



From Eros to Agape: Reconsidering the Chain Gang's Song in McCullers's "Ballad of the Sad Café"

Carson McCullers closes her "Ballad of the Sad Café" with the chain gang—"Just twelve mortal men, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county. Just twelve mortal men who are together" (66)—singing out on the Forks Fall highway. Throughout her works, McCullers uses music as a substitute when the intensity of the moment is too powerful for words. In a conversation, McCullers stated clearly her awareness of the inequities that permeated her home region:

There is a special guilt in [Southerners], a seeking for something had—and lost. It is a consciousness of guilt not fully knowable, or communicable. Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insisted was natural and right and just—when all along we knew it wasn't. (McGill 217)

At the end of the "Ballad," McCullers's literal integration of the singing chain gang in a segregated South is her way of conveying the message that this novella has less to do with Eros—the passionate, individual love that exists between humans and controls the actions of Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy—than with Agape, the brotherly love of God.

McCullers must have known from the world as it existed around her in Columbus, Georgia, in the first half of this century, that the chain gangs, those groups of men in black and white striped uniforms who worked the roadside swinging picks, digging ditches, laying pipes, picking up trash, were rare visual examples of integration in an otherwise segregated South. The irony that McCullers suggests through the men's song—that they must be chained to be together to find harmony—was not lost on her.

Although the Southern prison system was segregated, the chain gang from its inception was integrated. According to *Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 1951*, Georgia did not submit information about prisoners

received or discharged between the years 1938–45 (141), although a 1946 government document (*Prisoners in State and Federal Prisons and Reformatories*) indicates that 50.3% of new felony convicts in the South were black (29). In Georgia, there were 1,062 white men to 1,710 black men received in the prison system during this year of statistical gathering (30). It is safe to conjecture that black men outnumbered white men on most chain gangs throughout the first half of the century.

In *My Memoirs of Georgia Politics*, Rebecca Felton relates many disturbing memories that date from the turn of the century, including the story of a black man who spent 15 years on a chain gang for stealing a shotgun, and that of a 12-year-old black boy who was given 12 years on the chain gang for borrowing a horse to go for a short ride (658). In the case of *Johnson v. Dye* (1949), an escaped black Georgia prisoner was held by a federal court because of the horror stories about inhumane treatment—“that it was the custom of the Georgia authorities to treat chain gang prisoners with persistent and deliberate brutality [and] that Negro prisoners were treated with a greater degree of brutality than white prisoners” (Goldfarb 373). Georgia authorities could offer no testimony to the contrary, and the runaway escaped extradition.

In a 1932 bestseller, Robert E. Burns, a white man, documented the treatment he experienced in his *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*, available during McCullers’s teenage years in the Muscogee County Library in Columbus. A second book in that same year, John Spivak’s *Georgia Nigger*, called the public’s attention (and, in all likelihood, that of the 15-year-old McCullers) to the atrocities in McCullers’s home state. Both books were widely reviewed with the aim of reforming the penal code. In *World Tomorrow*, E. Y. Webb notes that *Georgia Nigger* has “relatively few new facts brought to light here, [but it is] . . . a picture . . . more moving than studies and statistics” (428). Spivak tells his story through a fictionalized account of David’s efforts “to escape from a monstrous system” (i). Especially disturbing in the Spivak book is a series of photographs of black men in their striped uniforms in the cage, the stocks, and on the rack. None looks as though he would be capable of joy in song.

McCullers captures the essence of the call-and-response method of discourse found in African-American church services: “One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful” (66). But she is careful not to let the word “joyful” hang in the air. She qualifies the comment, trying to move toward a closer assessment of what the chain gang’s song might mean: “It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright” (66). Her response to this music is similar to that of Frederick Douglass, who, in his *Narrative*, re-

counts the singing of the slaves on the way to the Great House Farm: "The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness" (31). When Douglass went to the North, he was stunned to hear that many thought the singing was "evidence of contentment and happiness" (32). "It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake," he wrote. "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears" (32). Douglass had the advantage of speaking as an insider; his words have the ring of credibility.

McCullers's rendering of the chain gang's song is not a picture of contentment, yet critic Ihab Hassan sees their song as summoning "the indestructible joy of endurance and transcendent pain" (226). Richard Cook joins Hassan in the use of "joy," suggesting the prisoners have "an elemental capacity for joy that transcends and changes, if only for a moment, the miserable conditions of their lives" (100). The implication that "joy" can come from physical degradation is disturbing. Can the reader be pacified by such a "joyful" interpretation, and thereby forgiven any "shared burden of Southern history," as C. Vann Woodward might call it? Can the reader, even for a brief and fleeting moment, believe that the chain gang member and contributor to song is, as Douglass says, doing anything more than expressing "the sorrows of his heart"? Virginia Spencer Carr's suggestion that "one's only relief" (59) is "to seek solace" (66) by listening to the chain gang slants McCullers's position. The author never posits that comfort will come from this activity; rather, walking down to the Forks Fall highway is something "you might as well" do (4, 65). Simply stated, there is *no* joy in this kind of enduring—for the convict, for the reader.

Not much happens in "Ballad" to soothe the wounded spirit in the love triangle of Miss Amelia to Cousin Lymon to Marvin Macy to Miss Amelia again. Their story, set within the frame of the singing chain gang down on the Forks Fall highway, is reflected onto a grander, more cosmic scope by the "twelve mortal men who are together." McCullers, by story's end, leaves the reader considering these questions: Are chains what it takes to bond black and white men together in the South? Is any kind of reciprocal love possible in such a universe? Can the only tie that binds humanity be inhumane suffering held in common?

The chain gang is the frame of the story, not a closing mysterious appendage. McCullers's elevation of love from Eros to Agape succeeds precisely by way of ironic failure. In the South, at the time she was writing, for black man and white man to produce the harmony that should prevail in a world where Agape is understood, she had to remove the song from the people and place it where it could make a stronger statement. The music had to "swell," and it had to be relocated to "the earth itself, or the wide sky" (66). The harmony that comes from and out of the world around us is how

McCullers's vision transcends, how it pushes toward Agape. The reality, however, is "one lonely voice, . . . the sun, the sound of the picks in the silence" (66). McCullers gives a perverse hope, disturbing enough to let that message in the chain gang's song reverberate: Must it be, always, "the sound of the picks" or are "twelve mortal men who are together," without the chains, possible in this specific geographic region? Beyond this place where the "soul rots with boredom" (65) is there something more? Not yet, McCullers is saying, but the chain gang's music does haunt the heart.

MARGARET WHITT

WORKS CITED

- Burns, Robert E. *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*. n.p.: n.p., 1932.
- Carr, Virginia Spencer. *Understanding Carson McCullers*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1990.
- Cook, Richard M. *Carson McCullers*. New York: Ungar, 1975.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. New York: Signet, 1968.
- Felton, Rebecca Latimer. *My Memoirs of Georgia Politics*. Atlanta: Index Printing, 1911.
- Goldfarb, Ronald and Linda Singer. *After Conviction*. New York: Simon, 1973.
- Hassan, Ihab. *Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel*. New York: Harper, 1961.
- McCullers, Carson. *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Boston: Houghton, 1951.
- McGill, Ralph. *The South and the Southerner*. Boston: Little, 1963.
- Spivak, John L. *Georgia Nigger*. Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969.
- US Bureau of the Census. *Prisoners in State and Federal Prisons and Reformatories*. Washington, DC: GPO, 1948.
- . *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1951*. 72nd ed. Washington, DC: GPO, 1951.
- Webb, E. Y. Rev. of *Georgia Nigger*. *World Tomorrow* 15 (2 Nov. 1932): 428.