

Cane River Chronicles I & II:
A collection of poems/short stories birthed from
the memories of my ancestors of Cane River
(Natchitoches Parish)
By Debra Roberson

I.

Black woman

You are the creator of all life. In your womb is the foundation of a past that defines our future. From your being evolves all nations, kindred, and tongues. Black to Red to Yellow to White- we owe our existence to you. We behold your glory- innate, incomprehensible, intimate, you are beautiful beyond words. Knowledgeable beyond understanding. Your strength spans man's weakness by creating a bridge from generation to generation. Without you we cease to be. For you, Black woman, are the essence of God given life itself.

Black man

You have toiled until your hands are calloused and bruised. You have had to stand by while your family was torn apart and your women raped. Even though from your loins flowed life, you were enslaved and told that you are less than human. You hung your head in shame as you passed a white person and you had to cross to the other side of the street. Your strong black back bore the pain and sorrow of your heritage and with every crack of that whip they tried to beat that pride out of you. You were born of kings and queens. You have forgotten that you are royalty. Where formal slavery hid in the shadows, you are still enslaved in the prisons of this "Great Country. "You matter" Don't lose sight of your greatness. We need you, Black man.

Spirit Tree

You spread your limbs and leaves for the white masses who lunch under you any given day. The trunk is a silent protector as the leaves whisper comfort and peace to the slave owners. You spread those same limbs to receive the bodies of my ancestors swinging in the wind.

Strange fruit, No

Kings, queens, blacksmiths, scholars

You forget their given names and occupations as you drain the life from their limp bodies. But I don't forget-

These ancestors gave birth to you too.

You are trying to erase the cradle of salvation, but you will not succeed. **We will prevail.**

SLAVE

Servant

Lazy

Adventurous

Virtuous

Excellence



Dominique Toussaint

Letter to my Great, Great, Great Grandfather Dominique Toussaint

I never met you in person, but I feel the power of your blood coursing through me. I didn't grow up with your name on my tongue and it wasn't until my mind was engaged and broadened, did I realize that you bear a great name- Toussaint L'Ouverture (born Dominique Toussaint). Grandfather- were you so named because we are directly related to this great man? Or were you named this because my ancestors didn't want us to forget that we are descendants of Haiti. You arrived here and there's a multitude of people that came from your loins. We remember you now. I recognize you now. You are my reminder to never let slavery of life overtake me. Like Toussaint L'Ouverture- we are the captains of our lives and we have every right to live free even in a shackled world. Thank you for teaching me that I have a choice- Live Free or Die.

Say their names

Activists

Dr. Martin L. King Jr
Rosa Parks
Frederick Douglas
James Baldwin
Mahalia Jackson
Harriet Tubman
Sojourner Truth
Malcom X
W. E. B. DuBois
Medgar Evers
Marcus Garvey
Barbara Jordan
Paul Robeson
Booker T. Washington
Rudy Bridges
Thurgood Marshall

Victims

Eric Gardner
Trayvon Martin
Tamar Rice
Sandra Bland
Tyre King
Breonna Taylor
Atatiana Jefferson
Botham Jean
Philando Castille
Alton Sterling
George Floyd
Michelle Cusseaux
Freddie Gray
John Elliott Neville
Michael Brown
Ahmaud Arbery

No, we will never forget your sacrifice, words of wisdom, your leadership, your courage, your power in the midst of adversity, your pain, or your premature deaths. Those who don't remember the past are doomed to repeat it. **NO, WE WILL NEVER FORGET!**

To the Pilgrims:

“As iron sharpens iron so does one person sharpen another.” But you didn’t come to learn, listen, collaborate, or sit at the table of equality.

You came to conquer, divide, overthrow, bludgeon, murder, rape, and pillage.

What did religious freedom have to do with this?

In God we trust

Do we and what god is this?

White power, money, wealth, sex, death. You talk but no words of substance are coming out. You print this on money that you use to pay the hooker in the back room of the club before you go home to your garden estate. You pay this holy paper under the table as you hire the Hitman to make your life easier. You use this paper at a whim as you pay unequally those who work for you. This blood-stained flat god of yours will not save you. Look around you, where is your god in all of this chaos? You are standing on sinking sand.

The pestilence (Covid-19)

It kills indiscriminately. No warning! You think your big houses behind gated communities can save you? You think that place at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue can cover you? Or your fair skin gives you a buffer? What about your guns, flags, statues? No, NO, No! This angel of death destroys regardless of race, color, creed, sexual orientation, handicap, or religion. When you close your eyes, are you safe? Wake up, we are at war for our souls. The coronavirus kills and unlike you, it is not prejudiced.

What about my rights?

Just wear a mask they say but the people revolt. I want my freedom to kill as many as I come in contact with. Are you that selfish? Yes. It's not about you. Protect yourself, protect your family, protect those you love. Get down off that high horse and do your duty-Wake up and Mask up!

II

The Overseer

“Hush now child,” my mother whispered to me. “Mr. Charlie is just a few rows over. Do you want him to see you?” As I shook my head no, she hurriedly pulled out the sticky things from my fingers and wiped the blood away. “Remember, you pull the cotton gently and work fast or they will dock your pay again”, she said. Tears flowed down my face as I recalled how I used to play with Miss Ann in the yard of the big house. I wanted to go back to that time. We ran, made mud pies, had tea parties and sat on the dock and listened to the steamboats coming in. I wiped those tears with the back of my hurting hands and began to pull the cotton from the row that was all mines. Everyone was so much farther ahead of me. My sack looked sad compared to the others. Mr. Charlie was the overseer and most times he acted like he birthed this cotton himself. “Faster chile,” he yelled to me. “You wanna get your pay docked again?” No sir, I mumbled. I was only getting 3 cents a pound now because I was not a fast picker. I tried to keep the blood off the cotton because if I didn't, I wouldn't get any pay at all. I hated Mr. Charlie and that dang horse. If he knew how it was supposed to be done, why didn't he get a sack and join us in the fields. The Massa said that we were to obey Mr. Charlie, even if he was Black like us. I just wish I could play again but my place was in these fields. Didn't seems fair to me, but what did I know- I was only 10.

Pentecost Baptist Church

I hated that dress and these stocking pricked my legs. What was the big deal? We went to church every Sunday and it was always a grand occasion. “Close your legs,” my grandma told me this at least 10 times on any given Sunday. I was not used to these dresses and stocking. I wanted to wear jeans and shorts but that wouldn't be appropriate. Women wore shirts or dresses and Men wore suits and ties. It took nearly an hour to get to the church and you could hear the sounds of the organ music as you rounded the bend of Old River (Cane

River). “Mrs. Bertha, your grandbabies look so nice,” the women cooed. I just wanted it to be over so I could get some of that fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, cake and pop they served after church. Churching was serious business. We were there for at least 4 hours- calling on the Lord and such. If it was a “good” Sunday- The Holy Ghost visited, and a few wigs went flying. I looked over at the wall in the back on the left side and there it was- the hole that Mrs. Hawthorn left when the Holy Ghost came over her and she snapped her head back and made that hole. I didn’t understand why the Holy Ghost could make you jump out your seat and over benches or lay you out on the floor for several minutes. Sometimes it took others longer and the ushers came with the smelling salts. The best part for me was the music- it was lively, and it seemed to fill the church with life! The piano would talk, and the organ would respond. Each in a harmonious dance as the notes lifted us higher. I looked around for a fan. Luckily, there was one in the row I was in. I stared at the two children on the front- a boy and a girl in prayer. I flipped to the back and it was an advertisement for some funeral home. It was getting hot in this packed church. I saw the deacons lifting the windows. We still had a way to go here. The preacher hadn’t preached yet. I loved when the music would stop but the song carried on with stomping and clapping. This was the essence of church for me. We didn’t need any fancy instruments-just each other voices, hands and feet.

When the music stopped, after that hymn of preparation, the preacher came up. My uncle, Flueny, was the preacher. This was my grandpa’s brother. Uncle Flueny read some scripture and then proceeded to preach about something else entirely. I guess it was customary to throw some scripture around before you preached. I tended to blank out at that point. It mostly went over my head and I was feeling mighty uncomfortable in these clothes. Then I heard something familiar. My Uncle said, “Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the King’s horses and all the King’s men, couldn’t put Humpty back together again.” I looked around to see if anyone besides me was giggling. All the kids had smiles on their faces, but the adults were serious. What in the world did a children’s rhyme have to do with God? Well, I was curious on that Sunday. Uncle Flueny preached as if it was his last sermon. After 2 hours of preaching, Uncle Flueny brought it back around. Humpty Dumpty never should have been on that wall. It’s like us, we straddle the fence trying to see what our neighbors have. When Humpty fell, he broke. We often fall in our walk with God and become broken. Humpty was looking to others to piece him back together. We look at friends, neighbors, anybody to help us get our life back right. You see, Humpty Dumpty in all his brokenness needed King Jesus to make him whole again. And we are the same-only Jesus can make us whole again. I finally got it! The doors of the church opened, and I was the first to hop out my seat. I wanted to be made whole and I knew I was in the right place for it to happen.

I don got over

“I’m so glad, I don got over. I’m so glad, I don got over, I’m so glad I don got over. Don got over at last”

I could hear the ladies sing this as they wrapped me in that white sheet and wrapped my head with that white cloth. I tried to be still, but I was a bit antsy. I couldn’t believe it. I was finally going to be baptized. I told my grandparents, I had religion, but they didn’t believe me at first. I was too young- 5 years old, so they sent me back to the mourner’s bench. Each Summer I came to live with my grandparents and during this time we went to different church revivals in the hopes of me gaining salvation. My days went like this- wake up, eat breakfast, do chores and pray until it was time for church. Sometimes, the people in the neighborhood would come over at 12noon and we would have a prayer meeting. They would call me to the living room and lay hands on me and pray for me. I was earnest in my prayers-I really wanted to be saved. Afterwards, I went back to my room, got on my knees and prayed again and again. I remember when my dad sat me aside and told me the story of how he “got over”. He was walking in the fields one day praying and he asked the Lord for a sign that he was saved. He looked up at the sky and the sun was shouting. He ran all the way home and told his parents he was saved.

I had to pray for a sign too otherwise, I would never be saved. I remember when my grandparents sat me down and opened the family bible and showed me a picture of the devil. I couldn’t shake that image. I woke up scared and I went to be scared. “Lord, I believe in you, please show me a sign,” I begged God. As I prayed, I felt dejected. Why did God not want to save me? I woke up one day and it felt a lil bit different than other days. After my chores, I went to my room and I fell on my knees. I prayed, ‘Lord, I believe in you, I love you and I know you died for my sins. I know you rose up from the grave and you are alive in me today.’ As I prayed in this dark room, I felt some heat and light. I looked up and there was a light bulb suspended above my head-no strings. I jumped up and ran to my grandparents and told them I was saved. That night at revival, I got off the mourner’s bench at altar call and sat up front. My journey with Jesus was just beginning. I was told that I would be baptized on Sunday.

After I was properly dressed and tied with rope near the bottom of my leg (so the sheet wouldn’t rise when I went in the water), we all set out from the church to Cane River. We sang songs the whole way- “Wade in the water”, “How did you feel when you come out of the wilderness” and “Jesus, keep me near the cross.” When it was my time to go in the River- two men grabbed me under the arms and carried me to the preacher. I couldn’t feel the bottom. I wasn’t afraid. I was happy and it showed when I came up out of that water shouting! I was a newly born believer. They sang the song, “I don got over” and I think I sang it the loudest because I don got over at last!

Me too

Everyday Keith and I played. We made up games to play or we played games we knew. He was my good friend and next-door neighbor. Sometimes we got in trouble for doing naughty things, but each day was full of adventure. I was playing in the yard at my house on New York Street in Houston. I was a lil bored because it was just me as my mom and cousin sat outside watching and guzzling down some Schlitz. I asked if I could go next door and play with Keith. "Sure," my mom said, "Just behave." I yelled, "I will," and I jetted next door. Keith was watching cartoons and we sat in the living room imagining over selves as *Speed Racer*. I wanted a car like that so I could speed around a track and beat my friends.

Keith had an older brother named "Green". That was his nickname because he was always hustling money. Green called me in the room-he wanted to show me something. I went and he closed the door behind me. He proceeded to try to touch me in inappropriate places. I can't remember if I screamed or shock overtook me. I fought him off as best I could, but he was way taller and heavier than me. I saw something come out of his pants and I kicked him there. He went down and I escaped. I didn't bother to tell Keith bye. I ran out the house and straight to my mom and cousin. I told them what happened, and they laughed. I couldn't believe it. I was telling the truth and I was scared but yet they laughed and said, "I bet you won't go over there anymore." I looked at them and realized they were drunk. From that day forward I hated beer and I kept my issues to myself. If nothing else, I learned what a swift kick to a male genitals can do.

Fit in

I wasn't the most popular girl in school. In fact, I wasn't popular at all because I made straight A's. It wasn't until the new girl joined our class. She was from Opelousas and her name was Pam. She took me under her wing and tried her best to corrupt me. She'd push kids out the way, beat them up after school and took the best seats in the cafeteria. There I was part of the in crowd. I wasn't sure why she picked me, but I was glad to be on the good side of Pam. One day the group of us went to the girl's bathroom and there was Gail. She was the sister of my sister's boyfriend. I had no beef with her. We were friends. When my sister came over to their house, I would come too, and Gail and I would play. Well today was not a play day. Pam glared at Gail and she pushed her to me. I hesitated. If I didn't push her back, I was a wuss and likely out of the club. If I did push her, I betrayed our friendship. I did the only thing I felt I could do-I pushed her. This continued for a few

minutes and I saw the hurt in her eyes. Finally, Pam tired of this and let her go. That evening my Mom got a phone call about my behavior. I was embarrassed that I betrayed a true friend just to fit in with Pam's group. Eventually Pam moved back to Louisiana as fast as she had come to Houston. She got into lots of trouble with fighting and such. I apologized to Gail. I was no bully and never again did I care about fitting in.

Slave Quarters

There was no where you could hide or have complete solace. The slave quarters were for whole families and most times it was a big room with little space for all who lived there. Cooking, washing dishes and oh, yeah, going to the bathroom was all outside. Bathing was done in the big tub that was used to wash clothes in. We went to the water pump and bought the water to the house to get warm on the fire outside. The father was first to bathe, then the mother and the children according to age. The baby was last and often time the water was so black that the baby had to be held above the water and washed. There were so many chores to do that little time was left for play except an occasional Saturday. Sunday was the Lord's Day and we spent the day in church. If we were lucky, we could attend school to grade 6-just enough to get a base for reading, writing and basic arithmetic. We survived these times, but it wasn't easy.

Moss

“Slave Quarters had no beds with mattresses and box springs. The best you could hope for was one of the flour or sugar sacks that was empty. You had to wait your turn, based on age, and it was like Christmas when you got an empty sack. You ran to the nearest moss tree and filled the sack with as much moss as you could. This became your sleeping bed for the rest of your time on that plantation.”