



**ONE MORE
RIVER TO CROSS:
A VERBATIM FUGUE**

ADAPTED BY LYNN NOTTAGE



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**



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ADAPTER'S NOTE

When I first encountered the WPA slave narratives, I was struck by the sheer power of hearing African American men and women share the experience of surviving slavery.

The dramatic narratives capture the horror and brutality of slavery in the complicated cadences, syntax, and vocabulary of the former slaves. They are not easy reading, but they give us a unique window into that most peculiar of institutions: slavery. They put a human face on an inhumane institution.

I struggled with how best to present the slaves' narratives on the stage. In the end I decided not to overlay the former slaves' memories and recollections with an artificial narrative, but rather to allow the colorful stories and music from the period to take the audience through the intense journey of slavery in the United States.

Living with these narratives has been a difficult and painful reminder of the brutal legacy of slavery in the United States; indeed I hadn't quite realized the extent to which the experience still reverberates inside of me.

I believe the theatre provides a wonderful context for us as a community to contemplate and learn from the voices of our past. The ritual of resurrecting the voices creates a bridge to an era many of us have either chosen to ignore or marginalize because of the wounds it reopens.

I share these vital stories today because the reality is that, for many people throughout the world, the institution of slavery remains very much alive. I also share these narratives because I believe theatre can ultimately be a place of catharsis and healing.

—*Lynn Nottage*
March 2007

SOURCE MATERIALS

1. *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery from Interviews with Former Slaves* is a monumental collection of 2,300 interviews with former slaves, gathered between 1936 and 1938 by field workers under the auspices of the WPA Writers' Project.
2. Period advertisements, newspaper articles, journals, diaries, speeches, and sermons.
3. Traditional Negro spirituals, folk songs, field hollers, and chants. (References for field chants and songs can be found through the Library of Congress website and other research resources, readily available via the internet.)

Please note:

The source material is placed as a stage direction next to the character tag. Some small edits to the originals have been made to aid in the flow of the language.

// in the text indicates overlapping dialogue.

CHARACTERS

MEN, #1 and #2, African American

WOMEN, #1 and #2, African American

CHORUS: Female #1 and #2, Male #1 and #2

Note:

The piece can be performed with 6 to 12 players.

Ideally, the text of the slave narratives should be performed by 2 men and 2 women, ranging in age and physical type.

The Chorus (2 men, 2 women, a percussionist, and a fiddler) is a mutable force that conjures the world of the Antebellum South. Through song and dance, it provides the information from the public records and creates the musical and sonic landscape.

PLACE

A time-worn plantation house that the players bring to life through music, sound, and movement.

TIME

Late 1930s, looking back on the Antebellum South.

ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS: A VERBATIM FUGUE

SUPER-TITLE

(Projected.) From 1936–1938, field workers, commissioned by the Federal Writers' Project, gathered over 2,300 interviews from ex-slaves. For the first and last time in history, a large number of surviving slaves were encouraged to tell their own stories, in their own words. *(Blackout.)*

MOVEMENT #1 — LONG WAYS FROM HOME

Lights rise. Woman #1 stands frozen on the steps of a time-worn plantation house. A captured moment. She comes alive.

WOMAN #1. *(Elizabeth Sparks.)* What's that? You want me to tell you 'bout slavery days? *(Lights rise on a tableau vivant: The Chorus bent and frozen in a field, as if poised for hard labor. One by one they come to life.)*

CHORUS. *(Gullah folk song.)*

ROCKAH MH MOOMBA

CUM BO-NA YONDA

LIL-AYE TAMBE

I ROCKAH MH MOOMBA

(CUM) BO-BA YONDA

LIL'AYE TAMBE

ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA BANGA

L'ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA QUANK!

ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA QUANK!

L'ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA QUANK!

(Lights rise. Man #1 and Woman #2 sit on the porch of the worn plantation house. A moment.)

WOMAN #2. I know so many things 'bout slavery time 'til I never will be able to tell 'em all.

MAN #1. Lots of old slaves closes the door before they tell the truth about their slavery days. *(Lights rise. Man #2, with a cane, pokes the flowerbed of browning flowers in front of the time-worn plantation. A moment.)*

MAN #2. But, I don't mind telling you what I know.

WOMAN #1. Dem days wuz hell. *(The Chorus continues to sing.)*

CHORUS. *(Folk song.)*

ROCKAH MH MOOMBA

CUM BO-NA YONDA

LIL-AYE TAMBE

I ROCKAH MH MOOMBA

(CUM) BO-BA YONDA

LIL'AYE TAMBE

ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA BANGA

L'ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA QUANK!

ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA QUANK!

L'ASHWILLIGO HOMASHA QUANK!

(A percussionist beats out a plangent African rhythm.)

MAN #1. *(Augustus Ladson.)* My grand pa an' grand ma on pa side come right from Africa. They was stolen an' brought here.

WOMAN #2. *(Susan Snow.)* My ma was black African ... She tol' me how dey brought her from Africa.

MAN #2. *(Yach Stringfellow.)* My daddy come from de old Africa and was tall and straight as a' arrow.

MAN #1. *(Augustus Ladson.)* They use to tell us of how white men had pretty cloth on boats which they was to exchange for some of their o'nament'. *(Percussion. Chorus creates the soundscape of Middle Passage.)*

MAN #2. *(John Brown.)* One day a big ship stopped off the shore and the natives hid in the brush along the beach. Grandmother was there. The ship men sent a little boat to the shore and scattered bright things and trinkets on the beach. The natives were curious. Grandmother said everybody made a rush for them things soon as the boat left. The trinkets was fewer than the people. Next day the

white folks scatter some more. There was another scramble. The natives was feeling less scared, and the next day some of them walked up the gangplank to get things off the plank and off the deck. The deck was covered with things like they'd found on the beach. Two-three hundred natives on the ship when they feel it move. They rush to the side but the plank was gone. Just dropped in the water when the ship moved away.

WOMAN #2. (*Susan Snow.*) You know, like we say "president" in dis country, well dey call him "chief" in Africa. Seem like de chief made 'rangements wid some men an' dey had a big goober grabbin' for de young folks. Dey stole my ma an' some more an' brung 'em to dis country.

MAN #2. (*John Brown.*) Folks on the beach started to crying and shouting. The ones on the boat was wild with fear. Grandmother was one of them who got fooled, and she say the last thing seen of that place was the natives running up and down the beach waving their arms and shouting like they was mad. The boat men come up and keep them quiet with the whips and clubs. (*The Chorus creates the soundscape of the slave market.*)

MALE CHORUS #1. (*Period advertisement.*) To be sold on Wednesday, 3rd August next, by Cowper & Telfairs: A cargo of 170 prime young likely healthy Guinea Slaves, imported directly from Angola. Savannah. July 25.

FEMALE CHORUS #1. (*South Carolina Slave Code.*) All Negroes, Indians, mulattoes, and Mestizoes, who are or shall hereafter be in this province and all their issue and offspring born or to be born, shall be and they are hereby declared to be and remain forever after absolute slaves, and shall follow the condition of their mother. South Carolina Slave Code. (*Percussion. Lively and haunting African rhythms. The percussion stops abruptly.*)

MAN #2. (*John Brown.*) The slaves was landed at Charleston. The townfolks was mighty mad 'cause the blacks was driven through the streets without any clothes.

MAN #1. (*W.L. Bost.*) Lord miss, them slaves look jes like droves of turkeys runnin' along in front of them horses. (*The Chorus continues to conjure the soundscape of the slave market.*)

MALE CHORUS # 2. (*Period advertisement.*) The following slaves will be sold at Potters Mart in Charleston, South Carolina. Miscellaneous: Lots of Negroes, mostly house servants, some field hands. Conditions: 1/2 cash, balance by bond, bearing interest

from date of sale.

MAN #1. (*W.L. Bost.*) The speculators stayed in the hotel and put the niggers in the quarters jus' like droves of hogs. All through the night I could hear them mournin' and prayin'. I didn't know the Lord would let people live who were so cruel. The gates were always locked and they was a guard on the outside to shoot anyone who tried to run away. I remember when they put 'em on the block to sell 'em. The ones 'tween 18 and 30 always bring the most money. The auctioneer he stand at a distance and cry 'em off as they stand on the block. I can hear his voice as long as I live.

MALE CHORUS # 2. Bid up, gentlemen, bid up!

MAN #1. (*Jordon Smith.*) Sometimes a thousand slaves was waitin' to be sold. When the traders knowed men was comin' to buy, they made the slaves all clean up and greased they mouths with meat skins to look like they'ds feedin' them plenty meat.

MAN #2. (*James Martin.*) We were put in stalls like pens for cattle and there's a curtain, sometimes just a sheet in front, so the bidders can't see the stock too soon. The overseer's standin' just outside with a big black snake whip and a pepper box pistol in his hand. Then he pulls the curtain up and the bidders crowds 'round.

MAN #1. (*Jordon Smith.*) They lined the women up on one side and the men on the other —

MAN #2. (*William Huston.*) And they was stripped to the waist ... One or two of the women folks was bare naked.

MALE CHORUS #1. (*W.L. Bost, cont'd.*) "Here's a young nigger wench, how much am I offered for her?"

MAN #1. (*W.L. Bost.*) Lord chile ... The poor thing stand on the block a-shiverin' an' a-shakin' nearly froze to death. When they sold, many of the poor mothers beg the speculators to sell 'em with their husbands, but the speculator only take what he want.

(*Mingo White.*) I 'members dat I was took up on a stan' an' a lot of people come 'round an' felt my arms an' legs an' chest, an' ask me a lot of questions. Befo' we slaves was took to de tradin' post Ol' Marsa Crawford tol' us to tell eve'ybody what ask us if we'd ever been sick to tell 'em dat us'd never been sick in our life. Us had to tell 'em all sorts of lies for our Marsa or else take a beatin'. (*Percussion. The players continue to conjure slave market.*)

MALE CHORUS #1. (*W.L. Bost, cont'd.*) "Now gentlemen and fellow citizens, here is a big black buck Negro. He's stout as a mule. Good

for any kin' o' work an' he never gives any trouble. How much am I offered for him?"

MAN #2. (*James Martin.*) One bidder takes a pair of white gloves ... and rubs his fingers over a man's teeth and he says, "You say this buck's 20 years old, but there's a cups worn to his teeth. He's 40 years old if he's a day." So they knock that buck down for \$1,000. Then the overseer makes 'em walk across the platform, he makes 'em hop, he make 'em trot, he makes 'em jump. And then sale would commence, and the nigger would be sold to the highest bidder. (*The players conjure auction bidding.*)

MAN #1. (*Robert Falls.*) Now my father, he was a fighter. He was mean as a bear. He was so bad to fight and so troublesome he was sold four times to my knowing and maybe a heap more times. That's how come my names is Falls, even if some does call me Robert Goforth. Niggers would change to the name of their new marster, every time they was sold. And my father had a lot of names, but keep the one of his marster when he got a good home. That man was Harry Falls. He said he'd been trying to buy father for a long time, because he was the best wagoneer in all that country abouts. And the man what sold him to Falls, his names was Collins, he told my father, "You so mean, I got to sell you. You all the time complaining about you don't like your white folks. Tell me now who you wants to live with. Just pick your man and I will go see him." Then my father tells Collins, "I want you to sell me to Master Harry Falls." They made the trade. I disremember what the money was, but it was big. Good workers sold for \$1,000 to \$2,000. After that the white folks didn't have no more trouble with my father. But he'd still fight. That man would fight a she-bear and lick her every time.

MALE CHORUS #2. Bid up gentlemen, bid up!

MAN #2. (*William Huston.*) A buyer would walk up and down 'tween the two rows and grab a woman and try to throw her down and feel on her to see how she'd put up. If she's pretty strong, he'd say, "Is she a good breeder?" If a gal was 18 or 19 and put up good she was worth 'bout \$1,500.

MALE CHORUS #2. (*Period advertisement.*) A valuable Negro woman, accustomed to all kinds of house work. Is a good plain cook, and excellent dairy maid, washes, and irons. She has four children, one girl about 13 years of age, another 7, a boy about 5, and an infant 11 months old. Two of the children will be sold with

ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS

adapted by Lynn Nottage

4M, 4W (doubling)

Between 1936 and 1938, the Federal Writers' Project gathered over 2,300 interviews with former slaves. Pulitzer-winner Lynn Nottage has collected and condensed these interviews into a theatrical exploration of the history of slavery in the United States. By resurrecting these slaves' stories onstage, Nottage resurrects the voices of people who for so many years had none, and creates a space for the contemplation of the enduring effects of slavery in America.

Also by Lynn Nottage

BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK
CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE OF JOY
RUINED
and others

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

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