

The Slave Ship as the Chronotope of the Black Atlantic: Interaction between Space and Time as Reflected in the Antebellum Slave Narrative

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I

The international slave trade is considered the largest migratory wave in human history. Between 1450 and 1750 approximately 15 million people were forcibly removed from Africa. The slave ship, a vessel physically standing for and at the same time symbolizing the infamous Middle Passage is more than just a plain watercraft as it reifies the slave trade and according to Paul Gilroy functions as a chronotope (4). The international slave trade, a liminal activity impacting three continents, Africa, America, and Europe primarily originated from the Atlantic littoral. The slave ship naturally applies to first generation slaves arriving in the New World before the United States and Britain prohibited commerce of humans in 1808 and 1807 respectively.

The slave ship as a tangible manifestation of the slave trade, either the British or American version, had plied the waters within the context of the triangular trade. The first scheme includes the exchange of guns, or manufactured goods produced in Britain for slaves at the West Coast of Africa, followed by the infamous Middle Passage to the Caribbean, and the selling of slaves for primarily sugar at the Caribbean market and the eventual return of that commodity to Britain. The American version of the triangular trade had three endpoints: New England, with rum production, the slave coast, and the Caribbean. Accordingly, rum was shipped to West Africa to be exchanged for slaves, who were taken across the Atlantic to slave markets in the West Indies, where after completing the heinous “transaction” sugar or molasses was purchased, which was transported to New England again for the making of rum.

While the early phase of the Atlantic slave trade was controlled by six countries, England, France, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Denmark, eventually due to the Portuguese and English dominance most slaves were taken to North America and Brazil. Between 1750 and 1850 the slave trade was centered around three staples: cotton at the American South, sugar in the Caribbean, and coffee in Brazil. In the view of David Eltis the slave trade was made possible by the development of European navigation, the demand for the respective products, the warm oceanic

currents of the southern and western streams, and the active participation and profiteering of the indigenous population, known as agency of the Africans. (Eltis 22-23)

My essay aims to disclose the potential interpretations and various meanings of the slave ship while exploring the motive of the chronotope. In my work along with that of Gilroy I utilize the theories of Alexandra Ganser, Tamara Danicic, Michel Foucault and Ulrich Neisser. I consider the slave ship as a literary and cultural trope while probing the temporal and spatial perspective of its human cargo. My research relies on the narratives produced by Briton Hammon, James Albert Gronniosaw, Ottobah Cugnano, Olaudah Equiano, and Venture Smith. At first I provide a closer look at the chronotope as a literary motive then I investigate the time and space-related attitudes of the respective protagonists.

II

The idea of the chronotope, a binary conceptual structure standing for the correlation of space and time in a literary work originates from Mikhail Bakhtin considering it the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” within a given text. (84). In the same vein, Tamara Danicic asserts that a specific text contains a system or matrix of chronotopes as well (312).

The chronotope is primarily applicable to travel and mobility. Frances Bartkowski posits that travel pushes the subject into “affirmative groundlessness” despite the traveler’s effort to interpret or decipher a new culture by visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory means. “Texts of travel, immigration, and confinement are intended to make most bold the contrast in possible positions of subjects and writers who look, hear, speak, touch, taste, and smell their way by, through, and into an already existing community to be deciphered” (xxvi). In the same vein, Steven H. Clark argues “the travelling subject, wavering between two worlds, is [...] poised to split and unravel” (39)

The slave narrative and the accounts of white settlers forcibly taken by Indians are the two major examples of captivity literature. While in case of the latter the forced journey takes place on land, the African enslavement experience includes compelled travel both on the continent and at sea. The events leading up to and taking place during the Middle Passage amount to a tragic series of displacement episodes reflecting the very notion of “affirmative groundlessness.” The international slave trade certainly resulted in the displacement or uprooting of millions of Africans. First generation slaves experiencing the Middle Passage suffered the first displacement in their homeland as they were sold or enticed into

slavery, then again upon their arrival into the New World as they were forced into the bottom rungs of the given social structure.

The slave narratives produced primarily before the prohibition of the slave trade went into effect in 1807 in Britain and in 1808 in the United States provide a glance into the temporal and spatial perspectives of enslaved persons via the chronotope. Frances Foster and Kim Green's view of the slave narrative replaces the traditional interpretation of the given reports as a linear or direct progress from slavery to freedom. Having reconsidered the paradigm, Foster and Green forward the concept of a circular movement between two endpoints: ports of call and pulpits of consultation (45). Ports of call implying the actual harbors the slave is forced to pass through refer to the physical aspects of mobility, especially the movement between the slave coast and the arrival in the Caribbean. Pulpits entail the heuristic or didactic considerations of such texts. Naturally, it is the port motive, which is primarily applicable to my inquiry.

The port and pulpit model offers a promising tool to deal with autobiographical literature. If we consider ports figurative gateways then the physical details of the actual travel come to mind. The protagonist as an actual traveler passes through a landscape he or she is part of and describes. The view of the landscape is a consequence of travel in space, or in Michel de Certeau's words, "linking acts and footsteps" (162). The port and pulpit aspect is also present in the general evaluation of the travel trope entailing mobility and perception, and individual development respectively. The simultaneity of the motif is further expressed in Jerome Bruner's observation concerning the function of the travel narrative as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality (5-6).

Following suit, John Sekora interprets the slavery experience as a circular movement between the core and the periphery (504). The core in case of the potentially enslaved individual is the given African society from where he or she is forcibly removed and tossed into the periphery as the infamous holding centers or slave castles, among them Elmira, established in 1482 were located on the coast, or the peripheral edge of Africa. At the same time, this motive also expresses social displacement, both at the destination and arrival points.

Chronotopes have two main types, the pastoral pattern and the one reflecting displacement. In case of the first space dominates over time. The pastoral pattern is found in traditional travelogues commemorating a journey undertaken at the traveler's will, or initiative and usually refers to an idyllic immersion in the beauty of the landscape. In the chronotope expressing displacement the temporal or time-oriented perspective prevails over spatiality (Ganser et al 2). Likewise, according to Ulrich Neisser during travel the hero forms or attempts to form a cognitive map. Cognitive mapping, or constructing "an orienting schema, an active information-

seeking structure” is comprised of three steps: becoming acquainted with the new physical surroundings, finding and exposing routes, and identifying landmarks until everything becomes familiar (110-111).

The slave narrative contains the non-pastoral or displacement version of the chronotope in which time prevails over space. Comparing the position of the slave to the Indian captive, one obvious difference is that the latter moves or forced to move on land, and several texts contain reports or descriptions of the landscape encountered. The slave or the human cargo of the slave ship is naturally deprived of such opportunity. Consequently, s/he is unable to develop a cognitive map, which would assist him or her structuring the travel experience by the help of physical and metaphysical landmarks.

The analysis of a chronotope calls for the exploration of both the spatial and temporal aspects. For the purpose of evaluating the given individuals’ perception of time Stephen Hawking’s arrow of time model can be helpful. The tripartite scheme includes the thermodynamic arrow pointing toward entropy, the psychological arrow referring to the subjective perception of time, and the cosmological one highlighting the expanding universe (Eiley).

I believe the first two arrows are relevant to the chronotope represented by the slave ship. The entropic aspect of the Middle Passage is suggested by the limited space, or virtual imprisonment at the bottom of the vessel along with the lack of communication and isolation. At the same time this experience, just like the entropy phenomenon, is apocalyptic in itself. While according to Virágos, the apocalyptic pattern is based on myth and points to a felicitous future, or “delayed gratification,” its aspect suggesting divine election and the acceptance of the given ordeal can be applicable to future interpretations of the slavery experience (121). Accordingly, Alexander Crummel viewed slavery as an ordeal imposed by God to justify the historically exceptional status of the black race (416).

Linda Warley’s postcolonial theory considering the acquisition of control over space and time suggests the temporal structuring of the slavery or confinement experience. As she asserts “Only by investigating both time and space can we fully articulate what it means to be *situated* human beings” (3). Thus the chronotope is a tool of subject construction, a way to achieve agency, even if in a limited form. The perception of time is the exact guarantee of personal integrity, and a way to preserve physical integrity in case of the suffered trauma. A well-known example is Mary Rowlandson dividing the story of her captivity into Removes. It is worth noting that the accuracy or extent of the perception of time differs at land or sea. Naturally, any ground trip can provide points of reference for orienting the protagonist while the same does not apply to crossing the endless ocean.

Why does time dominate over space in the chronotope implying uprootedness or displacement? Just like in the captivity narrative, the victim of both the Indian attack and the ambush of the enslaver is thrown into a Heideggerian nothingness in which he or she has to gain control over time. Control over time means ownership of the given traumatic experience and the ability of coping. Perceiving the passage of time implies the division of the endless temporal continuum into units, thus a way of control, by extension agency. In case of the pastoral chronotope the protagonist can fully immerse himself or herself in the scenery and imagine that time has stopped. Ironically, the captive white settler or enslaved African attempts to emphasize the passage of time, that is the passing of his or her trauma as well.

Space or the perception of the distance covered during travel is the other component of the chronotope. The spatiality of the slave ship experience can be interpreted by Foucault's concept implying that place created at the intersection of space and time always reflects power relations. It is beyond doubt that the slave or human cargo jammed in the bottom of the slave ship with severely limited mobility is in an inferior position in fact forced into an early version of a non-place. Marc Augé defines non-place as a location excluded from the traditional interpretation of space, that is, the mainstream space. The non-place "which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity" (78) also expresses separation from roots. The spatial structure of the slave ship includes the non-place in a dual sense. The slave being moved against his will between two continents is excluded from his own original world, that is Africa, and s/he is also torn from his or her cultural and social roots. Furthermore, s/he is forced into the non-place of the slave ship as well. The slave's confinement in the holding area of the ship secluded from the public and open sphere of the given vessel represents the physical and metaphysical inferiority of the slave on-board and in the world alike. Nancy Munn's negative space theory implying spatial prohibition and boundary making is also applicable. Munn considers negative spaces characterized by "deletions or of delimitations constraining one's presence at particular locales" (448). Accordingly, the slave, being physically constrained, is forbidden, or prevented from entering or accessing other parts of the ship.

Exploring the chronotope from the point of view of the cargo, or the enslaved individual, it can be concluded that during the Middle Passage, viewed as the chronotope of displacement, time dominates over space. The slaves are prevented from experiencing or only display a limited ability to perceive the passage of time. The endless ocean does not provide points of reference to evaluate the length of the journey. The slaves treated as human cargo are separated from the crew and are forced into a physically and metaphysically inferior position. A further question can be raised namely whether the space covered by the vessel and its cargo can be proportional to time?

The ocean represents infinity and stability at the same time as the slave ship is just one chronotope of the matrices of such conceptual structures recognized by Tamara Danicic. While the ship is a chronotope, so is the ocean with infinity regarding space and time. The formula “time spent = space covered,” therefore, applies only if space is conceived in a linear sense of moving ahead. (12) The slave ship deconstructs this formula, as no linear advancement can be recognized reinforcing Sekora’s notion of circular movement, or the progression between ports of call. The interaction of space and time determines the chronotope, which has such complementary aspects as one’s relation to geographic and geopolitical position, nature, social class, race, and gender. The chronotope operates on two levels. Accordingly, a given text can express historicity or describe the connection between space and time. In case of the chronotope implying displacement time is in a dominant position, while in case of an idyllic pastoral chronotope space is superior to time.

Just like in the Indian captivity narrative or in case of the slave ship the distance covered indicates the passage of time. The internal time passage experienced by the protagonist takes over or gains priority as compared to real historical time. In fact space dominates over time, but mostly in an apocalyptic manner, as for the slave this time is “out of joint” (Shakespeare). The slaveship functions as a chronotope both on the individual and macro level as it can be considered a living micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion (Gilroy 4). While nautical novels, among them *Moby Dick* (1851), present a microcosm of the contemporary social background of the respective crew, on the slave ship such a description is only applicable to a limited extent at best. The primary reason for this is the fact that there is virtually no communication between the slaves and the crew and the origin of the slaves, although they represent a wide variety of African peoples, is not known for the slave traders, who treat the former as a homogeneous entity. On the individual level the slave is compelled to travel, while on the macro level the slave ship connects several cultures, continents, and perspectives.

Time dominates or prevails over space as the slave cannot perceive the distance. On land or in the prison, s/he can perceive or feel the passage of time, but at sea s/he becomes unsure or uncertain. The exact definition of time is replaced by a time-related dead reckoning. The increasing distance from their home or home shore makes them less sure of themselves. The trauma of the abduction and the brutality experienced during the Middle Passage is alleviated by the fleeting of the internal subjective time. Thus, the chronotope shows how the slave copes with the specific trauma. As Hudson Martin argues, the slave ship became a space of displacement of unparalleled space, time, epoch and civilization (38).

Toni Morrison building on Pierre Nora’s *lieux de memoire* concept argues that in African-American culture bodies of water serve as *lieux de memoire*, or sites

of memory. "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was." (99). Nora identifies places of memory as physical, and metaphysical repositories of remembrance with material, functional, and symbolic dimensions (19). Therefore, the Atlantic Ocean, the site of the black community's originary trauma serves as a *lieux de memoire*. The actual bones of the victims demanded by the slave trade represent the material aspect, the water and its capability to remember symbolizes the organic perspective of black history, while the actual crossing stands for the archetypal black cultural experience (Wardi 6).

A *lieux de memoire* can be conveyed verbally, kinetically, and visually (Fabre and O'Meally 8). The verbal aspect is the actual description of the given action or concept, the kinetic dimension represents motion at sea, while the visual side commemorates the landscape. Thus the very concept in fact underlines the idea of the chronotope as well. Following Morrison's line of thought, if the slave ship is considered a *lieux de memoire*, the aforementioned texts revealed that due to the coerced nature of the respective travel the recollections of the participants of the Middle Passage are restricted to the verbal and kinetic level. It is noteworthy, that the given protagonists do not engage in describing the surrounding landscape, not even while reciting their misadventures on land.

Paul Gilroy surpassing the traditional interpretation of the chronotope attributes a linkage function to the concept. In his view the slave ship represents the movement, or transfer of people, goods, and ideas, (4) or put in other words: people as goods. The vessel itself plying the Atlantic Ocean is already in a liminal position sailing between continents, cultures, and worlds. Besides the human and physical cargo the slave ship transports ideas. The slavers driven by the notion of Anglo-Saxon or western superiority arrive at the slave-coast, and take aboard African individuals as potential carriers of their home culture.

Although the application of Ganser et al's road movie model implying the coexistence of individuals in a shared location and maintaining identical perception of space and time (8) might appear tenuous at best, the slave narratives primarily report on, or provide such information from the victims' point of view. These texts also contain indirect references to the spatial or temporal perspectives of the crew. Furthermore, in case of the slave ship the separation of the crew from the cargo precludes such a shared perception and alludes to the racial component of the chronotope expressed by the black cargo and mostly white crew.

While Ganser et al focus on the road movie or the trope of the road, their observations can bear relevance in the case of the slave ship as the actual vessel as well. The chronotope set on the road implies the encounter of characters who would otherwise never meet sharing the same space and time. The slave ship certainly implies a place where space and time intersects, and in a way functions

as a meeting place for people who would otherwise not come to know each other. The road narrative also presupposes identical perception of space and time by the respective characters, which in case of the slave ship does not apply.

The narratives of Briton Hammon, James Albert Gronniosaw, Ottobah Cuguano, Olaudah Equiano, and Venture Smith provide valuable information regarding the applicability of the chronotope. These texts were written before the prohibition of the slave trade in Britain and the U.S in 1807 and 1808 respectively. Equiano later worked on a slave ship thus he offers an important glimpse into the temporal perspective or the perception of the passage of time on the part of the crew.

Briton Hammon's Narrative titled "*A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760) begins in 1747. He describes how he received permission from his master to join a logging expedition at the Caribbean. Thus, he leaves for the journey not as a slave, but as a member of the crew. He makes little note of the details of the trip: "We sailed from *Plymouth* in a short Time, and after a pleasant Passage of about 30 Days, arrived at *Jamaica*" (20). The ship is not involved in the slave trade as it is on a commercial or business venture. The use of the first person plural expresses belonging or identification with the crew.

In "A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars..." (1772) Gronniosaw also provides details of his enslavement. Born originally into a royal family in Bournou, that is inland Africa, he is lured away from home by an unscrupulous trader with the promise of showing him "houses with wings to them walk upon the water" (35). The narrative includes reports or accounts of his trip to the coast of Africa with clear indication of Gronniosaw's ability to maintain a temporal perspective and accurately perceive the passage of time. The protagonist is fully aware of space and time as he comments: "We travelled 'till about four o'clock every day, and then began to make preparations for the night" (36), or "I was now more than a thousand miles from home, without a friend or means to procure one" (37). Furthermore, it is probably due to his privileged background that he is treated relatively well during the transatlantic crossing. His reports confined to being seasick implies that he spent most of the journey on-deck.

The Narrative of Cuguano, "Thoughts and Sentiments..." (1787), however, is clearly written from the point of view of the victim. The protagonist is uprooted and separated from his home culture both literally and figuratively. It is noteworthy that exact definitions of time are not given: "we continued several days in sight of our native land" (149) implying a removal, a gradual distancing from familiar sites, and the entering of the Heideggerian nothingness surrounding the enslavement experience. The statement: "I could find no good person to give any information of my situation" (149) is a clear indication of separation and isolation. It is worth mentioning that his description of the travel bearing a similarity to that

of Gronniosaw also contains more stable and definite references to the passing of time and the distance covered on land, “We went with them again about half a day’s journey” (148) and “I was kept about six days at this man’s house” (148).

In “Narrative of the Life and Adventures...” (1798) Venture Smith on the other hand describes his crossing as a commercial transaction: “after all the business was ended at the coast of Africa, the ship sailed from thence to Barbadoes” (375). His report of the Middle Passage reflects a distancing from the suffering of his fellow travelers. “After an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox, which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbadoes: but when we reached it, there were found, out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive” (375).

Olaudah Equiano, eventually becoming an entrepreneur participating in transatlantic slave commerce describes himself on a continuum ranging from a status of cargo to a crew member on a slave ship. The beginning of his enslavement experience recorded in “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano” (1794) connotes anxiety, fear, and alienation as the slave ship ominously “riding at anchor” (202) hides an entry into a “world of bad spirits.” (203) In a noteworthy manner and at the same time indicating an attempt to appreciate or assess distance, in other words, spatiality, Equiano evaluates his and the ship’s position as to the African coast by looking through the quadrant of a sailor (205).

Interestingly, while most of the Narratives exclusively refer to the experiences of the given slave preserving or presenting the events from the point of view of the enslaved person, Olaudah Equiano reports from the other side of the issue, as he was working on slave ships as well. Having enjoyed a somewhat privileged status, he is manumitted and “can try his luck as a commerce merchant” (229). Since now he is relatively free he judges distance and time better as manifested in his report on “being very ill for eleven days” (237). Moreover, he displays a gradual distancing from his original culture and countrymen referring to slaves on a ship where he serves as “some of the poor oppressed natives of Africa” (237) or as “live cargo” (240). By this time, however, Equiano is clearly aware of his geographic position and the respective destination: “We arrived at Georgia, and, having landed with part of our cargo, proceeded to Charlestown with the remainder” (237).

III

As it was mentioned before, the motive of the chronotope is applicable to the slave ship as an object, a manifestation or tool of the slave trade, and is valid and operational from the point of view of the slave as well. It is noteworthy, that

the passage of time or the judgment of the distance covered is only applicable to overland travel, or when the given slave reports on other journeys than the Middle Passage. Since the slave ship is part and parcel of the international slave trade it is also a scene or site of intercultural communication, or of its failure.

The chronotope as a literary tool assists in a more profound understanding of the slavery experience. The very definition, implying the perception of space and time to varying extent alludes to an activity or feature that can only be performed or possessed by humans. Consequently, the application of the chronotope concept refutes the view of slaves as objects while it inscribes such displaced individuals into history. It was suggested that the chronotope operates on the macro and micro level. The slave ship as the representative of the slave trade symbolizes or stands for victimization, objectification, and displacement in the larger community context while it connects several cultures and functions as a tool or means of cultural exchange frustrated by failed intercultural communication. On the micro level, however, the concept reinforces the ability of enslaved persons to maintain a temporal and spatial perspective and offers a strategy for coping with the trauma brought on by the forcible removal from one's home and culture.

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