Peculiar Institutions: ‘Wash,’ by Margaret Wrinkle
by Major Jackson
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One of the challenges white writers face in creating black characters is the avoidance of caricature and stereotype. If cultural appropriation must take place, the thinking goes, then authors should treat black narratives — often the products of American history, and thus as sacred as the Constitution itself — with kid gloves. If they fail even in the slightest, readers are sure to voice criticism and, maybe justifiably, rain down judgment and reckoning.

Too much singing and dancing, Al Jolson-style, will activate the siren button of the race police. Gratuitous portrayals of black people as oversexed might lead to protests (and the best-seller list) — but so too might the rendering of a historic black hero as humane and full of complexities, something other than a cardboard, iconic, brave champion of the people.

Recently, Kathryn Stockett, author of “The Help,” was criticized for presuming to speak from the perspective of black domestic workers in 1960s Mississippi. A few decades earlier, William Styron’s “Confessions of Nat Turner,” which among other offenses imagines the great rebellion leader fantasizing about raping white women, gave rise to a whole anthology in rebuttal, “William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond.” Strong dissent and hostility may confront anyone interested in using fiction to tell the story of African-Americans. When it comes to literary portrayals of black people, no one is indifferent and no one is spared scrutiny, not even black authors.

Leaping headlong into these turbulent waters, Margaret Wrinkle has written “Wash,” a debut novel about slave breeding in Tennessee during the country’s westward expansion, and a masterly literary work that will surely earn praise at every turn. Of course, novels about the past are less about the historical periods in question than about how we interpret them through a present-day lens to achieve greater understanding. And what topic needs more understanding than the sexual violence that fueled the economic engine of the 19th-century South?

“Wash” is narrated, in luxuriant prose, chiefly by three characters: Richardson, a Revolutionary War veteran and diffident slave owner who resorts to breeding to stave off debt; Wash, the protagonist, who serves as Richardson’s breeding sire (or “traveling negro”) even as he attempts to find within himself a freedom his body does not possess; and Pallas, Wash’s lover, a midwife and medicine woman from a neighboring farm, whose owner once leased her for three years to another plantation as a sex slave for the proprietor’s sons. In short, affecting passages, these characters tell their stories, often with considerable overlap. The technique gracefully waltzes a reader through the novel’s more violent peaks and turns while undergirding one of its main assertions: the interrelatedness of the characters’ destinies. Black and white, these figures are thrown together in brutal or loving relation to one another, harboring feelings the institution of slavery forbade.

Richardson inherits a legacy of pain from his father, disguised as financial success and masculine achievement. His ambition pushes him to become a man of means and influence both as a soldier and as an unenthusiastic slaveholder. Yet, feeling alienated from the sons who will inevitably claim his power, Richardson coerces a friendship with Wash, who has to bear his master’s inebriated visits to the horse barn where he lives and listen to his woeful stories.

“He started coming later and later,” Wash says, “talking at me into the damn middle of the night, always sitting a little too close and forever holding that flask. Telling me all his insides whether he meant to or not. At first, it made me feel big because it gave me something on him. Like he was giving me a stick to poke him with. But as time went on, I saw it wasn’t a stick for poking him or hitting him neither. It was bigger. More like a heavy wooden beam. A beam I couldn’t hardly lift. All his telling did was pull me too close to hit him good.”

Like many of the characters, Wash (the name is short for “Washington”) attempts to cultivate a sense of freedom. His mother instills in him the power of ancestry, spirit-work and self-possession as a way to survive the tribulations of slavery. She teaches him to make talismans and charms, to claim the land with rocks and altars, and gives him the gift of language and lineage by describing his extended family and her history with his father, so that his people breathe beside him, serving as a wall of life when he feels the death of slavery upon him. Yet Wash has a difficult time applying his mother’s resources when they might keep him out of trouble.

Consider a violent encounter at the center of the novel. While Richardson is off serving in the military, Wash is left in a friend's care just as he begins to grow into a powerful young man. The friend's son is terrified of "saltwater Africans" — a fear prevalent among plantation owners who knew of Toussaint L'Ouverture's uprising in Haiti — and he provokes Wash to speak his mind in an impudent moment of self-regard. In the next instant, the son has snatched a claw hammer and struck him down:

"Nobody moved. I went down like a rag doll, they said. Landed on my belly, cheek to the ground, hit side up. My dark cap turning darker. Catching the blood seeping and I'm staring across rough winter grass with one eye swelling shut."

Ripe with violence and vulnerability, this is the moment that sticks with you when Wash leaves on Fridays in a wagon to have sex with women on nearby plantations. Wrinkle tastefully abstains from narrating too many of these scenes. Grand narratives of American slavery are replete with stories of runaways or resistances in the form of conjuring or outright rebellion. However, Wash believes that he will exact his revenge on the corrupt system by populating this part of the South with his children. His resistance will come through his offspring, which helps him to cope with his appointed, dehumanizing task and the fact that he must suppress the part of him that longs for physical freedom.

Wrinkle's prose is lush — at times to a fault, as the novel veers into metaphor and allegory. As if the abiding notion of the stud were not enough, on several occasions Wrinkle goes at length to squeeze the symbol of the *mare* into a metaphor for Wash's fate, revealing an ecstatic intemperance with figures of speech. Quite possibly, too, the novel is overly self-conscious about speaking back to the past, and it sometimes devolves into aphorisms, as when Wrinkle insists that the dead and their deeds are "all here, all connected, all the time, regardless."

Yet I was moved by this story. Some would argue we are still living with the effects of slave breeding. Wrinkle's novel does not allow us to draw easy correlations but invites us to consider the painful inheritance and implications of such a horrendous moment in American history. Rather than disapproving opprobrium and diatribes, this debut occasions celebration. Haunting, tender and superbly measured, "Wash" is both redemptive and affirming.

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