

Margins

Of the five texts below, two are original writings, by writers Velma Pollard and Desmond Egan; the other three are transcriptions of field recordings. With the exception of Egan's poem, they are published here for the first time. These short texts speak to us with authentic voices from the social, cultural and linguistic margins of the anglophone world.

USA

The following enthralling narrative is by ex-slave Laura Smalley (born in East Texas circa 1855). It tells of an encounter her mother had with Native Americans in the early 19th century. If the mother was about nine or ten in this story («big enough to handle water») we can estimate from other biographical details that it took place not later than 1846, soon after Anglo-Black settlement of eastern Texas had begun, settled mainly from the lower Mississippi area. Both of Laura Smalley's parents had come from this area.¹ It is intriguing to think that the incident could probably be dated to the very day on the basis of the spectacular meteorite shower.

The vivid telling of the tale makes visualisation of the incident very easy, set amongst the rolling wooded landscape of eastern Texas. The native Americans are in the last years of their freedom in this area. At the break of day they come to the spring they have probably known for generations, only to find it enclosed on the plantation. This, like the star shower perhaps, is a sign of their changing fortunes. The story involves the elements of air, fire and water, and also bread (earth), and this in itself confers a powerful elemental attraction. This previously untranscribed, unpublished passage is a gem, too, linguistically, since it contains a number of archaic features, providing a sample of a more basilectal level of 19th century Black American speech. The narrative begins when the fieldworker asks Laura Smalley if she had met any «wild Indians».

1. See Bailey et al. (1991: 68).

The morning the stars fell (African American English)

LS: *I núse yèar māmá tálk ábárúm* [I used to hear mama talk about them] *when say sh..when she was a chile, he [she] say dat uh, one mornin she went out an Ole Mistress - she'd big nough you know for to handle water - an said when she got to de door, open de door, that the stars was fallin. Now when stars was fallin (th)at mornin, an said she didn know, said Ole Mistress looked out an says: Dont you go out there! She says uh star(s)..She says they jus went like meat fry'n you know, she said the whole Earth was jus, jus uh, lit-up you know. Said they jus go:n like meat fry: ffwffwffwffw. Jus fore day. En said dat uh, when she went to go tuh duh spring, an the stars fell, say when they quit fall, twas daylight. An say she met some Injuns, India..Indians, down (th)ere - you know they pack [carry] water f'om a spring she said. An say she met some wild Indian. An they had, Ole Missus' cook had give uh [given her] a piece of bread, an dey give uh duh, dey give um de beads you know, give um, give uh, give uh some beads. Some beads you know, an took the bread, an evi...[FW: Oh!]*

Yaassum [Yes sir] , *an took the bread*

f'om uh. An said evitime she go a step in front, or go a walk they des [just] step in front uv uh, evitime then she go a walk they step in front uv uh [every time she started walking / tried to walk away they stepped in front of her].

An said findly [finally], at last dey had the bread up an retch [reached] the han back you know, an took the, took the beads way f'om uh. En dat said they was wild. Take it away f'om uh. An say she went back to the house, cryin, went back to the house cryin, said that, she tole she met some people who took uh bread, en give uh some beads an took the beads away from uh. An das only ever I hear talk of wild Injuns...Indians, in muh life. I never hear talk of no Indian(s). Aint never seed one.

Library of Congress archive 5497A.
Recorded by John Henry Faulk in 1941,
under the auspices of the WPA government scheme.

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[Editor's note: Laura Smalley's self-corrections (*Injuns* - *Indians*, and *give um* - *give uh*) show a degree of self-monitoring on her part which makes some of the features in the text specially remarkable for their mixed character: standard past verb forms (*said*, *looked out*, *didn't know*, *met*, *went*, *had*, *tol(d)*, *took*); common nonstandard forms like regularised *seed*, levelled past forms *give*, *come*, or singular/plural *was*; as well as unmarked verb forms which could be AAVE or creole - 3rd person singular *say* (in variation with *says* and/or *said*) and *go* (perhaps in variation with *went*), *take* (beside more frequent *took*), or *hear* as a past (*I never hear*). Moreover some features look as if they could only belong to a creole system: *he / um* referring to Laura Smalley's mother (note the switches *she* - *he* - *she* in the first two lines, and the *her* - *um* - *her* variation with *give*). This is reminiscent of creole 3rd person singular genderless pronoun forms *i / im-um*. Likewise *go a step* and *go a walk* ('started walking') seem to show a continuous aspect marker *a* followed by an uninflected verb, a feature typical of some creoles; *when they quit fall* ('stopped falling') shows a similar uninflected verb pattern.]