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**WILLIAM JOLLIFF**

## **Revisioning the Journey of Lewis and Clark: Frank X Walker's York Poems**

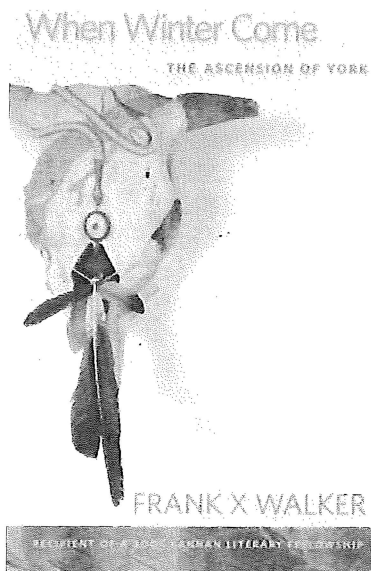
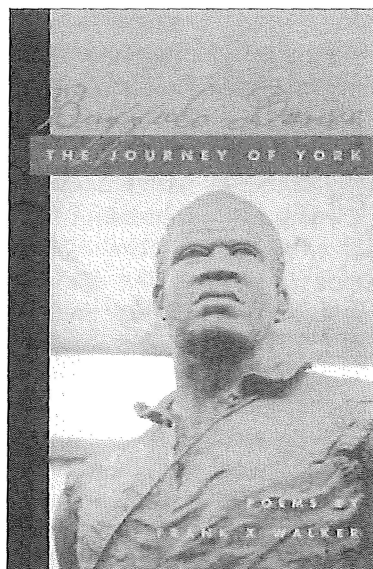
Affrilachian poet Frank X Walker's *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York* is a sequence of brief poems narrating the expedition of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery. What makes the familiar account newly compelling is that it is offered in the words of York, William Clark's slave. Told from his particular and unique perspective, it melds a story of great excitement—his experience of the American West—with a story of great human misery, his experience of slavery. And in a broader historical context, it presents an early step in the Euro-American destruction of Native American culture, as related by one whose own culture had been ravaged by the same people. It's a promising narrative scenario.

But to fulfill such promise, the book needs to succeed on two grounds. First, like any extended verse narrative, it must maintain our engagement formally by helping us suspend disbelief and by providing sufficient aesthetic gratification to keep us reading. Second, because it uses known characters and events, the new telling should revise or enhance our understanding.

Walker makes York his first-person narrator in each of the book's 57 pieces. His chosen prosody is a conversational free verse that simulates the crafted transparency of oral storytelling. An African-American idiom is suggested through diction and a handful of alternative spellings, but, wisely, Walker only

*suggests* dialect—he doesn’t try to fabricate the speech of a 19th-century slave. Neither does the poet disappear from the page, in spite of his carefully crafted first-person narrator. Instead, Walker calls particular attention to his storytelling role in his Preface: “I have attempted to be present in the texture and timbre of poem titles and while setting the epigraphs out as guideposts into individual poems.” Stating this baldly is a didactic move, but it rightly highlights the significance of his choice. By titling each incident with the 21st-century sensibilities his readers share, then relating each in the more removed voice of a 19th-century slave, Walker creates a double-voicing that establishes scaffolding for several kinds of irony. The tones become clear as we touch upon the book’s themes.

Because it questions our most essential human values, the work’s center is York’s spirituality, revealed both overtly and as a shaping force on other themes, such as racism, sexuality, and ethnocentrism. From the first poem, “Wind Talker,” York identifies with “Katonka,” the buffalo, and he notes that two of the tribes encountered consider him a “Katonka” “who walk like a man” (1). In part, they are referring to his appearance: his size, his blackness, and even the texture of his hair cause them to accept him as one like themselves, only somehow on a grander scale—he’s the very image of providence. York himself senses and accepts this totemic relationship with reverence and gratitude; the honor it gives him, however, is irksome to his white masters. Not only do they see his African attributes as a curse, but they also miss the spiritual link. At the same time, they covet the influence such status gives him with the Natives. Again in “Spirit Mound,” York is appropriately hesitant to approach a Native religious site, but he notes that Clark “don’t seem to understand / what be sacred to others any more / than he see the difference / tween me ana pack mule” (15). That’s a precise insight: Walker will not let us miss the fact that Clark is blind to much that York sees intuitively. In “Black Magic,” for example, the Euro-Americans often attribute their success to luck, and Clark, York states,



"believe his power come from Washington." In sharp contrast, York himself sees in their good fortune "something familiar as the night sky / an more dependable than the ground under our feet" (26). That may be Walker's most essential distinction: York's holistic respect for all creation set against Clark's vision of land and people as objects to be owned and controlled.

Of course, that's how Clark views York—as a thing to be used. In spite of his growing self-understanding, he remains Clark's slave, and the strain is clear. As he relates in "God's House," his master had never even asked him to go on the expedition: "He just say 'pack' an pointed to the door" (4). In spite of being ordered, York maintains the spiritual insight to intuit the grandeur of the West: it was "like church," he states (5). In addition, the nature of their situation is such that, unlike any other context, here he can carry weapons:

An where else but God's house can a body servant  
big as me, carry a rifle, hatchet ana bone handle knife  
so sharp it can peel the black off a lump a coal  
an the white man  
still close his eyes and feel safe, at night? (5)

With such lines, Walker posits something holy in the West, something that creates a kind of asylum in which York can be allowed unprecedented freedom while, simultaneously, Clark can be assured that his slave, though armed, will do him no harm. But that doesn't mean York forgets his bondage. Even when given a vote regarding the decisions of the Corps in "Electorate," he complains that he won't become "too full a myself / 'cause come dark, I still have to pick the fleas / off his blanket a skins, so at least he sleep / straight through the night" (52).

Freedom remains beyond reach, and York can only imagine, in "Sad Eye," what life would have been like in the homeland of his father, Old York: "I reckon freedom an Africa be like having / a whole sky to yourself" (50). Indeed, once the Corps returns to St. Louis, any liberty York had experienced in the West is forgotten. As the first bar-room stories appear in the appropriately titled "Revisionist History," York loses his stature as a uniquely valuable member of the Corps and becomes "Massa Clark's boy," "just along to cook / an carry" (61).

Nowhere does York feel his status as chattel more keenly than in the sexual denigration he endures back home—a stark contrast to his days in the West, when he enjoyed some sexual freedom. Though Clark would ridicule him for having sex with a Native woman, he did not prohibit it. As Walker ironically relates in "No Offense," York is glad to do so *at the request of her husband*. How can he refuse a man who so honors the buffalo York that he "want his wife to hold [his] seed" (21)? He contrasts this sacramental view of sex with the drunken rape of black women by white men "back in Kentucke" (20), a practice that becomes more painful still as reflected in such poems as "Sundays and Christmas." That poem's epigraph notes that York's wife is owned by another family, so the couple see each other infrequently; wrenchingly, York reflects that "the deepest hurt in the world" is "standing on the front porch / while the massa part her thighs / knowing that any cry raised / is inviting death or worse" (9).

Sadly, this racism that justified slavery in the East continued in the Corp of Discovery's relations with Native Americans. While the Natives and York sense their common humanity, to the ethnocentric Clark all the Natives were "chil'ren" who must learn to answer to their "Great White Father." Such dullness makes Clark the target of chiefs' irony when they suggest, for example, that the Great Spirit "could not ride on the back a such a small thing" as the "Peace Medals" the Corps gave the Natives—a coin featuring President Jefferson's likeness ("Swap Meeting" 34). Walker paints Clark as puzzled by—and more than a little jealous of—the Natives' admiration for York. In "Nomenclature," they honor in the slave the very things that the whites have belittled, "my big nose an wooly hair." They believe his blackness "is a thing to be worshipped" and his "nose a sign of power." For making such valuations, Clark refers to them as "ignorant savages," but we suspect he feels a personal insult. As York points out, "it don't take a edjicated man / to guess what they think / a his thin nose an pale face" (36). Though Clark little understands his ethnocentrism, he must feel the effect of being the outsider.

As a sequence of nearly 60 poems about a journey, this book could easily become a picaresque narrative, but repeated readings demonstrate Walker's unity of effect: his craft is sure throughout, his aesthetic consistent. Thematically, the sequence becomes a study of individual and intercultural spirituality. Through exploring and imagining York's perspective, Walker succeeds in enhancing our understanding of an important chapter in American history.

Although clearly a sequel, *When Winter Comes: The Ascension of York* is quite a different kind of book. Obviously, it has the same subject, but it does more than extend the story of York's life. One obvious aesthetic difference is that the functional, transparent free verse of the first book has evolved into a more complex prosody: the lines and stanza forms are varied and engaging. But the most important formal difference is the one that most profoundly enhances the book's psychological weight: through the use of multiple points of view, Walker develops York's character with a new depth that is at once stunning and sobering.

The book begins with York still speaking, and the first poem, punningly titled "Role Call," supplies narrative context for those who didn't read the first volume; for those who did, it suggests the more critical, reflective trajectory this book will take. The themes prevalent in *Buffalo Dance* are re-introduced in the first few poems, and in the "The Great Inquisition," Walker, through York, even charts out the kinds of questions this second book will be addressing:

Why I never run to freedom?

How my heart make room  
for two women?

When I come to know God?

An what did I pretends not to know  
'bout the men an the facts  
a the great expedition?

I've studied on these same questions  
for many a year.... (7)

That very study, York's struggle, is the stuff of this collection. Walker refuses easy answers; his characterization is too complex for that. When York states that "there be two sides to ev'ry story / an then there be the truth," we have a pretty good idea of how the poet may challenge us ("Role Call" 4).

Nowhere is York's depth more fully demonstrated than in response to why, given the fact that he was a well-armed, capable frontiersman in a country where the Natives revered him, he didn't "run to freedom." And there are several answers. For example, in "To Honor and Obey," he relates that since he viewed his service to Clark as an "agreement of sorts," he needed to fulfill his role—a role of subservience into which he had been socialized. Only later in life did he realize the model was flawed; then it was "a bitter root" that drove him to misery and whiskey (44). Family ties were another reason he remained. Throughout both books, York's family is significant, especially the love between York and his father, "Old York." It's in character for him to explain that if freedom means never "hearing one a Ol' York's stories, / never fussing with his Rose, / or getting to hold my wife and family....," then it wouldn't be worth it. Simply put, "I never run 'cause alla my family / still belong to Capt. Clark." That seems clear enough, but the lines, "None a us be free / lessen alla us gets to come an go / as we please," suggest that York has developed a social vision beyond personal welfare: it's not simply wrong for him to be a slave—slavery itself is wrong ("Homing Signals" 91). During his time with the Native Americans, he has tasted the kind of free life his father knew in Africa. So closely does it parallel the stories of the homeland that he wonders if those accounts were Old York's "way of planting seeds / so his son recognize home / when he see it" ("Homecoming" 5). In short, he has achieved class consciousness.

As in the first book, central to York's complexity is his spirituality, a collection of beliefs rooted in his family and affirmed through his experience with Native Americans. In contrast to Clark and the other whites who see them as "heathens," York understands the spiritual nature of their everyday life. As he states in "Without Bibles,"

Sitting in a river a sweat  
be no more than bathing to the captains  
but a blind man can see God  
in everything the red man do. (19)

Similarly, in "Praying Feets" Walker portrays the religious ecstasy of dance. Again the object of irony, Clark takes sadistic satisfaction in ordering York to dance, and York observes, "My captain think it make him look more powerful /

to order a man such as me to dance" (58). But as usual, Clark has missed an understanding that York and the Native Americans share. For them dancing is transcendent: "Something like leaving happens / when I be ordered to dance," York states. Dancing gives the sense of "how things might be if my mind / weren't shackled inside my head / like dreaming but not being asleep" (57). The Natives see clearly that York's great black body moves "by its own spirit // an not by a white man's hand...." They "sing nothing but praises" and join him "in the air" (58). Like York, the Natives "believe / even the animals share a master drummer," though his white masters believe "we the only ones / that know how to dance" ("Murmuration" 59).

Walker's use of multiple first-person narrators allows a still richer portrayal of York. This is particularly true as we come to understand his relationships with his two wives, each of whom speaks in several poems. In "Like A Virgin," York relates his passion for his Nez Perce wife, "the first woman I chose / on my own an that I didn't have to share" (21). And, as the title suggests, such love is a new, wonderful experience for him. This poem serves as an introduction to several poems from her perspective, poems that gently draw out the wonder of York and their shared passion, a courtship and physical celebration that is the very antithesis of slave sexuality. "Quiet Storm" suggests their joyful love:

While out searching for camas and other roots  
to celebrate our choosing each other

I made pictures with my fingers and lips  
trying to make the raven's son understand

the number and beauty of the butterfly....

Before our lips and tongues finally parted  
we floated like two eagles circling midair.... (24)

But York loves his slave wife as well, so poems from her perspective, after his return, speak with a subtext of pathos. She's all the more in love with the transformed York, but she's also aware of his divided affections: as she states in "Unwelcome Guest," the presence of York's Nez Perce wife is so real, "I swears I can almost smell hur" (75). She even tries to please him by putting together her version of a makeshift sweat lodge, believing that "what married people do together / on bended knees / once dem work past dey anger / can be holy too" (78). And in the book's most sensual poem, she tries to win him back with "The Sunflower Seed Oil Conjure": "I works slow an hard an afta a while / when I gets alla way t'his man sack / he open his eyes and be glad its me" (77). Though their relationship has suffered, she affirms in "Real Costs" that "Somewhere out dere / he learnt t'touch me / like I'm a woman / an not just some woman. / Me" (81).

Naturally, many of the poems concern how York's experience of freedom affected his interactions with the other slaves, a theme developed best through their perspectives. In "Field Up," a young man states,

some a da things he say  
gets us yung bucks mighty excited 'n stirred up  
'n scares off da olda ones  
'specially when he talk a tastin' freedom

what it mean t'be a man  
'n how out west they worship  
our blackness 'n live married to da lan'  
like our people do back in Africa. (66)

One of the disapproving "olda ones" is Rose, York's stepmother. In "Rose Shows Her Thorns," she belittles the airs he seems to put on—"he think he better den the rest a us"—and says, "Now he back here, tellin' all dem lies, an' claimin' to be a hero / for wipin' a white man's ass alla way to the ochian an' back" (67). Her reaction is disappointing, though not surprising. The reaction of various slave-holders is, understandably, demented. Captain Clark's brothers, narrating the ironically titled "Brotherly Love," state that the expedition "made a monster of [Clark's] boy York"; they want him "sold south" "rather than have him around to poison / all our good Negroes" (93-94). York's dissatisfaction is an inevitable thread, and multiple points of view give us a fuller portrait of the continuing anguish of freedom and honor tasted, then lost.

Walker successfully introduces the perspectives of several other narrators as well. Some we might have expected, such as Sacajawea and Old York; but others are brilliantly unlikely, such as York's hunting shirt, his axe and knife, and even the Snake River, all of which speak with strangely believable voices. And when the book closes—with its painful and plain evaluation of the Corps of Discovery—we realize how fully Walker has moved us into the experience of York. Singly and together, these books are a great success: they portray the complex character of York, they enrich our understanding of an important chapter in American history, and they demonstrate the evolving art of Frank X Walker.