

Elżbieta Rokosz-Piejko

Adapting, Remaking, Re-visioning: Alex Haley's *Roots* in a Triangular Relationship with Its Two Television Adaptations

Abstract: The 1977 television adaptation of Alex Haley's family saga was an overwhelming (although rather unexpected) success, both in the United States and abroad. The 8-hour miniseries, aired first by the History Channel on Memorial Day 2016, is a new take on the adaptation of Haley's text, advertised as a remake of the 1977 production. The article refers to the original success of Haley's text, followed by numerous controversies, and then discusses the appropriation of the story for the 1977 mostly white television audience, to finish up with a discussion of the angle which the 2016 production took, engaging in dialogue with the "iconic" 1977 miniseries.

Keywords: *Roots*, Alex Haley, adaptation, television miniseries, remake

In the history of literature there are a number of works that have turned out to have an immense social and cultural impact, far exceeding the highest hopes of their authors. Alex Haley's 1976 book titled *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is, undoubtedly, one of them, despite the controversies that surround it now. Those controversies concern the basic idea of truth: the book was published, advertised and sold as being based on facts; this is what supposedly distinguished it from other publications taking up the subject of slavery.¹ Haley called his work an example of "faction"—written in the form of a novel, but being the history of his family, one of its branches, traced down the genealogical tree back to his African ancestor, captured in the Gambia in the second half of the eighteenth century and sold into slavery in the British colony of Maryland. The germ of the story was found in the history preserved in his family's oral tradition, passed from generation to generation, until Haley himself found the determination to pursue his research and explore both the American and the African elements of the story, which, as he claimed, had taken him twelve years.² The veracity of the results of that research is, however, questionable.

1 See, e.g. Boyd; Crouch; or Reid.

2 One of the sources providing detailed information about the creation of both the book and the serial is the Warner Bros 2007 documentary *Crossing Over: How Roots Captivated an Entire Nation*.

Haley started the project in the 1960s, which coincided with his collaboration with Malcolm X culminating in the posthumous publication of the activist's autobiography. That fact seems to explain Haley's apparent urge to both find and cherish his African roots within the universal African-American context, and to confirm the Islamic heritage of the people of Africa (Kunta Kinte, the African ancestor whose birthplace Haley claimed to have finally discovered came from the Islamic part of Africa). In the mid-70s, when Haley's book finally saw the light of day, it became caught up within the post-Civil-Rights atmosphere, but it was still before its completion that the book gained enough fame to be contracted for a television miniseries. As Haley was finishing his text, page by page, so were four screenwriters completing the adapted screenplay, all of them white.³ The book was published in August 1976,⁴ when the miniseries was already in production. The serial was shown by ABC television starting January 23, 1977, for eight consecutive nights, as the producers feared it might not attract too many viewers. The results were astonishing—more than half of the nation watched the production, breaking all possible records and leading to daily routines and special events being rescheduled (cf. *Crossing Over*).

The consequences of this popularity—particularly of its scale—were unprecedented and unexpected. One of them was an outburst of interest in genealogy amongst Americans of various origins. Letters to the National Archives in Washington, requesting information on people's genealogies tripled, applications for permits to use the facilities doubled. Knowing one's lineage became an urge not only for African Americans, but equally so for the descendants of immigrants. Thousands of people searched for their roots, encouraged by Haley's example.⁵ Another immediate consequence was the striking popularity of Alex Haley himself. In 1977 he received the Pulitzer Prize, became a celebrity giving dozens of lectures and interviews, and had a number of places and public institutions named in his honor.

However, with the growing popularity of Haley's family history accusations appeared, the first and most serious of which concerned plagiarism. There were also

3 As William Haley, Alex's son, suggests in the documentary *Crossing Over*, the fact that no African American screenwriter was involved in the process resulted in the miniseries being "not as hard hitting as it could have been." In the same documentary material David L. Wolper, the miniseries executive producer, claims, that it was Alex Haley's decision not to get any other African American writer but him be involved in writing the screenplay. According to him, Haley said: "I'm afraid that if a black writer is associated with this show, he's gonna give his point of view of how this should be. I don't want his point of view, I want my point of view."

4 However, as we can read in the 1976 edition of *Roots*: "A condensed version of a portion of this work first appeared in *Reader's Digest*" in 1974.

5 We can find reference to the interest Americans took in genealogy, inspired by the Haley family history, in a number of sources, including Gardner 152-153; Manley; and the documentary *Crossing Over*.

questions about the general veracity of the pre-Civil War segment of the family history. There were two separate court cases in the spring of 1977, in which the plaintiffs claimed Haley had plagiarized their novels. The first one, settled to the plaintiff's advantage, concerned the main character, Kunta Kinte, and numerous passages, which were, as Haley eventually was forced to acknowledge, taken from *The African*, a 1967 novel authored by the plaintiff, white author Hal Courlander. Courlander and Haley settled the case for \$650,000 and a statement that "Alex Haley acknowledges and regrets that various materials from *The African* by Harold Courlander found their way into his book, *Roots*" (qtd. in Kaplan). The second case, brought by Margaret Walker, an African American writer, claiming that Haley plagiarized her 1966 novel *Jubilee*, was dismissed as unsubstantiated. The fact of plagiarism was not publicized, the Pulitzer Prize was not revoked. Judge Robert Ward, who presided over the Courlander case, says in the 1996 BBC documentary *The Roots of Alex Haley*: "Alex Haley perpetrated a hoax on the public." That hoax, however, was to be fully revealed years later.

Haley's book became of immediate interest to historians and genealogists. Those who too enough effort, e.g. Gary and Elizabeth Mills, found out that the pre-Civil War part of the book was a hoax,⁶ and so was the very tracing of Kunta Kinte and locating him in the village of Juffure, the Gambia. The Mills' article from 1981 and a number of other articles from the 1990s, published after Haley's death in 1992, provide evidence for the falsity of Haley's claims (cf. Crouch; Reid). The most accusatory was Phillip Nobile's article "Alex Haley's Hoax," which appeared in *The Village Voice* on February 23, 1993. Nobile gained access to the repository for Alex Haley's papers, located at the University of Tennessee Special Collections Library, Knoxville. His findings were published in the abovementioned article and were also turned into the BBC documentary referred to above, directed by James Kent, never broadcast in the United States. They prove both the plagiarism and the lack of reliable evidence for the pre-Civil War period of the family history, and of the African part in particular. It appears that the Kunta Kinte of Juffure, the Gambia never existed. Or at least not the one supposedly brought to America in 1767 to become Alex Haley's ancestor.

No matter what the revelations concerning the actual authenticity of the Haley family history are, Kunta Kinte has become part of the American historical narrative as an archetype of an African ancestor every African American has in his or her genealogy: a warrior, a free man enslaved, struggling to maintain his identity and dignity, and to pass the knowledge about the African ancestors onto the next generations. Whoever Haley's actual African ancestor was, he did stay in people's memory, because what started Haley's research were a few African-sounding words

6 Until 1870 the federal census listed most blacks by age and sex, not by name, which renders most research into African-American family history basically ineffective. The Mills prove that the conclusions Haley jumped to about his pre-Civil War ancestors were wrong.

that had survived in the family oral tradition, coming from “the African,” the ancestor brought from Africa and enslaved.

Kunta Kinte became an archetype of an African slave for millions of viewers outside the US, as the series sold remarkably well abroad: for the viewers, much more than the readers, because it was the miniseries rather than Haley’s text itself that conquered the world and inscribed the name of Kunta Kinte in the memory of all those who watched it. The fact that the story itself is actually made up is of little importance from the global perspective—even if the character is fictitious and has no connection whatsoever with Alex Haley’s family, the urtext is true. There were millions of Africans caught and sold into slavery who were abused, mutilated, exploited. *Roots* one way or another tells their story. However, if not based on facts, Alex Haley’s *Roots* is just a novel and should not have been advertised as nonfiction. As the court case proved, in that supposedly nonfiction book there were 80 passages plagiarized from a novel. However, as the *New York Times* editorial team wrote after Haley’s death: “Whatever its flaws, *Roots* opened modern America’s eyes to [its] black heritage... its impact was phenomenal” (qtd. in Henig 60).

It seems that the popularity of Haley’s narrative in the 1970s, whether the book or the miniseries, grew out of a number of factors, two of which are the skilful fictionalization of family history, thanks to which we get access to Haley’s ancestors’ feelings and emotions, and the informative function it played, “teaching” thousands of readers about slave trade and the horrors of slavery in general. That “lesson,” however, turned out to be partly misleading, as some researchers have proved, with reference to both African culture and tradition, and slave ships’ practices.

The 1977 miniseries was made and broadcast within certain social constraints. As Matthew F. Delmont puts it in *Making Roots: A Nation Captivated*, “the series had to appeal to white viewers in order to be a commercial success” (109), as the white audience constituted a majority of the television programs recipients. The series had to have “white television names” and some of the white characters foregrounded. Nevertheless, it managed to “rework blackness” and skillfully negotiate “the challenges posed by remembering slavery in a (white) nation that would rather not talk about it” (King and Leonard 120). Some of the white characters were softened, the cast was selected carefully to include recognizable faces (e.g., Lorne Hyman Greene, Maya Angelou, O.J. Simpson, Kevin Joseph Aloysius “Chuck” Connors, George Stevens Hamilton). There were also a number of alterations introduced, which led to the partial substitution of white for black perspectives on the African past (there are some scenes in which the point of view is that of a white character, e.g. captain Davies who has the slave ship under his command). However, most of the story is evidently told from the perspective of African American characters, who are all positive, while most of whites are unquestionable villains. For the first time, in a major television show addressed to the wide audience, whiteness was decentered and African American characters appeared as fully human. And for the first time in a production like this, the fact of white slave masters raping their female slaves and having children

by them is conspicuously referred to, stressing that in American history “whiteness and blackness are inextricably linked” (Gardner 152).

Roots still remains of interest to scholars, as reflected by a recent publication *Reconsidering Roots: Race, Politics, and Memory*, edited by Erica L. Ball and Kellie Carter Jackson (2017), including essays which readdress the impact of Haley's book and of the 1977 miniseries. In their introduction, the editors quote Matthew Frye Jacobson's opinion concerning the global popularity of the television production: “*Roots* was rather nimbly appropriated as a generic saga of migration and assimilation, not an African-American story, not even an American story, exactly, but a modern one—a story that ‘speaks for all of us everywhere’” (qtd. in Ball and Jackson 7). In his essays published *Reader's Digest* in 1977, Haley stressed the universal immigrant story inscribed in the narrative (7). Because of this universal dimension the series was a subject of serious criticism—for turning African Americans into an ethnic group as any others. The leftists criticized both the book and the series for privileging faith and family (Haley was a Republican, after all), and for making slavery look more benign than it actually was. The miniseries, even more than the book, stressed the similarities between Kunta Kinte's story, or the stories of his descendants trying to survive against all odds, and immigrant narratives. From such a perspective, Kunta Kinte does resemble an immigrant who struggles to save pieces of the “old world” and becomes a character that Americans of all ethnicities can identify with. As Richard King notices in his article on African Americans on television, “*Roots* may have marked the first time many whites had been able to identify with blacks as people” (74). Very strong criticism concerned also the introductory text delivered in the form of voice-over, advertising the production and explaining its origins as follows: “From primitive Africa to the Old South, *Roots* sweeps across a young America bursting with all the dreams, all the joys, and all the hardships of a vibrant country and its people, through the years of slavery, the Civil War, reconstruction and struggle to survive” (*Roots* 1977). Such an opening, besides depreciating African culture and civilization, stressed the universal, that is American, nature of the narrative, which in a way is also foregrounded by Haley himself in the subtitle of the book: *The Saga of an American Family*.

As Ball and Jackson notice, *Roots* and its 1977 adaptation served as a popular metaphor for the legislative gains of the Civil Rights Movement and a promise of a better tomorrow and led to “reading *Roots* as a post-civil-rights parable” (6). However, it did “hold under erasure important historical elements” (King and Leonard 120). This is precisely what the new television adaptation of *Roots*, broadcast in 2016 does not do—quite the opposite, it exposes such elements, just as a History Channel production should.

The 2016 8-hour production was advertised as “[t]he groundbreaking series reimagined” and its first episode was aired on Memorial Day 2016. The reason for its creation, stated in the advertising campaign, was, first of all, the urge to revive the “cultural icon for a new audience” (Dirk Hoostra qtd. in Andreeva), since “[t]here is a whole generation of Americans who don't know the story, don't have a connection

to *Roots*” (LeVar Burton qtd. in Guthrie). A relatively rare solution in adaptations of literary texts, the 2016 miniseries instead of trying to readapt the source text, re-makes the first adaptation and remains in a constant dialogue with it, rather than with Haley’s text. The explanation for such an approach can be twofold; first of all, the 1977 series is much better known to the contemporary television audience than the book, and it is more captivating and dynamic as a narrative, too. Besides, unlike Haley’s book, it is not burdened with the accusation of being a hoax.

The new audio-visual text is more dramatic, more violent, more visually attractive and more historically contextualized. However, its social impact cannot be—and, admittedly, nobody ever believed it could be—comparable to that of the 1977 miniseries, as the televisual landscape makes it just one production among many, its advertising was moderate, and the subject matter instead of being surprising or novel rather fits into the vogue for historical productions set in the slavery period (to name as the most conspicuous the examples of *Django Unchained* (2012), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), a new TV series *Underground* (2016), or the feature film *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) showing Nat Turner’s uprising). The political context of the 2016 production, seemingly entirely different from that of the 1977 original, is not exactly so, due to the continued systemic racism towards people of color and relatively recent demonstrations against it, e.g. Black Lives Matter activist movement.

As Thomas Leitch points out, the remake, the original film it remakes and the source text of the two audio-visual texts establish a peculiar “triangular relationship” (39). As he also suggests, remakes usually intend to revise the original films, while evoking the memory of the earlier productions with all the positive associations the audience might still have. This is precisely what the 2016 miniseries does—while paying homage to the original production it provides Haley’s narrative with a richer historical context and a more accusatory tone. Addressed to an audience much less sensitive to violence and cruelty on screen than in 1977, it was advertised as more violent than its predecessor: the characters are more brutal, the whippings are longer, sexual violence is more explicit. Each episode is preceded by a warning: “The following historical presentation contains intense language of the time period and violence,” and the viewing guides available on the History Channel webpage contain a similar message: “Please note that ROOTS contains intense language of the time period, violence and sexual violence and therefore we do not recommend it for children under the age of 14. Viewer discretion is strongly advised.”

Similarly to that of the 1977 production, the cast of the 2016 adaptation includes a number of well-known actors (e.g. Forest Whitaker, Anna Paquin, Laurence Fishburne, Johnathan Rhys Meyers, Matthew Goode) and introduces new faces as well (e.g. Malachi Kirby, an English actor of Jamaican ancestry, as Kunta Kinte). LeVar Burton, the actor who played young Kunta Kinte in the original miniseries, became one of the executive producers of the new production and played a major role in the advertising campaign of the new series, creating a natural connection between the old and the new version.

Just like the source text and the first adaptation, the new miniseries starts with Kunta Kinte's youth in Juffure in West Africa, in Mandinka Kingdom, the Gambia. Haley's story romanticized and rehabilitated Africa, picturing it as an Eden, and so did the first adaptation. Back in 1977 the picture of Africa as a place populated by people with strong family ties, a clear system of values, not "wild beasts," was a new and valuable contribution. The 2016 production goes a step further: Juffure is not a simple village (as Haley and the original miniseries depicted it), but a vibrant urban community, and Kunta is planning his studies in Timbuktu before being abducted. The producers stressed that the recreated African setting is much richer in the 2016 series due to the enhanced knowledge of African history that is now available. Kunta's life is, however, more troubled due to the conflict between his tribe, the Mandinka, and the Koros, another tribe, the members of which eventually capture Kunta and sell him to the white slave traders. The tribes are presented as much more militant and Kunta's warrior training is more violent; the general atmosphere of the African part of the story is transformed, with pastoral overtones replaced by much more complex and ambivalent ones.

The softening of white characters introduced in the 1977 adaptation is not to be observed in the 2016 series, which also returns to the original names of the white masters depicted in Haley's book and the two adaptations, the names changed in the 1977 production: Reynolds, Moore, and Harvey become Waller, Lea, and Murray, as in Haley's narrative. The Waller brothers are depicted as far more vicious and racist than in the original series and the entire sub-plot from the 1977 series involving the moral dilemma of Captain Davies regarding his command of a slave ship disappears in the remake. In the 2016 production, the captain participates in slave trade and takes advantage of the female slaves on-board his ship, which the 1977 captain refrained from.

If the education of the audience of the 1977 production concerned mainly sympathy and empathy for the African American protagonists, the 2016 version tries to provide a more powerful and accurate history lesson.⁷ In the aftermath of the television broadcast of the 1977 production, "more than 250 colleges and universities began offering courses on *Roots* and the history of slavery" (Maranzani). The new production, anticipating potential interest, is accompanied by additional materials available on-line, to supplement those potential viewers in need of further historical background or subject for discussion.⁸ It is overtly didactic, aspiring to be viewed as an audio-visual history lesson. Hence, among the elements that distinguish it

7 The insistence on accuracy can, however, lead to quite surprising declarations, as it is in the case of Marisa Guthrie's statement beginning her 2016 article on the new series for *The Hollywood Reporter*. She states that "a more violent and a more accurate remake is here," which without further explanation sounds as if a modified copy, which a remake as such is, could be actually more accurate than the original.

8 A variety of viewing guides can be found at <http://www.history.com/roots-viewing-resources>.

from both the source text and the first adaptation is the abovementioned very clear historical context and involvement of the protagonists in key historical events taking place between 1767, when Kunta arrives in America, and the end of the Civil War, when the televisual narrative ends. Both series refer similarly to only one historical event, i.e. Nat Turner's rebellion and the impact it has on the protagonists' lot, while major modifications introduced in the process of the historical contextualizing of the remake concern the events of the American Revolution, the abolitionist movement and the Civil War.

The American Revolution becomes part of Kunta Kinte's story, because as a runaway slave he is shown as encouraged to join the British troops and promised freedom when the American cause is lost. He joins the weaponless Ethiopian regiment of Lord Dunmore, but escapes from the battle, in the fog, witnessing his friend's death; he is captured with the British papers stating the right of slaves to be free and, as a punishment, part of his foot is cut off before his return to his master. The abolitionist movement is represented in the last episode by Nancy, a white lady, the fiancée of Fredrick Murray, one of the slaveholders, who turns out to be a Union spy. When her true intentions are discovered, she is hanged and so is Jerusalem, her slave associate. In the same episode, covering the period of the Civil War, Chicken George, Kunta Kinte's grandson, joins the Union Army, and through his first-hand experience the viewers learn about the role of African American soldiers in the conflict, as well as about the treatment they received when captured by the Confederates. After the battle at Fort Pillow, Chicken George witnesses the massacre of the black soldiers who, according to the Southern standards, did not have the rights of POWs and were simply slaughtered.

All of the abovementioned scenes and events are new to the story, introduced by the screenwriters.⁹ These additions serve a number of purposes—they not only provide a general lesson in American history, but by the inclusion of African Americans in the events they stress the part slaves, or former slaves, played or could have played in that history. The broader historical context becomes the main feature which distinguishes the remake from the original series, besides the general high visual quality of the picture and more violence shown.

As Forest and Koos notice, remakes “reflect different historical, economic, social, political and aesthetic conditions that made them possible” (3). Informative, violent, dramatic, consistent aesthetically, the new series has been quite well received by the critics, but did not lead to any major debate. It is significant that its reviewers referred to the 1977 series, not Haley's book, as the source text it should be compared with. They stressed not so much the narrative or visual qualities of the production, but concentrated on the different times in which it “landed” as “one story among many” (the quoted phrases come from Poniewozik's review for *The New York Times*,

⁹ Unlike the original miniseries, the group of screenwriters of the 2016 production included, besides Lawrence Konner and Mark David Rosenthal, two African American writers: Alison McDonald and Charles Murray.

but a similar stand is represented by D'Addario or McGuiness). Does the new series have anything to say to its viewers that they do not know yet? Probably not. Was it, then, worth the effort? What it certainly achieved, was bringing back the memory of the original miniseries, and with the full awareness of the cult that still surrounds it and the sensitive territory the critique of Haley's novel is, restoring it into the contemporary media discourse and circulation. It also evoked in the original audience of the 1977 miniseries' the nostalgia for the times when a television drama could unite the audience nation-wide in the common experience of participation in what turned out to be television history making. As Poniewozik rightly points it out in his review: "A generation of viewers—whatever we looked like, wherever we came from, wherever we ended up—carried the memory of Kunta having his name beaten out of him."

The 1977 *Roots* was "the right story" in "the right form" at "the right time," as back then Barbara Jordan, a Texas Congresswoman, told the *Time* magazine (qtd. in Rothman). In this particular case of the "triangular relationship," to use Leitch's term again, paradoxically it is not the remake that dominates and "marginalizes the original film, reducing it to the status of the unseen classic" (40), but rather the shadow of the original series looms over the remake, making it somehow insignificant, as it seemingly has done with Alex Haley's hoax, overshadowing it with its own gripping narrative. The case of the two *Roots* miniseries conspicuously illustrates how vital in any production's reception is the social, historical and cultural context of its launching. The 2016 perspective leads to the reflection on how much has changed since 1977 in the way slavery is referred to and in the participation of African Americans in the dominant media discourse. However, as D'Addario notices, "the greatest danger for a story like *Roots* is that, through repetition, its images of evil become clichéd." What is distressing, though, is that racial violence, which is unquestionably the narrative's subject matter, still has its contemporary context in which the narrative of Kunta Kinte and the struggle of his descendants resonates with a disturbingly familiar note.

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