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Anecdotal Evidence: Civil War Flash Fictions in the *New (National) Era*

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Shortly after the Civil War ended in 1865, Frederick Douglass acquired a partial interest in the last weekly paper he would eventually own and his sons would eventually edit. Appearing in the District of Columbia for the first time on 13 January 13, 1870, and first edited by John Sella Martin, the *New (National) Era* (1870–1874) initially privileged political reports, educational advocacy, and a zeal for enterprise supplemented by a "HOME CIRCLE" department on its back page. "In our civilization," Martin declared, "home is the focus to which are gathered the elements of manhood and the centre whence radiate the virtues of patriotism" ("Our Journal"). Advancing that cause in "the interest of the negro race" during a year-long run, the page offered sketches and recipes, anecdotes and sermons, poetry and fiction, including two Civil War stories that I have examined in meeting rooms like this one and on the pages of the *African American Review*.

Today, I'd like to consider three not-quite-stories. The only one long enough to approximate a robust narrative is more sketched than plotted, while the other two are brief, episodic, anecdotal. Without much narrative heft, these glimpses of a Boston horsecar, a Virginia apparition, and a District boarding house seem particularly vulnerable to the disdain of historians: too fleeting individually to make waves and too slight collectively to count as a broad sample or a measurable influence. In "Exemplary or Singular? The Anecdote in Historical Narrative," Malina Stefanovska describes such brief flashes as "the threatening substratum from which historiography had to extract itself," and she adds, "anecdotes are associated with rumor, legend, lack of rigor or evidence, a fascination with singularity and with aesthetic form, lawlessness, contamination with fiction, and subjectivity" (16). Even adding two genuine war stories fails to rescue the chief African American periodical postwar from becoming an imaginative lightweight if page count, publishing run, and outsized audience are the only metrics that matter.

But "anecdotal evidence" also conjures up *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, where Thomas S. Kuhn first contended in 1962 with the "anomalies" that Ian Hacking in his recent introduction describes as "contrary to lawlike regularities, more generally, contrary to expectations" (xxvi). For both Kuhn and Hacking, anomalies can accumulate into a changed world view, even into a revolution in contemporary thought and perception with three significant upshots for my purposes. Recast as anomalies, anecdotes become quietly defiant, the exceptions that challenge the social rules they may ultimately help transform. Remembered in addition for their beginnings as French "*faits divers*" or news briefs, anecdotes also foreground everyday drama, the briefly reported spectacles that readers recognize and can themselves begin to extend. Finally, anecdotes as the news of ordinary people, and sometimes the flash fictions invented to meet newspaper deadlines, may help limn an alternate postbellum world that reveals what it was possible historically to imagine.

This reassessment of anecdote as evidence hinges upon the éclat of Kuhn's seminal pink book, which undercut the paradigms of rational inquiry and incremental assimilation for a model of discovery that was sudden, disruptive, and intense. The book has never gone out of print; indeed, new editions appeared in 1970 and 1996, with a fiftieth anniversary edition arriving in 2012 and still promoting crisis and revolution. "The transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm," Kuhn still insisted. "Rather it is a

reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations" (85). "New fundamentals"? By analogy, that sounds much like the revolution in race relations that followed the Civil War, during and then after the immediate postwar period when amendments to the U.S. Constitution were debated in Congress and ratified by the states.

Across decades, spirited commentary on Kuhn's structural approach has continued as well, though the thorniest issue has not been abrupt change but shifting vocabularies as an incommensurable paradigm develops into a new way of seeing. Referencing a familiar optical illusion, Kuhn wrote, "What were ducks in the scientist's world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards" (111–12). From Ptolemy to Copernicus and from Newton to Einstein, same data, different paradigm, with the new and the old launching such differing terminologies that they can seem impossible to compare, a singular misfortune that can doom what's called "theory-choice." As Carl Hempel observed in 1980, "How can [adherents of different paradigms] even have lunch together and discuss each other's views?" (Quoted by Kindi, 110, n.27). It is then a small step from bold science as upheaval to bold politics as revolutionary, even for Kuhn's fiercest critics. In "The Demise of the Incommensurability Thesis," Professor of Philosophy Howard Sankey remarks that "the phenomenon appears to be a quite common one, occurring frequently in social interaction, and is by no means restricted to scientific revolution" (89, n.14). On this score, witness Toni Morrison's observation in "The Site of Memory" that her only access to the "unwritten interior life" of those who composed slave narratives was what she called "a kind of literary archeology" (92), one in which "[t]he image comes first and tells me what the 'memory' is about" (95). It is the challenge to rational discussion and steady assimilation that anecdotes, born of imagery and everyday circumstances, can ease by demonstrating how quickly ducks can become rabbits.

For example, in "The Wounded Soldier and the Old Colored Woman," which appeared in the *New Era* for 9 June 1870. Following upon ratification of the three Reconstruction amendments that permanently abolished slavery in December 1865, curbed state jurisdiction in July 1868, and secured suffrage for African American men in February 1870, this reported "incident" (4) takes place on a crowded Boston horsecar among a handful of characters without names. When an aging Black woman climbs aboard, nobody offers her a seat until a young Black man stands up. He wears the cap and carries the crutch of an ex-soldier, who reveals that he lost his foot at Fort Wagner amid African American glory. White passengers immediately offer their seats, before the narrator concludes that "something finer than politeness taught him to respect the woman because she was old, and poor and black" (4). Proffering a seat on the bus to a Black woman is the sudden change that makes this short-short story seem anomalous. But behind that is the greater anomaly of African American service in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts "colored" regiment bound in 1863 for the Charleston harbor. Kuhn's ducks and rabbits are everywhere in the anecdote's quick contrasts between White and Black, old and young, male and female, civilians and enlistee, able-bodied and injured. Even transformation figures when a wartime volunteer with a crutch inspires horsecar riders to stand up, while teaching a lesson in respect.

As the *New Era* acknowledged, the news brief first appeared in *Merry's Museum*, a Boston children's monthly whose postwar issues Madeleine Stern has described as "enlarged, improved, and rejuvenated, with a new editor, new contributors, new engravings, new features, and a new dress" (166). The new editor as 1868 began was Louisa May Alcott, who included this anecdote in February as part of her "Monthly Chat" and signed it "Cousin Tribulation." The pseudonym is a nod to Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863) and Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle, the narrator that Sarah Elbert has called Alcott's "alter ego" (liii, n.2) in the letters she wrote while serving for six

weeks in Georgetown's Union Hotel Hospital. What Elbert describes as "Alcott's passionate concern for woman's rights and racial integration" (x) abides in the soldier's kindness to an old woman whom other horsecar passengers are content to ignore. Rejecting the status quo, the wounded veteran stands up for a "reconstruction . . . from new fundamentals" that has almost everyone talking in a bare five-hundred thirty-eight words.

Such an anecdote can make the emergence of a new paradigm appear seamless once readers also get out of their seats. Historically, the genre's intersection with news can be traced back, as Sylvie Dion notes, to its oral heyday during the commercial expansion in seventeenth-century France with its big fairs and market days, which led to eighteenth-century newssheets that were hawked and nineteenth-century canards that were sung. With the arrival of the penny press and police gazettes by the mid-nineteenth century, column fillers and whole sections of *fait divers* (Dion's titular "human interest stories") became customary. Enter Félix Fénéon's *Nouvelles en Trois Lignes*, literally both news and novels (equally "nouvelles") in three lines. Published by the Paris daily *Le Matin* during 1906, each composition was Dominique Jullien's "ultra-brief narrative" (66), exacting at no more than one-hundred thirty-five typographic signs with a "haiku esthetic," in Jullien's apt phrase (68).

That esthetic reveals a structural logic more recently deployed in the volley of tweets that became Teju Cole's *Small Fates* in 2011, each tweet no longer than one-hundred forty characters and derived from news items in Lagos, Nigeria. For instance, "An Air Force officer in Bayelsa who mistook himself for a cop mistook the baker Paul Wisdom for a thief and shot him in the head" (@tejucole, 14 August 2011, quoted in Pearce, thenewinquiry.com). Ella Mingazova points out that Cole inherited in *fait divers* a "hybrid form, at once information and story," an anecdotal genre that raced along the divide between history and fiction and sometimes swerved. "Many of Fénéon's *fait divers* were most likely the product of his imagination," Mingazova continues, "as the rapid delivery that was required by the periodicity of the newspaper was incompatible with the time-consuming labor of collecting information and it was customary to invent *fait divers* to meet a deadline" (148). The same hybrid logic, the same tantalizing incompletion gets left for postbellum readers to resolve in "Believe in Ghosts!," which traces the kind of wartime trauma that Alcott's horsecar riders never hear.

This second anonymous anecdote appeared in the *New National Era* for 3 November 1870, after Frederick Douglass became the weekly's full owner/editor and extended the paper's title as well as its aspirations. Almost twice the length of the Boston editorial item, this brief narrative is set along backcountry roads running between an "old mill" and "the ruins of an old-time Virginia mansion," terrain now haunted by Confederate troops near a Union bivouac. Their presence might somehow explain the recurring specter ("the whole picket line saw it repeatedly")—that is, until the narrator spots a six-foot column of fire that takes a human form, "a headless man wrapped in a pale blue flame that flickered in the night air" before gliding toward the mansion (4). Without Fénéon's economy or Cole's wit, this unresolved anecdote reads like an extended haiku without a third line, a "true story" that just . . . stops.

Stuck on an "insignificant incident," a *fait divers* must for Dion (80), "Believe in Ghosts!" crackles with the scrape of the everyday in its picket-duty authenticity. What's more, the bizarre spectacle substitutes fictional devices when its information runs out and teases a mysterious link between Virginia labor (the mill) and Virginia leisure (the mansion) that the weekly's readers were left to ponder. At nine-hundred eighty words, this sequence of events is still flash fiction, which Robert Evans defines as any prose narrative "of roughly a thousand words or less" (69). Although its cast offers no "brown face," its headless apparition counters the swift social resolution that

Alcott provides to reveal how baffling slave country could be for Union troops and how much the threat of violence would linger into Reconstruction, when this "small fate" was published. For readers, as for the anecdote's Tom and James on picket duty, the scene is heightened by the narrator's colloquial voice, his direct address, and his pending task: "Tell it to you? Certainly, I will; and maybe, as you are well versed in ghostly lore, you can explain what it was we saw" (4). Like the report of the wounded soldier on the horsecar, this anecdote summons others to resolve an anomalous crisis, a "crime" now supernaturally charged.

How to read the crime that no histories of the Civil War have noticed? If it is too much to credit the lurking Confederates with engineering a hoax without a hitch, there's another gloss that would have suited the *Providence Evening Press* in which "A Reminiscence of Virginia During the War. A True Story" first appeared on 31 May 1870, five months before the *New National Era* reprinted it. The Rhode Island daily paper was edited at the time by the Reverend Sidney Dean, who had served Connecticut in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1855 to 1859, first with the American Party and then as a Republican (*Biographical Directory*, 892). On July 27, 1862, in a sermon at the Mathewson Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Dean spoke out with a public servant's dismay against the Confederacy and the" serpent of disunion" (4); in the Virginia dark, that becomes an unsettling phrase that could point less to Confederate hoax than to Union disquiet. After all, James McPherson in *The Battle Cry of Freedom* cites "interior lines of communication" to explain the Confederacy's startling military successes (338), a tactic that led to Union misgivings in Southern terrain the bluecoats scarcely knew. But editor Dean also railed against slavery as "a social, national small pox" (10), an editorial priority that invites two sterner readings. The anecdote's "headless man" in a "column of fire" runs to a mansion that is already ruined, a Union image of a divinely decapitated patriarch and his plantation's just downfall. Alternately, because the specter arises in the old mill and hurries toward the collapsing manor, the headless figure arguably stands in for the brutalized enslaved who were bent on retribution as well as emancipation's new and divinely appointed social order in the making.

Both the "incident" on the Boston horsecar and the narrative frame around Virginia's "dense woods" blur Mingazova's hybrid line between information and story through characters, dialogue, imagery, and narrative structure, precisely what makes the anecdote a rich genre and an historian's nightmare, Stefanovska's "rumor" contaminated by "fiction." As Peter Novick asserted in the first lines of *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, an insistence upon "meticulous documentation" (4) has been fundamental since the nineteenth century, when the study of history banished elitist amateurs to coalesce as a discipline. "At the very center of the professional historical venture," Novick wrote, "is the idea and ideal of 'objectivity.' It was the rock on which the venture was constituted, its continuing raison d'être" (1). There is no question he would raise an eyebrow over "a six-foot column of fire" and the evidentiary value of its "headless man" as symbolic threat.

And yet anecdotes have for centuries provided entrée to incidental worlds that have otherwise gone undocumented, as the etymology of the term reveals. In Greek, "an ekdotos" were things "unedited," unpublished, even not meant for publication, what semiotician Lisa Block de Behar describes as "[c]loser to secret histories" (32) in their access to (say) an undocumented Boston horsecar or an unnoticed Union bivouac in Virginia. Is access through anecdotes important enough to forget their hidden agendas, their unverified information, their suspect data, their "contamination?" As Media Studies scholar Simone Natale puts it: "[w]henever we deal with history, the opposition between fact and artifact is a key problem" (441)—perhaps, I would add, *the* problem with the anecdote as a hybrid form. But Natale goes on to observe: "Whether an

anecdote is based or not on events that have actually taken place, its social and cultural presence depends on the extent to which the anecdote is reported, disseminated, and used by different agents" (443). "Reported, disseminated, and used?" That recalls the function of periodicals such as Douglass's postwar African American weekly, but more specifically its bewildering not-quite-story "Glimpses of Sunshine among the Clouds of War," the first of these three short-shorts to appear and the only one written by "A Soldier" *for* the *New Era*.

Published in the issue for 31 March 1870, this full-blown sketch is too long at 2477 words to be called flash fiction. In terms that Robert Evans would recognize, it is "sudden fiction" (limited to 2000 words) plus an extra flash (70). Next to none of that outpouring concerns an undocumented horsecar or even a Union camp, which disappears as the sketch begins. In their place is a District of Columbia boardinghouse during the summer of 1862, too early for the surge in African American enlistments after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on 1 January 1863. The sketch's narrator is an Ohio volunteer promoted to captain and serving as an Assistant Adjutant General, a staff position whose responsibilities were rarely assigned to African American soldiers. But his genial account neglects duty to favor a landlady's two daughters and a General's poetic valentine, all nestled in another outsized house without a dark wood or a troubling apparition. The only hint of racial difference comes with the narrator's valet Henry, "a colossal specimen of the *genus homo*" (4), who is mistreated by the captain and departs in three paragraphs.

How did "Glimpses of Sunshine" slip into "THE HOME CIRCLE" of the *New Era*, for which it was written? Like other Civil War short-shorts, this one appeared anonymously, though the last names of its officers—(Capt.) Donn, (Gen.) Armand, (Lt.) Riveroak, and (Lt.) Worthington—bear a striking resemblance to the first and married names of the large Piatt family in the Ohio Valley—Donn, his brother Abram, Abram's son Riveroak, and Riveroak's aunt, Mrs. Martha Piatt Worthington (Miller 11–31, Bridges 1–13). Biographer Peter Bridges describes Donn Piatt as "firmly opposed to slavery" (35) and active in the Republican Party; during the summer of 1862, the captain was also an Assistant Adjutant General in Piatt's Zouaves (Thirty-fourth Ohio Volunteer Infantry) stationed in Washington, D.C. where the literary Donn would later found the weekly *Capital* in 1871.

For him, too, Kuhn's abrupt paradigm shifts may be useful. "In both political and scientific development," Kuhn declares, "the sense of malfunction that can lead to crisis is prerequisite to revolution" (93). Make that "malfunction" in this vignette's pause on a valet's payback for too many hurled "boot-jacks and broom-sticks" (4): Henry lets slip the captain's crush on "Miss Malcolm" before hitting her up for "one dollar in money, an old cider cask, and a table" (4). The peanut-stand he sets up "down street a few doors" (4) recalls the weekly's motto, "Liberty and Enterprise," and nods to the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia during April 1862. In musing upon what Sella Martin and his first readers saw in the captain's valet, perhaps the key point is less the brevity of Henry's appearance than the sudden reckoning with "colossal" new era priorities, his anomalous anecdote emerging in a sketch that was otherwise complacent enough to suit *Godey's Lady's Book*.

Hints, nods, and speculations scarcely lead to "objectivity." Nevertheless, these three short-shorts *can* produce a new way of seeing, specifically of seeing an aging Black woman, a flaming apparition, and an ex-valet. What Frederick Douglass in his September "Salutatory" called "the tumultuous waves of the grand revolution" (2), prompted by the Civil War and the Reconstruction amendments, would thrive on the anomaly of African American volunteers in regimental uniforms, just as the weekly's "HOME CIRCLE," while it lasted, would help to imagine a new social default. The paper's early anecdotes, even when slight, rolled into Douglass's "tumultuous waves" because

they challenged "normal" social practices by highlighting Morrison's images in a Kuhnian model. Brief and unexpected, they nonetheless became commensurable with the country's founding commitments, particularly after peanut-stand enterprise and horsecar respect brought liberty and justice to those the country had so often shunned.

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