

Araştırma-İnceleme

**SUB-SUBALTERN: SELF-FASHIONING OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVE AROUND THE WORLD**

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**Abstract:** David Dorr's *A Colored Man Around the World* (1858) is a rare travel narrative written by an African-American slave and published before the Civil War. Dorr accompanied his owner in his travels and was promised to be granted his freedom on their return to the United States. When the promise was not fulfilled, Dorr fled to Ohio and published his account. Identifying himself as a patriotic American, Dorr echoes the imperialistic sentiments inherited from the British political imagination while simultaneously setting Britain against the United States with an awareness of a colonial past. Three other subaltern groups Dorr represents that are of interest to this study are women, –regardless of class, national or racial distinction- dogs, and the Oriental people as a whole, all of which I refer to as his sub-subaltern. The levels of subaltern representations in Dorr's narrative point to manifold identity markers. He imparts with white patriarchal norms, current legality and acceptance of the institution of slavery, normalization of specieism, racial and gender discrimination as well as American political and cultural exceptionalism. Attitudinal ambivalence regarding depictions of the Oriental is predominantly present in a similar vein to other contemporary American travel accounts published in the 19th century. This paper's focal interest is on the self-fashioning of an African-American slave on a very critical transitional period in his life and on his voluntary adoption of a Anglo-American identity which he instrumentalizes to create his own sub-subaltern with diligent avoidance of an acknowledgment of his subalternity.

**Keywords:** Travel narrative, Orientalism, Subaltern, Slavery.

**BASTIRILMIŞ KİMLİK: AFRİKA KÖKENLİ AMERİKALI BİR KÖLENİN DÜNYA SEYAHATI**

**Öz:** David Dorr'un 1858'de yayımlanan seyahatnamesi Afrika kökenli Amerikalı bir köle tarafından İç Savaş öncesinde yazılan tek eserdir. Dorr, seyahatleri sırasında sahiplerine eşlik etmiş ve kendisine Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ne dönüşlerinde özgürlüğüne kavuşma sözü

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verilmiştir. Bu söz yerine getirilmediğinde, Dorr Ohio'ya kaçarak, notlarını yayımlatmıştır. Dorr da, diğer Amerikalı seyyahlar gibi, İngiliz ve Fransız seyyahlar göz önünde bulundurularak, genel olarak Doğu'ya özel olarak da Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'na seyahat bağlamında, gecikmiş (belated) olarak nitelendirilebilir. Dorr'un seyahatinin müstesna koşullarının yanısıra, yurt dışında karşılaştığı bastırılmış kimlik taşıyan azınlıkları temsili –kendisi de bastırılmış bir kimlik taşıyan- bu çalışmanın odak noktasıdır. Diğer bastırılmış kimlikler arasında –sınıfsal, ulusal ve ırksal ayrımlar yazar tarafından da gözetilmeden- Doğulu, kadın ve hayvan yer almaktadır. Kendini bir vatansever olarak tanımlayan Dorr, İngiliz siyasi tahayyülünden miras kalan emperyalist duyarlılığı aksederken, sömürge geçmişinin farkında olarak Amerika'yı da İngiltere'ye karşı konumlandırmaktadır. Dorr'un anlatısındaki bastırılmış kimlik temsilleri birçok imlecini kapsıyor. Ataerki, kölelik kurumunun yasallığı ve yaygın kabulü, türçülüğün normalleştirilmesi, ırkçılık ve cinsiyetçilik ve aynı zamanda Amerikan siyasi ve kültürel istisnacılığı anlatıya içkindir. Temsildeki ikirciklik –hayranlık ve kibir- Doğulu betimlemelerinde çağdaş 19. yüzyıl Amerikan seyahatnamelerinde de görülür. Bu çalışmanın temelinde, Afrika kökenli Amerikalı bir kölenin hayatının elzem bir geçiş döneminde –kölelikten esarete- kendi kimliğini biçimlendirishi; gönüllü bir şekilde Anglo-Amerikan kimliğini benimsemesi (yasal olarak sahip olmadığı bir hak olmasına rağmen) ve bu kimliği temsilde başka bastırılmış kimlikleri betimleyerek kendi kimliğini ikrar etmekten ısrarla kaçınması yatmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Sehayatname, Kölelik, Şarkiyatçılık, Bastırılmış Kimlik.

## Introduction

1858 is the year, in his speech at the Illinois Republican convention, Abraham Lincoln, paraphrased the words from the New Testament: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Same year, Lincoln and the Democratic Party candidate Stephen Douglass held seven debates the central issue of which was slavery in the United States. It is also the year a travel narrative, that passed relatively unnoticed at the time and the centuries to follow, was published by a former slave from Louisiana. David Dorr had accompanied his owner during a Grand Tour of Europe and the Holy Land. Having been promised freedom on their return, and on that promise being unfulfilled, escaped to Ohio and published his account *A Colored Man Around the World*. Unfulfilled promise by the white man is a common motif of slave narratives as well as Native American history although a sense of solidarity is rarely expressed. Dorr is no exception when he describes the British as: "These people were wearing the skins of the beasts of their forests in the days of the Ceasars' invasion, and barbarous as our Indians, but now they are the most civilized and Christian power on this earth" (Dorr, 1858, p. 24). Throughout the 1850s, aside from Dorr's account, 27 travel narratives were published in the United States written by American authors whose itinerary included the Ottoman Empire. Only a few were authors by profession, their occupations ranging from diplomats to

missionaries to merchants. Needless to say they were all white and except for two, all men. Two accounts stand out in terms of popularity and being objects of academic scrutiny in the decades to come. One belongs to William Goodell, the famous American missionary who commenced the Armeno-Turkish mission and the other is written by Bayard Taylor, a Genteel tradition poet and travel writer whose fame barely exceeded his lifetime. Out of all factors that make Dorr's narrative exceptional, is the incongruity of his narrative's presence in this decade.

The already established genre with its own conventions and outlining<sup>2</sup> so uniform that individual stylistic transgressions were rare, if not absent, was the slave narrative. Strictly non-fictional, yet heterogeneric like travel literature, slave narratives posited an illustration of past and present circumstances brought about by the institution. Written in retrospection, they revealed a coherence in representation of the past while elucidating its consequences on the present self. Coherence of a discursive representation practice is similarly valid in travel literature of the 19th century. Dorr's narrative, is an Anglo-American travelogue proper in more senses than one. His account is heterogeneric by nature of being a travel narrative. His journey does not reveal either the arrested development of the individual observed in a slave narrative or the arrested mobility of a non-white in the 19th century. "Among the nonwhites and the white lower class men and women, the changing of localities has been treated as denoting a basically involuntary sort of displacement; an experience marked by dependence and supposedly lacking in adventure, learning, exploring, and self-indulgence" (Olney, 1984, p. 50).

### **1. Traveling as a Class Distinction**

In an age where mobility within or without the country is limited to white middle class male population, space left for non-whites in literary practices is already delineated. The delineation is based on race, class and gender. Although, starting from the 1830s the steamship competition lowered the prices of an Atlantic trip to the extent of affordability, travel for leisure is still a luxury. Traveling to Europe to claim cultural and historical inheritance, while at the same time demarcating a distinct American identity, rejecting the degeneracy in society and monarchy in politics, was an indispensable element in a relatively more globalized form of education. Having claimed the cultural inheritance, the American man had to move deeper into the Old World to reclaim the religious legacy in the Holy Land. Therefore, race and class seem to be the prerequisites for the assertion of a sui generis identity. Purposefulness of the journey is monopolized by the ideological framework of the hegemonic discourse. The nature of one's temporary presence in a foreign land however revokes the national assumption. Foreign land "constitutes a space by definition democratic since in theory no class systems or unfair hierarchies exist there; a

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<sup>2</sup> James Olney. "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo*, No. 20 (Winter, 1984), p. 50.

space then where individual renewal, property relations, and industry can be achieved within a democratic framework” (Klinger, 1997, p. 188). And it is this nature Dorr exploits to an exceptional extent. His narrative is not written in retrospect, as he uses his travel notes taken during the journey itself, which marks the initial transgression from a slave narrative. Dorr does not set out on his journey to map out his suffering. Despite lack of individual initiation of the journey, his experiences are depicted as a solitary act of exploration carrying the same rhetoric of empire without reference to his subordinate status. This is not an autobiographical performance of the past. The suffering and the victim status is externalized to constitute a collective problem of the masses already broached and destined to be solved. “Austria tyrannizes over man,” he writes, “but she cannot tyrannize, chattelize, and prostrate their rights with impunity, any more than Washington, Jefferson, or Henry could” (Dorr, 1858, p. 162). Although premature, in Antebellum United States, his foresight complements his optimistic anticipations about the future of the nation.

## 2. Identity Formation

Dorr refuses to privilege his individual suffering by not recounting his identity formation process of the past in terms of how the institution of slavery might have contributed to his ideological responses to his present observations. Consequently, our knowledge about Dorr’s life in the United States up until his journey is limited. We know that he was light skinned, and could easily pass as white, a quadroon by his reference. But his account is not one of black passing as white identity. If it was, the narrative structure would be a “deviation from real, pure whiteness—to show how white hegemony reproduces itself by limiting one’s ability to speak outside of the white/black binary opposition” (Sugimori, 2011, p. 38). Despite his refusal to echo the slave narrative structure, he does claim his race and status as a slave if not by demeanor and discourse by entitling his account as “A Colored Man Around the World” and beginning his narrative by a dedication to his “slave mother” with whom they were forced to be separated when he fled to Ohio to gain his freedom. His presence during the journey is contingent on his services as a slave however there is merely a single reference to his master. The journey provides him with ample opportunity to position himself as an independent gentleman, a Southern gentleman no less. “I mean to say, that I, a Southerner, judge too much by appearance, instead of experience” (Dorr, 1858, p. 14) he writes. Others are purely included in his fictionalized (due to the absence of the actual circumstances surrounding the purpose of his journey) account to be at his service. Thematic parallels with slave narratives notwithstanding, analyzing Dorr’s account in opposition to a genre prevents one from paying heed to the heterogeneity of African American voices in Antebellum United States.

Not because he may look at a colored man’s position as an honorable one at this age of the world, he is too smart for that, but because he has the satisfaction of looking with his own eyes and reason at the ruins of the ancestors of which he is the posterity...But the Author of this book, though a colored man, hopes to die

believing that this federated government is destined to be the noblest fabric ever germinated in the brain of men or the tides of Time. Though a colored man, he believes that he has the right to say that, in his opinion, the American people are to be the Medes and Persians of the 19th century (Dorr, 1858, p. 11).

As a belated traveler (as all American travelers compared to their European counterparts are) his representational treatment of the subaltern abroad, being a subaltern himself, is of special importance. Belatedness is manifold. American traveler is too late for ethnographic observation and information gathering, for economic and indirect political claim and setting the structure of representational discourse. Literary Orientalism by the mid 19th century is an already established discursive practice. American contribution to the practice is one of exceptionalism, a claim for uniqueness embodied in a style of reproduction and impression. An impression taken on in opposition to the Orient for a reconfiguration of the American identity that is superior albeit uninvolved.

This belated state called without exception to a claim for originality, especially in the prefaces and conclusions of the narratives. After all, anxiety of influence as defined by Harold Bloom, was a prevalent sentiment not unique to but dominant in travel accounts. Government sponsored colonial administrators, missionaries, canonical Romantics, ethnographers all have written about Europe and the Holy Land. Carving a space of originality faced with among the entire corpus of travel literature for Americans would be as challenging as fostering a national literature based on national independence and cultural myths in the 19th century. Out of those claimed originality in travel and achieved can be best exemplified by the 1869 travel account written by Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*. Twain, however, partially fictionalized his experiences by adding characters he did not in fact encounter and satirized what he saw to quite a vulgar extent. Dorr similarly voices his anxiety in his conclusion: “James says that men of talent are often seen with many books before them, extracting their contents and substances. Were such men authors? No! but imitators; they wrote few impressions because few were made; they merely confirmed what others proved. Like an anxious boy, in the ardor of anxiety to describe, I may fail, but I tell the thing as I saw it” (Dorr, 1858, p. 191).

Identifying himself as a patriotic American albeit having no legal acquirement of one, Dorr echoes the imperialistic sentiments inherited from the British political imagination while simultaneously setting Britain against the United States with an awareness of a colonial past. In order to reiterate a distinctive American national identity however, he has to invent or claim his own subaltern. In this regard, he remains true to norm and succumbs to the Western representational imaginary. Carl Thompson aptly outlines the portrayal of this popular norm in travel literature as the period when “most of the travel-related writings...were deeply suffused with these notions of cultural and racial superiority, and worked to inculcate them in their readership” (Thompson, 2011, p. 53).

Three other subaltern groups Dorr represents that are of interest to this study are women, –regardless of class, national or racial distinction- dogs, and the Oriental people as a whole, all of which I refer to as his sub-subaltern. The distinction among his representational preferences when there are, are apparent between previously established categories. Domestic/foreign, Western/Oriental, civilized/barbarian. The levels of subaltern representations in Dorr's narrative point to manifold identity markers. He imparts with white patriarchal norms, current legality and acceptance of the institution of slavery, normalization of specieism, racial and gender discrimination as well as American political and cultural exceptionalism. Attitudinal ambivalence –admiration and repulsion– regarding depictions of the Oriental is predominantly present in a similar vein to other contemporary American travel accounts published in the 19th century.

Focal interest is on the self-fashioning of an African-American slave on a very critical transitional period in his life –one from bondage to slavery- and on his voluntary adoption of a Anglo-American identity which he instrumentalizes to create his own sub-subaltern with diligent avoidance of an acknowledgment of his subalternity. This avoidance is actualized by his subversion of the generic expectations and setting himself up as a persona of categorical indeterminacy in terms of race.

In addition to most his encounters with foreigners being depicted in a master-slave binary where Dorr himself is the cultured traveler to be served, his encounters with women are permeated by an assertion of masculinity and domination. Positioning himself as the voyeur and imagining an interaction presumptuously without recounting any facts to support it, Dorr's is the penetrating male gaze as defined by Laura Mulvey. Reversally, his fantasies center around being the object of desire which point to a mere revelation of scopophilia. Voyeurism and the accompanying presumptions provide him with the sexual pleasure which he repeatedly refers to. The women in question however, by his depiction hardly respond to his desire or return his gaze wherefore rendering himself an unreliable narrator, leading to a situational irony. We, as the readers are aware of his representation of a commonplace interaction such as maid picking up the laundry as a prospective sexual attraction.

Having seated myself a la American, I listened very attentively to "those chiming bells." Tap, tap on my door called forth -another American expression, "come in." The door opened and a beautiful girl of fifteen summers came in with a scuttle of coal and kindling...A man is a good deal like a dog in some particulars. He may be uncommonly savage in his nature, and as soon as he sees his sexual mate, his attention is manifested in the twinkling of an eye (Dorr, 1858, 15).

His voyeurism rarely attended by a real interaction remains an integral part of his complex identity formation throughout the journey from Paris and Rome to Cairo and Constantinople. Excepting women, his participation in the Grand Tour in terms of cultural affirmation by self assertion and determination cannot

be refuted. Although this participatory process is interrupted by language obstacles in Europe occasionally, it is in the Ottoman Empire where this interruption causes frustration. Frustration when faced with the inaccessibility of Oriental women unlike those depicted in 19th century French Orientalist paintings, is not unique to Dorr. Many Anglo-American travelers voiced their vexation with the elusiveness of the Oriental female figure hidden behind a veil and had to confine their observations to partial disclosures of bare skin –and its whiteness that particularly fascinated them- or to the silhouette the promises of which was only ingrained in the Western imagination. “They sit like a tailor,” Dorr writes, “on the inside of their heels or ankles. You will see five or six stand talking in their beautiful silk wrappers, and quick as a fall they will sink down upon those little feet, like a blossom sinking from its majesty of beauty to its downward decay” (Dorr, 1858, p. 122). Mystified responses to imaginary female beauty was an integral element to the Genteel tradition, on the rise during the decade Dorr published his account. Bayard Taylor, one of its leading representatives would recount similar moments in his many travel accounts. Romanticizing distant sights of female figures were no less integral to the sign of gentility than paying heed to Byron both of which Dorr also fulfills. This inaccessibility however provides Dorr with the opportunity to impart an even more liberated sense of entitlement to describe the opposite sex. Moral framework which he attested to regarding chattel slavery in the United States does not extend to the Oriental female.

This veil was thin enough to make me believe I could see her figure of countenance, and I swear she was pretty. The guide said that she was for sale, I told him to go and buy her for me, and asked him who owned her, he said, her mother, but I could not buy her because I was no Mohammedan. ...He said he did not know how it could be done. I asked him if he thought the girl would admire me; he had no doubt about that, and added, I need not have any uneasiness about that, as I could make her love me after she was mine, she was obliged to obey me according to the Turkish laws, and no man could change the laws but Abdul Medjid, the Sultan (Dorr, 1858, p. 123).

Here, Dorr’s conventional masculine characterization of black passing as white identity expands his performance to a whole new territory. Dorr’s literary persona with his current status as a slave, in his reflection on the narrative, have moved beyond emancipation and into the status of a privileged Southern gentleman. That also provides us with a clue to his imagined readership. It is certainly not the laboring slave. His account is a tribute to his future self when as a citizen of the world, he will uphold his racial integrity. Accordingly, by reclamation of his masculinity he asserts himself once again as desirable in the absence of an affirmation by the female who is subjected to his gaze. Ironically, judging from his imagined position of power, as his future self, he will buy an Oriental woman and make her love him. In an introduction to Dorr’s narrative republished in 1999, Malini Johar Schüller writes in a similar vein: “As if in whiteface, Dorr continues to write within this Anglo American Orientalist tradition. In Turkey, the fragile, diminutive, inactive women serve as a

metonym for a supine 'Orient' against which the author defines his masculinity" (Schüller, 1999, p. xxxiv). There are quite a few encounters with Western and Oriental women where at times Dorr leaves the narrative open ended creating a suspenseful mystery, trying to invoke in the reader's mind that what actually took place is beyond what the reader could possibly imagine. Women, therefore constitutes Dorr's first sub-subaltern. As a subaltern himself might not have access to hegemonical power back home, his narrative written in the genteel tradition is an enunciation of marking a space of liberation.

### **Conclusion**

After the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century, representative approach to what the Western travelers deemed as the emblem of brutal monarchy and repression, the Sultan or the Sublime Porte has changed. Modernizing efforts in the Empire merely frustrated traveler because it did not complement the impression of the corpus of artistic output. What was left therefore, was a remnant of an original which was exhausted in depiction and epitomized the degeneracy of the regime. After all, Orient was prone to something that had been considered to be impossible as the cornerstone of Orientalist discourse: change. Dorr showed an awareness that the exotic he was in search for had been dissolved into an impersonation of itself along with the decline of political power in the international arena. Sharing none of the economic benefit with the British on the survival of a weakened Ottoman Empire, he, like Twain would do a decade later, was disposed to depict the Sultan as an immasculated, flimsy man stripped from any potency to have a determining effect on his own subjects let alone the world. Regardless of any individual traits, Sultans of the 19th century mirrored the fate of the Empire in Western literary depictions. Dorr's was no exception. In his, one can note a particular distate for blindness to larger global political framework which parallels his view on the persistence of the institution of slavery in the United States. Thus he exhibits the exceptionalist notions of a foundational American identity and abrogates it in the Oriental.

The Sultan is a weak looking man, and has the marks of fatigue well written on his forehead and limbs; he also looks like a man surfeiting on the fat of the world. He is a slow walking man, and seems as if he experienced some weakness coming from a hidden source which allowed its approach so gradually and agreeable that he is not conscious of its fatality. He knows nothing of the rest of the world nor cares for it, but believes that himself and Constantinople are the wonders and powers of it...He is incapable of fearing any nation on the earth, as he thinks that his is head of all. If some day, the news went to his palace that the Bosphorus was covered with a fleet, and that one ban had already struck the dome of the mosque St. Sophia, he would, through all his resolutions, break his haughty heart, and no doubt tremble off his divan (Dorr, 1858, pp. 127-128).

The romantic ideal assigned to the Arab Bedouin by the British was substituted by Dorr into the Egyptians. He felt with them a solidarity of racial integrity, an idealistic and glorious past. On landing in Egypt, Dorr delves into a narrative of



Ancient Egyptian history. It is the first chapter in his account where he provides comprehensive historical data as opposed to relating concurrent events. Soon we understand that the locals whom he encounters on the Nile voyage are to Dorr, merely deceitful Arabs who lie and cheat and are indistinguishable from one another. The solidarity he exacted for Ancient Egyptians do not extend to the current inhabitants of the land. By using selective and singular reference, he seeks to bridge their pasts whereby uplifting their presents or rather only his present to the latter in the barbarian/civilized binary. He writes: "Egypt was a higher sphere of artistical science than any other nation on the earth. This will naturally convey an idea to the world that the black man was the first skillful animal on the earth, because Homer describes the Egyptians as men with wooly hair, thick lips, fiat feet, and black, and we have no better authority than Homer" (Dorr, 1858, p. 134). Dorr's embracing of an artistic and scientific African heritage is akin to Du Bois's idea of double consciousness which emerges however, not as an identity marker in the United States but in a space of cultural negotiation commonly used to assert a sense of superiority. Superiority in Dorr is replaced by a sense of close association.

His cross-cultural negotiation also reveals an awareness of the rise of scientific racism in the 19th century. He quotes Dickens quoting Buffon on discussions about monogenism vs its negation polygenism and ends his narrative by arguing for a sense of unity which is scientifically based –albeit yet speculative in that context- and points to an innate equality among races. Aside from his optimistic view on the eventual abolition of slavery in the United States, it is the only instance when Dorr expresses a conviction of racial equality. But all in all, his account's mere presence in the genre of travel literature instead of a slave narrative and the revelation of of identity formation process as a Southern gentleman traveling around the world by nature are the strongest conviction and enunciation about equality.

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