

Introduction

“You know who we have on the show tonight?” Johnny Carson asked his audience during his monologue on February 2, 1977. “We have the author who wrote that amazing, wonderful novel, *Roots*. Alex Haley is with us tonight.” Haley, the author of the best-selling book in the country, appeared on the *Tonight Show* just days after the *Roots* television miniseries completed its record-breaking run on ABC. “If there’s anyone watching who does not know about *Roots*, you must have either been out of the country or on Mars someplace,” Carson joked. As Haley waited in the green room while actor Tony Randall and singer Mel Tillis performed and bantered with Carson, he must have thought of how far he and his family story had come over the past fifteen years. If he was nervous, it did not show. Haley settled into the guest’s chair and soon started telling Carson about how he had come to write his multigenerational story, tracing his family’s history from West Africa through emancipation in the United States. “The thing that actually did it for me was that my grandmother in Henning, Tennessee ... told me, all while I was growing up, a story about

the family, about where her parents had been slaves in Alamance County, North Carolina, and about the families preceding them,” Haley told Carson. “I didn’t really understand much of the story. It was like biblical parables.” It was a story Haley had told hundreds of times to audiences all across the country. Haley described how he had found information about different members of his family in archival records before reaching the most remarkable part of his story: “Ultimately, that research over the nine years would take me back to my fourth great-grandfather, seven generations back, an African who was named Kunta Kinte. He was born and reared in a little village called Juffure, in the Gambia, West Africa. He was brought here on a ship called the *Lord Ligonier*. And it left Africa July 5, 1767.”⁷¹ With *Roots* Haley achieved two incredible feats. He tracked his family’s history across the abyss of transatlantic slavery to a specific ancestor, and, almost as improbably, he made the slave trade and black history inescapable parts of national popular culture.

Roots, published by Doubleday in the fall of 1976 and broadcast by ABC in the winter of 1977, was read by millions and watched by millions more, but today *Roots* is neither acclaimed by critics nor much studied by academics. *Roots* fell out of favor in part because Haley’s story started to unravel as soon as it was in print. Haley fabricated parts of his story, paid over half a million dollars to settle a plagiarism suit brought by Harold Courlander, and relied heavily on an editor, Murray Fisher, to finish *Roots*. Other people were upset with how ABC, Doubleday, Haley, and associated parties seemed to be wringing money from the history of slavery. This explicit commercialization allowed *Roots* to reach millions of people, but it has made it difficult to see the book or the television series as a serious contribution to our nation’s understanding of the history of slavery.

Making "Roots" explores how Alex Haley's idea developed from a modest book proposal into an unprecedented cultural phenomenon. This book is guided by two themes. First, I emphasize how *Roots* demonstrates the importance, contradictions, and limitations of mass culture. Alex Haley always approached his family history as a story that had both emotional and economic value. There would have been no *Roots* without Haley, but there also would have been no *Roots* without white publishers and producers who pitched the work primarily to white audiences. It is likely that Haley never would have finished *Roots* without the financial incentive and pressure offered by his deal with television producer David Wolper and ABC. *Roots* never existed wholly apart from the mass market. This was and is uncomfortable for many critics, readers, and viewers to acknowledge. Rather than lamenting that *Roots* was somehow sullied by Haley's relationships with *Reader's Digest*, Doubleday, the W. Colston Leigh speakers' bureau, and ABC, it is more interesting and productive to consider how Haley, especially as a black writer in the 1960s and 1970s, created a story that could be successfully marketed to so many people.

Roots began as a book called *Before This Anger*, which Alex Haley pitched to his agent in 1963. Haley signed a contract the following year to write the book for Doubleday, while he was also finishing work on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Haley originally planned for *Before This Anger* to focus on his hometown of Henning, Tennessee, in the 1920s and '30s, and to use this nostalgic vision of rural southern black life as a contrast to the urban unrest and racial tensions of the 1960s. Haley's vision for the book expanded after family elders told him about someone they called "the Mandingo," who had passed down stories of having been captured in Africa and sold into slavery. This initial

family story sent Haley on a research quest motivated by both personal and financial concerns. On a personal level, Haley felt a natural human desire to understand his family's history. For Haley, like other descendants of enslaved people, this desire for genealogical knowledge was thwarted by the fact that his ancestors had been forcibly uprooted from Africa and treated as property for generations in America. The Middle Passage, where enslaved people were transported from Africa to the New World, both claimed lives and ruptured histories. When Haley eventually identified Kunta Kinte, from the Gambian village of Juffure, as his family's "original African," he felt as if he had reclaimed something that had been stolen from him.

Haley also understood that searching for and finding Kunta Kinte made for an amazing and lucrative story. Money problems followed Haley for the years he worked on *Roots*, and Haley supported himself during these years by lecturing across the country. Haley was a dynamic speaker, and on the lecture circuit he turned his search for his family's history into a detective story. He described traveling across continents and racing from archive to archive in search of clues. In Haley's detective story all of the pieces remarkably fell into place so that the stories he heard from his family elders matched up perfectly with legal deeds, shipping records, and Gambian oral histories. Much of what Haley told audiences was true; other parts were exaggerated, embellished, or fabricated. More importantly, Haley's story of his search for roots captivated audiences. As Haley crisscrossed the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he told the story of his search for roots to hundreds of thousands of people, earning \$500 to \$1,000 per appearance.

Haley was constantly selling *Roots*. His busy speaking schedule made it difficult for him to finish his epic book, but the lectures

amounted to one of the longest advance promotion tours in the history of publishing or broadcasting. Haley used his storytelling skills, honed in front of lecture audiences, to successfully pitch *Roots* to *Reader's Digest*, which published a condensation of the book in 1974; to producers David Wolper and Stan Margulies; and to ABC television executive Brandon Stoddard. Whether Haley was speaking to college students, church groups, or television professionals, he understood that audiences responded to *Roots*, first and foremost, as a good story. Telling and retelling his story taught Haley to focus less on the boundaries between fact and fiction, or between history and literature, and more on making a connection with his audience.

The second theme of this book is how *Roots* pushed the boundaries of history. Historians have shied away from *Roots* because the story's relationship to history is messy, but it is this messiness that makes *Roots* so interesting. Alex Haley mixed archival research, oral traditions, and fiction into a narrative he described as "faction." The television version of *Roots* complicated matters further, insisting that the production was based on a true story while billing the series as an "ABC Novel for Television." Critics have noted several examples of how Haley played fast and loose with historical evidence, and one need not search too long online before seeing *Roots* described as a "hoax," "fraud," or "lie." At their worst, these criticisms of *Roots* reassure people who would like to deny or minimize the history of slavery. Even at their best, the critiques do not explain why so many people were eager to read, watch, and listen to the story Haley created. *Making "Roots"* carefully traces when, how, and why Haley made up parts of his story, but this book is not an exposé. Rather, I argue that we need to pay more attention to the emotional and economic investments that led Haley to believe the remarkable

story of Kunta Kinte he heard in the Gambia and the similar investments that led publishers, television producers, and audiences to believe in *Roots*. Dividing *Roots* into discrete columns of fact and fiction does not explain why it was precisely the parts of Haley's story that most strained credibility that most moved audiences.

Americans choose to remember slavery at some moments and collectively forget it at others. *Roots* arrived in an era when academic and popular audiences were paying renewed attention to the history of slavery, including books such as John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972); Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (1974); Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974); Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976); Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977); Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975); George Rawick's *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972); and *The Black Book* (1973), a scrapbook put together by collector Middleton Harris and Toni Morrison, who was then an editor at Random House. *Roots* benefited from and contributed to this interest in the history of slavery, but it reached millions more people and changed the way Americans viewed slavery in ways that a historical textbook or monograph never could. None of these historians, for example, were going to be interviewed by Johnny Carson on the *Tonight Show*, be featured in *Reader's Digest*, or make the cover of *Time* magazine. *Roots* was unapologetically commercial history and was pitched to everyday American readers and viewers rather than to scholars. Popular and academic reviewers who dismissed the book and television series as too middlebrow or

criticized its historical accuracy largely missed the point. *Roots* asked viewers, across racial lines and national borders, to see slavery as a story about black people and black families and to identify with the sorrow, pain, and joy of enslaved people in ways that were unusual in commercial literature and unprecedented in broadcast television. There was power in the level of popularity *Roots* achieved. “The mass catharsis of ‘Roots’ has at last formulated a weapon equal in power to *Birth of a Nation*,” *Los Angeles Times* critic Mary Beth Crain argued.² *Roots* encouraged more people to engage seriously with the history of slavery than anything before or since. There are many valuable histories of slavery, but there is only one *Roots*.

Representations of race have played an important role throughout the long campaign for African American freedom. In the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth made extensive use of photography and the circulation of their images to create public selves and make a case for the humanity of black people.³ Similarly, W.E.B. DuBois compiled several hundred photographs of affluent African American women and men and displayed them in the “American Negro exhibit” at the 1900 Paris Exposition.⁴ DuBois’s remarkable collection of images testified to the diversity of African American identity and challenged the dominant racial ideologies of black inferiority. At the outset of the twentieth-century civil rights movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led protests against D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* when it opened in 1915 and again in later years when the film was rereleased.⁵ In the early years of television, the NAACP protested the caricatures of black people on *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951–53 broadcast; 1954–66 syndication) and civil rights advocates and entertainers called for more and better representations of black

people on the small screen.⁶ Still, American culture continued to be enamored with retrograde depictions of race. Most people do not realize that before *Roots* the most watched television program in American history was *Gone with the Wind*, the 1939 historical epic film that NBC broadcast over two nights in 1976.⁷ With *Roots*, Haley tried to marshal the power of history, at an epic and mythic scale, to advance black history in the mainstream of American culture. Over the course of the twentieth century many civil rights advocates and media critics lamented the power of racist fictions like *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation* to “write history with lightning,” to quote the phrase President Woodrow Wilson is said to have used to praise Griffith’s epic. Few people have had the audacity, as Haley did with *Roots*, to create a larger lightning storm.

If *Roots* was too fictional for most historians to take seriously, its version of historical fiction was not literary enough to be dissected in English departments. *Roots*, for example, is notably absent from the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, which runs to nearly three thousand pages.⁸ Despite his embrace of “faction,” Haley was dedicated to fitting all of the pieces of his genealogical puzzle together neatly. Literary critic Arnold Rampersad described *Roots* as being “so innocent of fictive ingenuity that it seldom surpasses the standards of the most popular of historical romances.”⁹ Over nearly six hundred pages, Haley’s narrative unfolds in a straight line from Kunta Kinte in the 1760s across seven generations to Haley in the 1970s, with little sense that there were questions Haley’s research could not answer. Creative work and scholarship since *Roots* by Toni Morrison, Kara Walker, Saidiya Hartman, Tiya Miles, and many others have found new and profound meanings in the fissures and erasures in the historical record of slavery.¹⁰ Haley’s archived letters,

notes, and drafts make it clear that he encountered hundreds of these gaps in his research but that he preferred to make his family story one of continuity. This commitment to continuity almost immediately put Haley out of step with how sophisticated writers and artists approached the subject of slavery. The long-term critical evaluation of *Roots* suffered in the exchange, and *Roots* has not found a place in the literary canon. But millions of readers and viewers enjoyed Haley's narrative style, and its massive popularity makes the work a baseline from which to appreciate more nuanced and challenging treatments of slavery.

This book draws on new and underutilized archival sources to tell the story of the making of *Roots*. I have examined tens of thousands of pages of Alex Haley's letters, notes, and manuscript drafts in the collections housed at the University of Tennessee, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and Goodwin College. These documents show, sometimes on a day-by-day basis, how *Roots* took shape from the early 1960s through the late 1970s. At the University of Southern California, the archived papers of David Wolper and Stan Margulies offer similar insights into how these television producers adapted Haley's story for the screen, as do Archive of American Television oral histories. In this book I foreground the voices and perspectives of the people who played a role in creating *Roots*: Haley, literary agent Paul Reynolds, Doubleday editors Ken McCormick and Lisa Drew, Haley's editor Murray Fisher, Wolper, Margulies, screenwriter Bill Blinn, and actors like LeVar Burton, John Amos, and Leslie Uggams. Despite the tremendous success of Haley's book and ABC's television miniseries, *Making "Roots"* is the first book-length study of *Roots*.

As a scholar of popular culture and African American history I wanted to research and write this book because we know

remarkably little about one of the most recognizable cultural productions of all time. One could fill a shelf with books on recent critically lauded television shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men*, but there is a curious lack of scholarship on *Roots*. When *Roots* is discussed, it is routinely described as a “phenomenon,” which suggests that it came out of nowhere or that it is inexplicable. By focusing on the fifteen-year period over which *Roots* developed, this book tries to ground this phenomenon in the specific decisions and actions of Haley and his collaborators.

Alex Haley never published another book after *Roots*. He loved talking to people but found himself overwhelmed by the praise, criticism, and legal troubles *Roots* generated. “He made history talk,” Jesse Jackson said of Alex Haley at the author’s funeral in 1992. “He lit up the long night of slavery. He gave our grandparents personhood. He gave *Roots* to the rootless.”¹¹ In this light, pointing out the flaws in Haley’s family history feels like telling your grandmother she is lying. Fortunately, Haley’s fabrications are only a small part of a much larger, more interesting, and more complicated story of the making of *Roots*. This book tells that story.