A Speech Made by a Black of Guadaloupe

ANONYMOUS

(fl. 1709)

This anonymous pamphlet, appended to an anonymous open letter, provides one of the earliest purported representations of slave speech and point of view. Although it is likely to be the work of a white English writer, it may represent an actual experience of hearing a slave’s funeral oration. In fact, many slave narratives of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were mediated through literate white editors and scribes.

In contrast to earlier attacks on slavery by the Quakers Richard Baxter (1673) and Morgan Godwyn (1680) and by the Behmenist Thomas Tryon (1684), the “Speech of the Black at Guadaloupe” (1709) offers one of the earliest examples of an anti-slavery tract not connected closely with dissenting Protestant theology. While its origins are likely to remain shrouded in mystery, the “Speech” still represents one of the earliest texts that purports to be from the point of view of an actual enslaved African, and, as such, it is an important step beyond Tryon’s overtly fictional representation of “Sambo” in the dialogue in Friendly Advice (1684; included in this anthology). Guadaloupe (corrupted by the English to “Guadaloupe”) is a French island in the Lesser Antilles.
A LETTER FROM A Merchant at Jamaica TO A Member of Parliament in London, Touching the AFRICAN TRADE.

To which is added, A SPEECH made by a BLACK of Guardaloupe, at the Funeral of a Fellow-Negro.

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A SPEECH made by a BLACK of Guardaloupe, at the Funeral of a Fellow-Negro.

The great and beneficent Creator, the Best of Beings, as Reason tells, and as our Master's Books assure us, when he had form'd this Speck of Earth, was pleased to crown the Work, by making Man, on whom he stamp'd the Image of Himself. All he expected in return, was but a just and grateful sense of the kind Maker's Bounty, and an honest Care to copy after the Divine Original in doing good; that is, in other words, promoting his own and others Happiness. The good and wise Maker had sufficiently furnish'd Man with Facultys necessary to so kind and glorious Design. He gave him the Powers of Perceiving, Deliberating, Judging: He implanted in him a strong Desire of preserving his own Being and Happiness, and gave him unexpressible Tenderness towards others. And as God made of the same common Mold all People, so whilst he subjected the inferior Animals to these little Vice-Rois, he left them all free to use and follow the Conduct of that Divine Ray of Reason, whereby they were shew'd and taught that reasonable Service which he requir'd. He made them, I say, free to follow this bright and faithful Guide, so soon as they should grow up to Man, and their Eyes were strong enough to bear the Light; that so the Creator might have the Glory of a free and cheerfull Service, and the Creature the Reward of Virtue, and an unconstrain'd Obedience. But, alas! how far has Mankind fallen? How much degenerated from the pure and happy State in which God created them? Sin introduc'd Sloth in some, Wantonness and Luxury in others. These were tempted to affect Command over, and Service from others; while those were again inclin'd to a base Submission and Dependence, rather than be at the Pains of exertiing those Powers the wise Author of Nature had given them, which were abundantly sufficient to all the Purposes of Life; and so they, like the profane Esau, whom we read of in our Master's Books, sold their Birth-right and Inheritance for a poor Mess of Pottage. Thus fond Mankind forsook the Divine Light plac'd in their Breasts, and by first becoming Servants to their own Lusts and Appetites, be-
came Servants to each other. It had been well, comparatively speaking, had Matters stop'd here; for hitherto there is no Wrong, no Violence: Besides, the Infirmities of Nature made it a necessary and even prudent Charity to serve their Neighbour in time of want, whose Assistance they again in their Turn might need and expect.

And if any set so little Value on the Gem of Liberty, as quite to part with it for a little Bread, which they might have reap'd and made with their own hands, they were to thank themselves for so foolish a Bargain, and had nothing to complain of but their want of Industry and Wit. But still this extended no farther than their own Consent had carry'd it; and the Agreement being mutual, they were no longer bound by it than their Masters perform'd their part, and treat'd them fairly. But the Lust of Dominion and the Desire of possessing, seizing Mens Brains, they grew fierce and raging, broke thro' the Ties of Nature and Humanity; and upon slender, or only pretended Causes, made War upon their weaker and more innocent Neighbours. Hence in the Source of all our Woes and Misery; to these we owe our Captivity and Bondage; to these we must lay the innocent Blood of our Brother who lies murder'd, barbarously murder'd, before us. Good God! what have we done? What Right have these cruel Men thus to oppress, insult, and inhumanly butcher their Fellow-Creatures? Let us examine all their Title, and see what it amounts to; and then we shall the better know, whether their Usage of us, or our Complaints, are the more just. They say, they bought us with their Money.—Confess'd; but who had power to sell? We were it may be condemn'd by colour of Law, that is, the Will of some Great Man, to be sold by way of Banishment for some suppos'd Crime.—But how did the Buyer know there ever was a Crime committed, or that the Sentence was just? or if he did, what Right did this confer? 'Tis plain, I think, it gives him only Right to carry us whither he pleas'd, and make us work till we repaid him by our Labor what we cost, with other Charges.

It may be we were taken in War; what Right then had the Conqueror? or what did he transfer? Suppose the War against us was just, and that our Buyers knew 'twas so; yet they like-wise know, that 'tis barbarous and cruel to take a conquer'd Enemy's Life, when the Injur'd can be safe without it; and that 'tis still more barbarous and inhumane for another to take it away, to whom he has sold and deliver'd his Prisoner; since by the Sale and Price receiv'd he seems to have taken the Mony for his Security, and upon that Consideration runs the Hazard of the other's setting him at liberty if he thinks fit. So that 'tis plain, this gives them no such Right over our Lives, as any Man that has the least Tenderness or Humanity (I might, I think, say Justice) would make use
of. And as for perpetual Slavery—it must be cruel Justice, that for so small a Sum, so soon repaid, wou'd purchase and exact what makes his Fellow-Creature, from whom he has nought to fear, so miserable for Life. If they contend for this as a Right which they are fond of, let them shew it, and let them take it and the sole Glory of it. But who told our present Lords the War was just? Do Victory and Right go always hand in hand? No, our Masters by Experience know they don't. This then at best can give but a dark doubtful Right, which never can defeat that natural and undisputed one the God of Nature has bestow'd on Men, to have, to own, no other Lord but him.

It may have happen'd we were sold to pay our Debts: What will this give them? In Equity they have at most hereby a Right to so much Service as will pay the Debt and Charges of transporting us. The first was all the Creditor could ask. But do they know what this Debt was? No, they never so much as once enquir'd or ask'd to be inform'd. We were perhaps bought of some unkind unnatural Father. Be it so. What have they got by this? Can a Father transfer what he has not? or have they what he neither did or could possibly give them? surely no. A Father has Power indeed, and ought to help and feed his young and tender Off-spring, as all Creatures do, but not to cast them out into the Fields, or sell them wantonly to a base Servitude. God gave him Power to beget and become a Father of Men, not Slaves. A Father, as 'tis fit, has Power too to guide and steer his Childrens Actions while Reason's weak; and if by Age, or otherwise, he's brought to want their help, they are oblig'd by Nature, and by Gratitude, to give their helping hand and best Assistance. But still they are not his Slaves or lasting Property; for when wise Nature has fitted them to propagate and educate their Kind, Reason requires, and Nature loudly tells they are at Liberty, they then are Men. It's true, we seem oblig'd to our Lords, that they were pleas'd to take us off the Hands of cruel Conquerors, or such wanton and unnatural Parents as begot us only for their Pleasure; either of which might likely have destroy'd, if they could not have sold us. But it would be remember'd, no Benefit obliges further than the Intention. Was it then for our sakes, or for their own, our Masters built such mighty Ships in which they plow the Main? Was it for us they laid out so much Wealth? Or was it to save our Lives, they so much ventur'd and expos'd their own? Alas! the Answer is too obvious: Our hard Labour, and harder Fare, but most of all, our cruel Punishments, and perpetual Bondage, but too plainly shew for whose sake all this was done. But besides, 'tis certain many Wars are made, many Children parted with, only because there are so many Buyers. So that all we have to thank them for, is, that they sought to serve themselves; and doing so, they sav'd us from those first of Ills their Avarice had wrought. Further,
Many of us, it may be, are bought neither of the Governour or Conquerour, of Creditor or Parent; but of a treacherous Friend, a perfidious Husband, or an odious Man-stealer. These are far from conferring any Right, unless what can arise from the most unjust and inhuman Acts in the world. What's now become of all their boasted Right of absolute Dominion? It is fled. Where all our Obligations to perpetual Servitude? They are vanish'd. However, we may perhaps owe them something; and it were but just, if so, they should be paid. Let us therefore, if from the account I have already given we can, make an Estimate of the Ballance.—Supposing then one half of us were justly sold at first by those that had a Right to all our Services, if that may be suppos'd: Suppose likewise that our Masters knew it too, and who the very persons were: Then they would have at most a Right to the Labour of such Persons during Life; and of the rest, till they had earn'd and clear'd so much as was given to the Captain who brought 'em hither. But since it is impossible for them to know on whom to place their several Demands; and since they bought us all at random, without regard to Right or Wrong: let us for once suppose favourably for them, who never favou'red us; let us suppose our Masters innocent of all the Wrongs we first sustaine'd. Suppose us Men, Women, and Children come to their Shoar from some far-off unknown Land, under the Power of a strange Captain of a Ship, who pretends he has a Right to sell us. He offers to deliver us, Great and Small, into their hands at 20 l. a-piece. They pay the Mony. We are deliver'd up. What are we now in debt? 'Tis plain, I think, that since they neither know nor did regard his Title, they can at best have one but till they're reimburs'd the Cost and Charge which they've been at. 'Tis sure we had a plain and natural Right to Life and Liberty; which to take away upon a weak, presumptive, or a may-be Title, were to make us of less value than Beasts and Things Inanimate: a Property in which, by Reason's Law, is never gain'd against a true and just Owner upon slight Presumptions, whatever may be done by Laws of particular Societys, to which each one agrees. But were it otherwise in mere Possessions, yet Life and Liberty are hardly things of so low rate, that they're to pass as lightly from the Owner, to whom God gave the sole and certain Property, as Beasts, or Birds, or Things Inanimate, which bounteous Nature laid in common, and wherein strictly no Man has more Right than what is necessary for him and his Dependants.

Let any Man but make the Case his own, and he'll soon see the Hardship. Would not any one think himself greatly injur'd, if another should make him his perpetual Slave, only because he gave 20 l. for him, to one who had him in his power? Methinks the very naming it is enough to shock a Man; and he should need no further Argument to convince him of the Injustice of the
thing. But Men are hardly brought to see what makes against their Interest. Taking the matter now to be as last stated—Suppose Twenty of us bought at once; the Mony paid would be 400 £. suppose six of the Twenty Children; suppose also one of us to die each year; reckon the Labour of each of those of sufficient Age at 10 £. a year, which is really less than it may be well accounted, seeing a great part of our poor Sustenance is owing to our own Hands and Industry, which we are forc’d to employ in planting Herbs and Roots, whilst we should rest from our more toilsome Labour. By this Computation we should have paid all our joint Debt in three years time. Yet would our Lords but use us as Men, we should not stick to a nice Computation, but frankly serve them three or four years more, before we claim’d our Freedom. Many of us here present have serv’d twice, some seven times the space our cruel Lords can justly claim. Of our hard Labour, let our weary limbs, their well-plantd Fields and full Coffers all bear witness. Of their hard and cruel Usage let our torn Backs testify. Of their bloody Inhumanity, let the Corps of our dear Countryman before us, weeping in its Goar; let it, I say, for ever witness against the cruel Authors of our Woe: who not content to make us Slaves, Slaves for Life, do use us worse than Dogs, and deny us the Compassion they would shew a Horse. 'Tis true, they willingly will teach and make us Christians; while they themselves want to be taught, both They and We are Men. In this however we are somewhat better used than are our wretched Friends in English Isles; where their hard Masters forbear to do good, lest that oblige them to do more. Ridiculous Superstition! that will not allow their servants to be Christians, lest they be forc’d to allow them to be Men. This is to found Dominion upon the Gospel of that Divine Teacher Jesus, who told them plain as Words could make it, his Kingdom was not of this World. And as if none were intituled to the common Privileges of Nature, except they please to allow 'em them by Washing or Baptizing, they carefully forbid our Brethren that. What I pray is this, but to make sport with the Creation, and to monopolize the Blessings of our common Mother Earth? Our hardy Tutors know things better. They teach us what themselves seem hardly to believe; and by giving us hopes of another better World, endeavour to make us content that they alone should enjoy this: teach us to do Good for Evil; and when we have done no fault, to turn our Cheeks to the Smiter, and our Backs to the Scourger; to submit not only to froward and unjust, but even to merciless and cruel Masters; remembering us that their Gospel says, Thro many Sufferings and Tribulations we must enter into the Heavenly Country; that Country where our dear, our patient, our murder’d Brother’s gone. But why should we complain of Death, whose Life’s so miserable to us? To kill us, seems the greatest kindness that our bloody Lords
can do. We have lost our native Country, our Friends, our Liberty; we are made Slaves to haughty cruel Men; we are fed and work'd hard; their Will's our Law; which when we do transgress, we suffer all the wanton Cruelty they can devise: No Prayers or Tears can touch their harden'd Hearts relentless as Rocks, they know no pity. What now remains in Life to be desir'd? Tis better far to die, than, being Men, be forc'd to live like Beasts: Beasts! and of those the most unhappy too. Still, tho our Hardships are as great as the Injustice of our Oppressors; tho our Sufferings are as many as the hated Days we live; tho all their Pleas of Right are false or short: methinks I could forgive them all, did they not pretend Necessity for their inhuman Acts. They tell, it seems, the European World, we're of such base, such brutal Natures, that nought will govern us, but downright Force and Fear; That like the Horse we must be broke and rid with Whip and Spur, but with far closer Reins. Abominable Forgery! Hated Imposture! What, are we not Men? Have we not the common Facultys and Passions with others? Why else has Nature given us human Shape and Speech? Whence is't that some of these wise rational Masters of ours give us sometimes Charge, not only of their Works and Cash, but of their Persons too; and make us judge when they're debauch'd enough in Wine, and when it's time to lug them home upon our servile Backs? Whence is't that some of us, without the Help of Books or Letters, are found able to deliver a Message, or do Business better, even by their own Confession, than they who instruct us with it? But were it a wonder, that while they use us so like Beasts, we should not act as Men? If they give us no Motives to Industry and Obedience, but a base servile Fear, is it at all strange, when that's remov'd, the hated Service straight should cease? It would be strange indeed, should it be otherwise. Could they be brought to deal with us as Men, they soon would see, we may be wrought upon by gentler Methods far than Blows and Scourges. But while they use us thus, how can they e're expect we should not hate them? how can they hope our Services should once proceed from Hearts they never touch'd, unless with Detestation? Let them make trual of their own Countrymen, and see what will be the difference 'twixt them and us. As much Slaves as they are already, this likely will be all the odds, they'll hate them more, and bear their Usage worse than we. To finish and compleat our Miserys, these Lords of ours, not content that we are Slaves, Slaves basely us'd for Life, they make our innocent Babes their Property, as if they sprung from Brutes. If their Right to us be so uncertain or so small, as I have shew'd it is; with what Pretence, with what Face can they enslave our guiltless Children? who have committed nothing to deserve the loss of Liberty in a base servile tedious Life, a Life beneath the State of Brutes. Supposing we were justly theirs for
Life, which they can never shew; yet still, the most they can demand from Innocents is some small time of Labour, for the little Sustenance which they receive'd by means of these our Lords. But not content with this, they carry on the wrong, and make them Slaves for Life as they made us; and claim our Children's Children, and so on, to all Posterity. Thus, our Lords who call themselves White-men and Christians, led by their Avarice and Luxury, commit the blackest Crimes without a Blush, and wickedly subvert the Laws of Nature, and the Order of Creation. Let us, my dearest Countrymen and Fellow-sufferers! Let us in this our great Distress and Misery, look up to the great Author of Nature, whose Works and Image are so basely us'd; and earnestly implore his mighty Aid: Let us beseech him, for sure he hears the Crys and Groans of his oppressed Creatures, either to soften those Adamantine Hearts, which cut us in pieces; or to put it into the Minds of some great, some God-like Men, to come to our Deliverance, that we may sing our Maker's Praise, and with Assurance say, There is a God who governs the Earth, and restrains the Pride and Cruelty of wicked Men.

FINIS