Historiography of Survival Theory: African Culture in Religious Experience

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Theories on the transference of African culture into America's South through the Atlantic slave trade has a history of its own. This paper discusses the contributions of E. Franklin Frazier, Melville J. Herskovits, Albert Raboteau, Gayraud Willmore, Walter Rucker and others to the debate of African cultural survival versus African cultural desolation in America. It focuses on the part that evangelical Christianity played in the 18th century by giving African culture, and especially African religion, a venue for survival, adaptation and exchange. A short discussion is added regarding Creolization theory and New World historiography as methods to approach the discussion with a fresh perspective. The author suggests moving beyond regimented interpretations and toward a perspective which accepts a great exchange of culture despite African cultural suppression.

Since the 1950s two schools of thought have prevailed concerning African cultural survival and its perceived influence with regard to religious experience in the 18th century American south. The first, pioneered by the African American Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier in the mid-20th century holds that slave culture, having lost all significant ties to African religious traditions, readily took to the new Christian tradition of their slave owners while reinterpreting it to meet their own needs. The other school, led by Melville J. Herskovits, claims that African religious culture did survive the Atlantic passage and exhibited its traditions on American soil. More recently scholars such as Raboteau, Wilmore and Rucker, have attempted to synthesize these interpretations. Their new perspectives have not brought about consensus as much as they have come to reflect the intricate matrix of influences which shaped both black and white religious experiences in America's south.

E. Franklin Frazier, African American sociologist and expert on the social conditions of slave families, argued in 1957 that the plantation structure in the south was highly effective in socializing slaves to their new lives. The psychological and physical damage which the slaves endured in transit was compounded by separation from their kinsmen, language groups and religions as they were assimilated into a melting pot and distributed across the vast south. Even if chance had it that two slaves shared the same language, they would likely be separated upon discovery.[1] Frazier thus argued that the white dominated plantation and community churches, which slaves were often allowed to attend, were simply another part of this assimilation.[2] He noted that as Methodist and Baptist Missionaries encouraged emotional conversion experiences, the slave culture took to the spiritual rites with new enthusiasm. Frazier regarded this attitude as a form of resistance against their captors' "formal type of social control."[3] Frazier built on earlier work by the influential American sociologist, and pupil of John Dewey; Robert E. Park. Park referenced William James with his 1919 proposal that the Negro experience was distinct within itself,[4] but that "the amount of African tradition which the Negro brought to the United States was very small" and that it was "very difficult to find in the South today anything that can be traced directly back to Africa."[5] Park accredited those superstitions which were observed among African American communities of the American south as no more

[1] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), 11-12.
[2] Ibid., 12.
[3] Ibid., 13.
[4] Robert Park, "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," *The Journal of Negro History,* 4, no. 2 (1919): 115, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713533. (accessed March 16, 2013).
[5] Ibid., 116.

than those which develop in any creative and rural communities. Park concluded that it is not even "part of Negro Christianity. It is with him, as it is with us, folk-lore pure and simple."[6]

In 1958, the year after Frazier published his signature work, Anthropologist and African American studies pioneer Melville J. Herskovits reopened Park's discussion. Herskovits agreed that what was once *uniquely* African culture may have been vanquished, but argued that the synthesis of language and culture which was viewed as "folklore" by Park was, as Park himself said, a period in the "various stages of cultural development"[7] and was therefore important to ongoing African-American history. [8] Using in-depth analysis of slave diaspora data Herskovitz developed interpretations which became the backbone of his revisionist work. [9] To support his cultural survival interpretation Herskovits explained how "political ferment in West Africa was something correlated with religious ferment, and brought about an interchange of deities which tended to give to the tribes in this part of Africa the gods of their neighbors." When one tribe conquered another, gods would be appropriated creating "a conception of the relationship between comparative power of gods and the strength of those who worship them," an important fact to remember when considering slave appropriation of their masters' religion.[10] This inherently syncretic West African tradition was loosely defined by the word "fetish" because of its common use of magic charms.[11] Magic

[6] Park, "The Conflict and Fusion," 116.
[7] Melville Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past, (Beacon Hill: Beacon Press, 1958), 12.
[8] Ibid., 10.
[9] Ibid., 63.
[10] Ibid., 72.
[11] Melville Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past, (Beacon Hill: Beacon Press, 1958), 73

was not unfamiliar to Europeans either, Herskovits reminds. In a conflation of superstition was an opportunity for African traditions to acculturate instead of assimilate. Herskovits also supported his perspective through the study of West African funeral rites. This study was supported by professors of American religious history; Butler, Wacker and Balmer who noted in their 2000 work, *Religion in American Life,* that evidence for African funeral rites had been discovered from New York to Virginia.[12] Frazier's reply to Herskovits' arguments was that there were "fewer of these survivals, that they have become more attenuated, and that they are less easily recognized in the United States than in Brazil and the West Indies."[13]

Albert Raboteau, an African-American scholar whose work focused on African-American culture and African religion, offered a synthesis of Herskovits and Frazier with the publication of his dissertation on Slave Religion in 1978. His view was that African cultural survival could not be generalized, but that some areas of the South were clearly more conducive to it than others. Raboteau cited the ecstatic behaviour of laughing, jerking and fainting which were common in evangelical revivals, claiming that "[i]n this heated atmosphere slaves found sanction for an outward expression of religious emotion constant with their tradition of danced religion from Africa."[14] Raboteau saw the cultural exchange as primarily one directional, but that where

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[12] Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 94.
[13] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), 239.
[14] Albert Raboteau, "Slave Autonomy and Religion," *Journal of Religious Thought*, 38, no. 2 (1981): 51-65, http://ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=4974427&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed March 19, 2013).

permitted, remnants of African culture survived. Far from joining the Herskovits camp, however, he criticized some of Herskovits' doubtful leaps of logic, for instance the claim that ecstatic shouting in congregational worship ("shouting in the Spirit") was exclusively an African-American phenomenon, which it was not. Further, Raboteau criticized the suggestion that the survival of a particular tradition of water baptism in South Africa is evidence of African-American acceptance of the Baptist baptismal rite. He, instead, advances his own theory concerning slave conversion and baptism: that it promoted community leadership, affluence and education.[15] It was with this empowerment that African religious traditions could incubate and survive in the religion of the slave owners.

Dr. Gayraud Willmore, scholar of African American church history and theology wrote in 1974 that Black theology was from the beginning, different than mainstream religion, and instead grew out of traditions which preceded the Black church itself. According to Willmore, "Its first theologians were not theologically trained professors, but preacher-conjurers of the African priesthood."[16] He pointed to not only the first Black ministers but also to African-American revolutionaries such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner who he considered to be products of the Africanized Christian

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[15] Albert Raboteau, "Slave Autonomy and Religion," *Journal of Religious Thought*, 38, no. 2 (1981): 57-58, http://ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=4974427&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed March 19, 2013).

[16] Gayraud Wilmore, "Black Theology," *International review of mission*, 63, no. 250 (1974): 214, http://ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000743118&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed March 19, 2013).

experience.[17] That these revolutionaries were empowered by church networks and biblical rhetoric is a general consensus,[18] [19] but Willmore argued that their authority was rooted in the soil of inherently African culture and religion.

Walter Rucker, professor of African and African-American Studies at the University of North Carolina argued in his 2006 work on African American ethnography that some 45 percent of Africans brought to Virginia from identifiable regions in the 18th century came from a particular part of South Africa: the Bight of Biafra.[20] Rucker considers it important to understand that significant numbers of slaves in 18th century Virginia were from the same cultural region of Africa. As a consequence, of this, Rucker argues that African culture and religion survived and manifested themselves in slave revolts.[21] In his 1800 revolt, Gabriel Prosser was able to rally a number of slaves to his cause of emancipation through his election as spiritual and military leader. Gabriel was able to take leadership, Rucker argued, because of "his employment and embodiment, conscious or not, of cultural metaphors and cultural spaces that enslaved Igbos [African people group] and others would find familiar and inspirational."[22] Rucker argued that Denmark Vesey's 1822 revolt attempt showed how pan-African connections linked slaves together in resistance and that "[one] of the most effective and ubiquitous of these links was the various Afro-Atlantic religious

[17] Wilmore, "Black Theology," 214.
[18] Ibid., 62.
[19] Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 226.
[20] Walter Rucker, *The River Flows On*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 125-26.
[21] Walter Rucker, *The River Flows On*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 129, 163, 187.
[22] Ibid., 138.

impulses that helped inspire slave revolts throughout the Americas."[23] One of Vesey's most influential supporters was African born conjurer, Gullah Jack Pritchard, whose power was respected by many who participated in the uprising. Gullah Jack had rebels place crab claws in their mouths as charms of invincibility;[24] an example of what Herskovits' explained about Fetish religion. "That not one slave questioned the validity of Jack's powers" argued Rucker, was "singular testament to the continuing connection they had to African spiritual beliefs and values. Vesey also drew heavily upon the Christian Old Testament for inspiration,[25] but it is hard to differentiate his Christian religion from the older traditions to which it was obliged. Rucker also argues that Nat Turner, leader of the 1831 slave rebellion, was a "[s]lave conjurer" even though many scholars have considered him a zealous Christian,[26] and so, quoting W.E.B. Du Bois, agreed that Turner represented at once a "bard, physician, judge and priest."[27] In short, Rucker holds that Nat Turner represented the early black church as a "religious middle ground inhabited by numerous slave exhorters, preachers and prophets… [who] bridged the two spiritual worldviews while not completely belonging to either."[28] Rucker also quoted British historian and expert in American slavery, Philip Morgan, who asserted that "African and American-born slaves were neither *tabula rasas* nor victims of a collective spiritual holocaust.

[23] Rucker, *The River Flows On*, 163-64.
[24] Ibid., 164-65.
[25] Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, (Garden City: Doubleday & company, Inc., 1972), 80-81.
[26] Rucker, *The River Flows On*, 187.
[27] W.E.B. Du Bois, quoted in Walter Rucker, *The River Flows On*, 187-88.
[28] Rucker, *The River Flows On*, 188.

Instead, they crafted a dynamic and functional culture, despite the denial of their humanity."[29]

Raboteau's and Rucker's syntheses made any measurement of the amount to which African culture was retained or lost increasingly elusive. Raboteau held that neither survivalism nor desolationism could be theories of absolutes. African belief could have been altered and synthesized by contact with Europeans even as "European traits could have been shaped and reinterpreted by the slaves in the light of their African past."[30] Those practices which were most easily retained were also those which were most similar to the practices of their neighbours. This being the case, it made the difference between integration and assimilation difficult to measure.[31] If Raboteau was correct in asserting that African-Americans found meaning in Evangelical religious rites, to what extent was the inverse also true? Did evangelical white culture also adapt elements of African religion?

After Nat Turner's slave rebellion, black churches and black leadership in mixed-race churches were considerably controlled if not outlawed. The result was an increased internalization of African-American worship. The secretive venues that slaves set up on plantations to conduct their own worship became known as Hush Harbours and served a more exclusively African-American expression of spirituality. Without the supervision or presence of slave owners they became the religious venues where slaves could express their frustration and angst.[32] The period leading to this was marked by increased

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[29] Rucker, *The River Flows On*, 151.
[30] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution of the Antebellum South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)http://lib.myilibrary.com/Open.aspx?id=90784 (accessed March 18, 2013), 58-59.
[31] Ibid., 59.
[32]Albert Raboteau, "The secret religion of the slaves," *Christian History*, 11,

repression; however, there was enough peaceful slave autonomy and proximity to white worshipers to allow African forms of religious expression to impose themselves on the white evangelical psyche.

Raboteau points to the "ring shout" which musicologists have considered "a particularly strong example of African-influenced dance style in the United States."[33] He calls it "a convincing example of Herskovits' theory of reinterpretation [with regard to] African traditions."[34] The camp-meeting revivals were another venue of belief transmission which "presented a congenial setting for slaves to merge African patterns of response with Christian interpretations of the experience of spirit possession"[35] Historian of black and religious history Mechal Sobel wrote that shouting was by no means a foreign concept to the ecstatic religious culture of the 18th century. A certain chest chanting shout or "singing exercise" however, which was observed among whites, appears to have developed "under the unconscious influence of black practices…. It [was] clearly an African form which was brought to America and penetrated by Christian meaning."[36] Hart and Anne Nelsen and Raytha Yokley added that the "religious growth of millions of men, even though they be slaves, [could not] be without potent influence upon their contemporaries,"[37] instead there was, inevitably, a great exchange of culture and superstition. [38]

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no. 1 (1992): 42-46, http://ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9604291019&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed March 19, 2013).

[33] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 68.

[34] Ibid., 72.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 140.

[37] Hart Nelson, Anne Nelson, and Raytha Yokley, *The Black Church in*

Atlantic Studies is an emerging discipline of historical work which begins to look beyond tradition or modernity as "winners" in a period and geography so replete with crossings of religion, race and heritage. Creolization has become a term to explain this phenomenon. It assumes that the experience of African-Americans is marked by a dynamic overlapping and reinvention of human culture. On one hand, Professor of African American studies at Duke University, J. Lorand Matory, argued in 2000 that much of what appeared to be survivals of African culture in America have been "in fact shaped by African or African-American cultural politics that long post-dated the slave trade."[39] By looking at cultural, historic, and political factors, Matory argued that with enough pressure a culture emerged which was neither African nor American in essence. Rather "Africa and its American diaspora reflect the effects of an enduring dialogue and a dialectic of mutual transformation over time."[40] In contrast James Sidbury, professor and specialist in slave and Atlantic studies, argued in 2007 that in view of the diversity of eighteenth century slavery, one brush could not possibly paint a pan-Atlantic picture. He instead advocated a localized approach that would go beyond a debate of cultural change vs. cultural survival, looking instead toward "a much messier picture in which different African peoples came together in different settings to develop a range of cultural responses to New World slavery."[41] The same effect can

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America, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), 31.
[38] Ibid., 60.
[39] J. Matory, "Surpassing "Survival": On the Urbanity of "Traditional Religion" in the Afro-Atlantic World," *The Black Scholar*, 30, no. 3/4 (2000): 41, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41068897 (accessed March 19, 2013).
[40] Ibid.
[41] James Sidbury, "Association, Globalization, Creolization, and the Not-So-Peculiar Institution," *The Journal of Southern History*, 73, no. 3 (2007): 629-630, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27649484 (accessed March 19, 2013).

be applied to the European-American experience. Migration historian Anthony Pagden described it well in a 2003 article; "[f]or many it has been a cathartic experience, a forced recognition that the Creole nations that have evolved out of the disappearance of the old European empires have never been one and united."[42]

In 2001 Historian Canizares Esguerra released his book on New World historiography, which called into question the historical debates and the value systems by which we critique them. He aspired to "assume that the emphasis in traditional historiography on identities as oppositional binaries… misses many of the actual interactions," paving the road for a more even historical evaluation. Every age has its historians with individual viewpoints, biases, methods and resources. It is through their lenses that the student of Atlantic migration must assess the historiography of African survivalism in religious experience. Departing from the survivalist theories of Herskovits and the desolationist precedent of Frazier, a Creolization theory has been tentatively approached, but with criticism from historians such as Sidbury, who holds that the picture is highly diverse and needs further localized research. That an African religious heritage influenced the African-American church in America's south in the 18th and 19th century has been accepted in recent syntheses of Frazier and Herskovits, however, the extent to which this affected white evangelical congregations is harder to measure due to African-American repression. What is clear is that culture is not static and that much more can be said in this conversation between absolutes.

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[42] Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: A short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, from Greece to the Present*, (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 164.

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