



*Revue internationale de
langues, littératures et cultures*

**N°17
2018**

**Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis
B.P. 234, Saint-Louis, Sénégal
ISSN 0850-5543**

SAFARA N° 17/2018

Revue internationale de langues, littératures et cultures

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ISSN 0851- 4119

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Reconstructing Subjecthood: the Role of Memory and Embodied
Knowledge in *Enslaved Africans' Emancipating Efforts* and *New
World Cultural Reinventions*

[Papa Malick BA]

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Abstract

This article is looking to make two points. The first is the issue of subjecthood of enslaved Africans and its role, i.e, how it has helped them in their liberation efforts during the transatlantic slave trade and in their cultural reinventions in the Americas. In fact, most of the literature produced about issues of their agency generally links its beginning with the plantation revolts or Black peoples' post-Emancipation existential movements. However, this paper contends that Africans have crystallized strategies of resistance and survival that initially made them subjects and not objects during their transportation to the New World.

The second point that this paper is looking at is how this sense of subjectivity was facilitated by memories and knowledge that they have carried with them as captives and how they have concomitantly been infused in and influenced their cultures in the New World.

Key words: slavery, Africans, subjecthood, agency, memory, culture, New World, Americas.

Introduction

With the advent of emancipation movements, Pan-Africanism, the Back-to-Africa movement, and the Civil Rights Movement, the question of subjecthood of black people had witnessed a universal resonance. In different ways, people of African descent from a wide range of professional groups have fought to restore their dignity destroyed by four centuries of enslavement and the debate in the academic sphere, with the rise of Diaspora studies, seems more than up-to-date as it retains the extraordinary attention of historians, ethnologists, anthropologists, and sociologists and is still unfinished. Despite the assumption that many have about the issue, few scholars have realistically dealt with it regardless of the availability of information,



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filling the historiography with a number of mythologies and figments. Others treat it partially, i.e. in light of the post-emancipation and pre Second World War Pan-Africanist movements.

As a matter of fact, the issue of subjecthood of enslaved Africans goes way back in the plantations, even before, in the slave ships during the Atlantic crossing. Here, it's important to know that Africa, together with the slave ships, the US, the Caribbean and Latin America, are posited as places within which they have produced the epistemologies which have created the historical subjectivities we are studying here.

Thus, in a broader sense, the main point that we are making in our analysis is that slavery did not obliterate enslaved Africans' role as agents and subjects of history. For that, we want to look at the memory of the representative African heritage on them in relation to the articulation of their subjectivity in their different and various efforts against slavers and in their new homes in the Americas. In other words, the text investigates the part of African past in enslaved Africans' struggles for individuation.

Specifically, our analysis focuses on their experience in the plantations, the nature of their character and personality, their family and community lives in order to understand their degree of subjectivity. In addition, I will explore the issue of African acculturation or what many scholars call the "creolization of black culture." In other words, I will look at the idea of roots or how Africa is used by African-Americans as part of their identities in the New World, how it integrates their daily lives and cultural practices, and how it came to dominate their cultural life.

Memory in the articulation of subjecthood during and after the transatlantic crossing

The four centuries of transatlantic slave trade constitute a sad event in the history of Africans to the point that they have almost hidden the foundational role and the inspirational and rich past of the continent. Eurocentrists and their followers have particularly tried to use this gloomy period of Africans' past as the most determining part of their lives, thus formulating innumerable fallacies and counter-truths to "thingify" and reduce them as just objects and finally cast them out of the annals of history and human civilization.

Analyzing the history and experiences Africans, it is anachronistic to say that they were put at the margin of world civilization, dominated to a large extent and acted upon. They were denied subjectivity and oppressively talked about until voices rose up to lay the platform from which this subjectivity can be launched. These voices aimed at correcting the distorted truth and countless figments that were fabricated to deny a dignified presence of Africans in historical archives. They were labeled “Afrocentrists” and accused of trying to serve “undocumented or misinterpreted historical and scientific claims and assertions about ancient Africa and ancient Egypt and their influence on the formation of other world cultures and civilization” (Asante, X). They were reproached the fact of questioning the illogic over-determination of African history by western historiography and of putting African past in the center of their inquiry and making Africans the subjects of their own history.

In other words, they were merely blamed for calling on the redrawing of “the map of knowledge and understanding” (Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 10) and for drawing on the history of Africans’ achievements, experiences, contributions, struggles and victories to present them as subjects rather than objects of human history and to give an absolutely convincing and scientific foundation for their explanations.

In general, the question of subjecthood of enslaved Africans during the Transatlantic Slave Trade has not yet received its deserved treatment in the scholarship compared to the issue of memory and knowledge through New World cultures which is relatively better studied. The great majority of people erroneously quote the Negritude Movement as having carved out the space to imagine African subjectivity.

In fact, African captives have started to articulate a course of action for their lives prior to their transportation to the New World even though they were not in powerful positions and situations. With the context of the horrible and inhumane conditions in slave ships that Stephanie Smallwood portrays in *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* as the metonym of *social death*, *commodification*, and *kinlessness*, African captives effectively rose up against their captors. She argues that “Successful African uprisings against European captors were of course moments at which the undeniable free agency of the captives most disturbed Europeans – for it was in these moments that African captives invalidated the vision of the history being written in this corner of their Atlantic world and articulated their own version of a history that was “accountable”” (34). They did not

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surrender to their enslavement or fatalistically accept their lot as enslaved but rather fought against the chains in order to recover their liberty and precedent lives.

The Middle Passage was so violent and so devastating that many scholars of the transatlantic slave trade think that it has made tabula rasa of all enslaved Africans' memories and connections with the continent. The horrible and absolutely inhumane conditions in which they were transported, the various hardships they went through during the voyage, marked sometimes with countless deaths of those who couldn't stand it, have been the basic arguments of scholars who hold this view. Olaudah Equiano (58) has eloquently described them in his autobiography:

The wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.

However, a different view is advanced by another group of scholars who hold that the journey to the New World has been so stimulating and inspiring to the slaves that they have recreated their African past in their new homes. This last advocacy relies strongly on the tremendous research made by great scholars such as Melville J. Herskovits, Lawrence H. Levine, Richard Price, Sidney Mintz, and Lorand J. Matony who have investigated and laid bare the different existing cultures in the New World that attest, in their various forms, a direct or indirect connection with the slaves' African heritages. In several countries of the New World from the Caribbean to Latin America up to the United States different forms of cultural practices, some keeping their purity, others slightly hybridized, and others completely transformed, undoubtedly originate from the rich memories and knowledge of enslaved Africans who have fantastically succeeded to reproduce and live their old practices in their New World environments.

As a matter of fact, a great deal of stereotypes and forged mythologies about enslaved Africans has been constructed in the 1960s and 1970s to speculate on their characters, personalities, and likeliness to rise up against slavery. The most famous one is the "Sambo" theory developed by Stanley Elkins in his book *Slavery, A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. Elkins alleged that slaves were docile and submissive people who were reduced to candid dependency by the absolute power and authority of the slave masters. He tried to explain the verticality of power distribution in the plantations, that is to say total authority descended and was incarnated by the master. He therefore concluded that supreme authority of the

master means perpetual submission of the slave. Elkins' argument can be seen as a mere attempt to explain what happened to the bondmen in America. But his argument lacked support when he sought for evidence, that is to say "Sambo" in Africa, and found a different personality.

From a different perspective, Deborah Gray White has offered in her book *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, two other mythological characterizations –"Jezebel" and "Mammy"- of enslaved females. From a gender standpoint, White also gives a description of how ideas were formed to elucidate images of African females in the slavery era. The "Jezebel" character is the portrait of the enslaved woman as a sensual person, "governed almost entirely by her libido" (29). White explains that this idea originated from English captors mistaking "seminudity for lewdness" when they first went to Africa to buy slaves (29).

As for the "Mammy" image, it was that of religious, maternal, and caring slave women who have an established knowledge in all household tasks. The black "Mammy" was "the premier house servant ... who not only ruled supreme in the kitchen but who was the general superintendent of the younger servants as well" (47). However, White argues that "The Mammy image is fully misleading as that of Jezebel. Both images have just enough grounding in reality to lend credibility to stereotypes that would profoundly affect black women" (49). These examples illustrate the myths that surround enslaved Africans and their social life in the plantations. They are just a manifestation of an endeavor to holistically get to grips with an overall understanding of the dynamics of organization and agency of slaves. Their main purpose is to understand the conditions under which they worked and their relations to each other and to their masters.

In fact, these constructed images about enslaved Africans' life in the plantation are in sharp contrast with the reality on the ground presented by authors such as Michael Mullin, Eugene D. Genovese, Peter H. Woods, Rolph Trouillot, Susan Buck-Morss and Matt Childs, to name a few. These writers have presented a whole different picture of enslaved Africans' life in the plantations which strongly contrasts the stereotypes on their unlikeliness to organize themselves and dismantle the slave structures. In their analyses, they elucidate moments when they have attempted to articulate a certain quest of subjectivity, their efforts to grant themselves humanity by rejecting their slave status through organized revolts and rebellions.

The stereotypes on black people in the plantations did not inform on what people knew about slavery in the Americas at large. Naturally, we are bound to raise these

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rhetorical questions. If slaves were weak and docile as the ‘Sambo’ myth pretends, how could some of them gain a reputation and authority as acknowledged leaders? How could they dare foment outstanding rebellions to overthrow the slave system? How could they organize themselves and structure their lives in communities and families and exercise strong impacts on slave masters? Where did they get the stimulus for all these achievements? Fundamentally, these interesting questions which are going to be addressed in this text lead to the inquiry on slaves’ memories and the strong significance of their past during slavery.

There is no doubt that, during the Middle Passage, slaves were quintessentially accompanied by their memories and hidden knowledge. Richard Price, for instance, argues in his ethnographic masterpiece *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African-American Imagination*, that some even brought with them material objects such as “pots and other stools” in slave ships (289). It is important to underline here the symbolic importance of the social, economic, religious and intellectual background of African captives in order to understand the extent to which they were influenced by their past. Generally, beyond forced enslavement, large scale slavery involved a great deal of stake and motivated Africans themselves to capture and sell their folks from all spheres of life as negotiable commodities to European traders. As any scholars have revealed, among the constituents of African captives, therefore, there were warriors, hunters, brave wrestlers, clan leaders, princes, religious leaders, rich land-owners queens etc. All these categories of people passed the crossing together and sometimes met in the same plantation.

Just as the Atlantic Slave Trade abruptly converted them into bondmen and deprived them of their status, freedom of actions, and enjoyments, it is obvious to know that they could not accept their new lot or be submissive to the unfree life imposed to them. So, they started their struggles against this uncommon experience of dislocation and alienation in the slave ships. As an illustration, Vincent Brown in *The Reaper’s Garden* argues that “Amid mortal crisis, they forged lasting relationships. Having been threatened with utter alienation, the survivors claimed their fellow passengers as kin. In Jamaica, “shipmates” were treated as brothers and sisters. The term was ... “the dearest word and bond of affectionate sympathy amongst the Africans” (45).

Alex Haley has also described in *Roots: the Saga of an American Family* scenes of solidarity between Kunta Kinte and his Mandinka folks. This point is also made by other scholars such as Michael A. Gomez in *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* who advanced that despite the execrable and repulsive conditions in slave

ships, characterized by high death rates, the middle passage has surprisingly created an extraordinary process of social transformation and networking between captives. And most importantly, some of these networkings were borne and continued into the plantations and have, to some extent, contributed to the significance of certain revolts in the New World. As Gomez shows, “Slavers often took on their full complement of captives in single regions of supply, and Africans emanating from the same region tended to be transported to the same New World destinations” (65). This increased their chance of communion and unity as there were important similarities with respect to their languages, cultures and concerns.

In fact, the culminant point of the Atlantic crossing is the vehement upsurges that slaves undertook in slave ships to get back to their previous lives and refuse to be turned into commodities. So, even though some scholars have depicted failed assaults of slaves against slave masters which turned out to massacres, others have shown relatively victorious attempts where slaves have succeeded to kill an important number of their captors or to escape.

The roots and routes of rebelliousness

It is important to elaborate on the contrasting views among scholars about the place of Africa before the outburst of the Atlantic slave trade in order to understand the likeliness of enslaved Africans to rebel against the slave system. To a certain degree, Western historiography describes pre-slavery Africa as a continent entirely characterized by utter ethnic fractionalization, the reign of a state of nature turning to cannibalism, inter-tribal warfares where the victorious enslaved the losers, and conglomerates of loose and anarchically organized communities. These narratives which began to appear in the second half of the eighteenth-century, and even before, multiplied in the nineteenth and twentieth- century and were mostly dedicated to please a certain European and North American readership. In response, others openly overtook to defend and rehabilitate black history. They were called Afrocentrists and accused of trying to ‘mobilize old myths and teach them as history’.

The most striking attack is probably Mary R. Lefkowitz’s book *Not Out Of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* published in 1996 which is in conversation with many works that acknowledged Africa as the cradle of civilizations such as Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*, Cheikh A. Diop’s *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, and Molefi K. Asante’s *The Afrocentric Idea*.

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Clearly, it is unreasonable to negate the historicity of Africans however racially driven one is. Considering the beginning of human existence on earth estimated to billions of years and the several human civilizations that have passed from that time to the present, how is it rationally acceptable to write out Africans? Is it logical to accept that Africans have made no history from the beginning of their existence till the outburst of slavery? Or worse even, why did some people want to confine African history into four hundred years of enslavement and humiliation?

Undeniably, these ideas are part of Europeans' powerful cultural propaganda to justify large scale deportation of millions of Africans during the Atlantic slave trade. They were the first to expose the history of Africa with the Arabs and this fact necessarily influenced the African historiography, part of which was born out of it. Their descriptions of the continent revealed mitigated feelings of strangeness and amazement, curiosity and repulsion but mostly willingness to a systematic distortion of the truth for the defense of colonial interests. These contradictory attitudes have dominated and produced, in various proportions, the narratives about Africa and African descended people and have framed the numerous epistemological questions that scholars have not finished to ask. For this reason, historians like Elikia M'bokolo (1995) preferred to call it "the history of the perception of Africa by others" instead of the history of Africa (36). He added, citing the Ghanaian historian Kwame Y. Daaku, that there is no such area of African history about which people have written so much as the Atlantic slave trade despite their little knowledge of it.

Analyzing the approach of these "Afrocentrists," it is important to say that they did not undertake to assail the "armada of conservative defenders of western canon" but simply made it clear that we can never understand Africa until we dare to link Africans to their classical past, as argued Cheikh A. Diop. So, their concern was to change "the idea of Africans as those who are only marginal to Europe, as those who stand on the periphery of Western triumphalism" as Molefi Kete Asante (1998: xii) states. It is this past that Michael A. Gomez elucidates in *Reversing Sail* when he states that "People of African descent, or black people, can be found in all walks of life. In ancient and medieval times their achievements were in instances unparalleled; their economic conditions to the modern world have been extensive and foundational, introducing agricultural forms and mining techniques while providing the necessary labor. They have contributed to the sciences and the arts in spectacular ways, but it is their cultural influence, including literature, theatre, painting, sculpture, dance, music, athletics, and religion that has received greater recognition" (2).

The history of Africa is that of rich social, political and economic dynamics that inspired attraction and admiration as acknowledged by its past. Even if historians continue to debate over the use of Egypt to give Africa the honor of being the cradle of human civilization, Africa (black Africa) has witnessed a flourishing civilization marked by great empire-states run by illustrious figures from the seventh to the fifteenth-century, that is to say the outbreak of the Atlantic slave trade by the Portuguese. Outside the medieval Nubia and Koush, the Bilad es-Sudan (country of black people) has known glorious epochs revealed in foreign narratives, especially the Arab ones, but also in the reconstituted memories of local historians who have conserved prosperous souvenirs. There was a succession of many powerful states competing in splendor. Different empires and kingdoms flourished and had various commercial exchanges with Europe: the Mali Empire in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Kingdom of the Gold Coast (from the fourth to thirteenth century), The Songhai Empire (from eleventh to sixteenth), the Kingdom of Kongo (fifteenth to early twentieth century). As Gomez said,

for all of the horror of the transatlantic slave trade, it did not rupture ties of the homeland. Africa would remain a central consideration in the hearts and minds of many, the dream of reconnection, of reversing sail (79).

So, how can it be understood that some people have tried to make us believe that Africans are a-historical or that their true history was the one told by others who were their despisers to some point?

Many researchers have established the relationship between enslaved Africans' origins and their potential to rise up against slavery. Understanding their earlier history can contribute to a fuller view of their motivations and actions. They "brought with them as many commitments to and preconceptions of justice and legitimacy as their captors" and were not "a blank slate," argued Eugene D. Genovese (1979: xvi). Most of them who displayed an uncommon sense of heroism were isolated or sold away because they threatened the whole plantation system. But many have radically risen up and considerably ignited their plantations. An unlimited number of conspiracies and revolts took place during and in the plantations. Though, Herbert Aptheker, one of the pioneering specialists of slave revolts, found "records of approximately two hundred and fifty revolts and conspiracies in the history of American Negro Slavery" (1983: 162), with the first ones dating in the "latter part of the seventeenth century" (163). For the sake of illustration and relevance to our paper, we are going to quote a few of them.

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The first illustration is the 1791 Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. Most people quote it as the most defining moment in the history of Africans in the New World and to illustrate the first successful slave revolt that has permanently abolished slavery. The 1789 French Revolution is often cited as having been the most tremendous influence of this revolution. However, it is important to know that the master-mind of this landmark revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, is the grandson of the king of the Aradas (Dahomey or modern-day Benin) who constituted the majority of French Saint-Domingue slave population. His father, Prince Gaou Guinou, heir to the throne of Arada, obtained a semi-freedom tenure from his master the Count of Noé. Drawing on his noble lineage specifically from his grandfather, L'Ouverture distinguished himself and gained his freedom in 1776, though some say that he was born free.

Then, as a free person, L'Ouverture quickly rose to the top of the social strata and became very influential. He raised consciousness among other slaves and was at the head of a big rebel group fighting to drive white masters out of Haiti. In 1794 he allied with the Spanish, extended his influence on the totality of Saint-Domingue Island and proclaimed definite freedom. The epitome of his action was when he institutionalized his power and compiled the famous Constitution of 1801. Unfortunately, the king of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, plotted against him and sent an army to arrest him in 1802. L'Ouverture was deported and died in captivity in Jura (France) in 1803 and slavery was re-established. One of his lieutenants, Jean Jacques Dessalines, victoriously took over the fight and granted independence to Haiti on January 1st 1804.

The second illustration is the 1733 St. John (now United States' Virgin Islands) Slave Revolt in the Danish West Indies, which started on November 23, 1733 when African slaves from Akwamu, originally from the Bono state in Ghana, revolted against the owners and managers of the island's plantations. Defeated in 1730 by rival tribes after the death of their king in revenge for years of oppression, the Akwamu people were sold into slavery to the Danes and brought to plantations in the West Indies. The Akwamus did not see themselves as slaves, since in their homeland many were nobles, wealthy merchants or other powerful members of their society; so slavery was an intolerable response to their previous living conditions.

Their rebellion was one of the earliest and longest slave revolts in the Americas. The head was an Akwamu chief, King June, a field slave and foreman on the Sodtman estate and the other leaders were Kanta, King Bolombo, Prince Aquashie, and Breffu. Their stated purpose was to make St. John an Akwamu-ruled nation. One

group under the leadership of King June stayed at the fort to maintain control; another one took control of the estates in the Coral Bay area after hearing the signal shots from the fort's cannon. They killed many of the whites on these plantations but avoided general destruction of property since they intended to take possession of the estates and resume crop production. Then, they continued their attacks successively to the Cinnamon Bay Plantation, the Jansen Plantation, and the Durloe Plantation chasing planters and their families to Saint Thomas. They took control of most of the island. On April 23, 1734, several hundred French and Swiss troops arrived in two ships at Saint John and succeeded to restore planters' rule. The insurrection ended on August 25, 1734. The loss of life and property from the insurrection caused many St. John landowners to move to St. Croix, a nearby island sold to the Danish by the French in 1733.

The third illustration, the Stono Rebellion (sometimes called Cato's Conspiracy or Cato's Rebellion) was a slave rebellion begun on Sunday, September 9, 1739, in the colony of South Carolina. It was the largest slave uprising in the British mainland colonies prior to the American Revolution. One of the earliest known organized rebellions in the present United States, it was led by native Africans from the kingdom of Kongo, and some of whom spoke Portuguese. Jemmy (referred to in some reports as "Cato") was a literate slave who led 20 other enslaved Kongolese, who have been former soldiers and warriors, in an armed march south from the Stono River (for which the rebellion is named). Because Kongo had been undergoing civil wars, more people had been captured and sold into slavery in recent years, among them trained soldiers. They recruited nearly 60 other slaves and killed 22–25 whites before being intercepted by a South Carolina militia near the Edisto River. In that battle, 20 whites and 44 slaves were killed, and the rebellion was suppressed. A group of slaves escaped and traveled another 30 miles before battling a week later with a militia; most of the slaves were executed; a few survived to be sold to the West Indies.

The fourth illustration is the Amistad sea rebellion also known as United States versus Libellants and Claimants of the Schooner Amistad in 1841. The rebellion broke out when the schooner, traveling along the coast of Cuba, was taken over by a group of captives who had earlier been kidnapped in Africa and sold into slavery. They were Mende, an ethnic group living in South-Eastern Sierra Leone mostly characterized by farmers and hunters. The event involved fifty-two Mende tribesmen who were purchased by Portuguese slavers in 1839 to work in the Cuban sugar plantations. After working a while, they were transported on board of the Amistad to another plantation. On the way, they succeeded to kidnap the crew and told them

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to take them to the Mende land in Africa. The ship navigated up to the United States and was intercepted off Long Island by U.S. navy. A widely publicized court case ensued in the US, resulting in the return of the thirty-six surviving Mende to their homes.

The last example is the Tacky's War or Tacky's Rebellion which occurred in Jamaica in 1760. The leader of the rebellion, Tacky, was a Coromantee chief before being enslaved. The rebellion broke out in Saint Mary in the North-Eastern Jamaica by a group of slaves most of whom were Coromantee, traced to the Koromantin Ghanaian fishing community. Their plan was to overthrow British rule and establish an African kingdom in Jamaica. Tacky, was described as a man of dignity and inspiration who stood up for himself and his people to protect and free them as he would have done, as a chief, in his own land. The experience in leadership he demonstrated in this rebellion was, for him, the same he exercised in Africa. His action created unrest and turmoil throughout the island. Unfortunately for the rebellion, a slave from one of the rebel controlled plantations escaped and informed white authorities. The rebellion was torn apart by a mobilization of an alliance of a planter militia and regular troops. Tacky was killed and the last fighters chose to kill themselves instead of returning to captivity.

Other cases of resurrections, most of which mainly inspired by religion, happened during slavery. But these were specific illustrations of the work of memory and the role that African heritage played in enslaved Africans' insurrectionist incentives. They demonstrate that they drew on the history of their achievements, experiences, contributions, struggles, and victories among their various insurrections during the Atlantic slave trade. These contributions occupied a symbolic place and were manifested in different perspectives such as the transformation of the plantations' economic system through their knowledge and skills, and culturally in their attempts to recreate home in the New World after emancipation. Judith Carney in *Black Rice* and Peter H. Wood in *Black Majority* have substantially detailed the contributive input of Africans in rice cultivation in the Americas and how their relatively important population changed the plantation configuration in the South. But this knowledge was also and more manifestly present in cultural representations which will be dealt in the following part of the text.

New World cultural retentions or reinventions?

After emancipation, black people started to think of how to transform their memories into strategies of resistance and to wonder how to live their negrohood in a foreign land. Being victims of coercive racism and exclusion in their new societies, their first reflex was to look at their specific “Africanity” or “Africanness” and reconcile themselves with it with the best of their knowledge and possibilities. After their enfranchisement, they started asking existential questions summarized by these three “Bs”: Being, Belonging, and Becoming.

Firstly, finding the answer to the question of “Being” means finding something or some things that typify them as African people. It corresponds to the search for a specific mode of representation of their identities, which is the signifier “blackness.” Secondly, the question of “Belonging” is about articulating a sense of home and creating it (re-inventing Africa) in their new “homeless places” so that they would not live an a-historical life. Lastly, the question of “Becoming” called to the strategies of becoming a subject, that is to say, deconstructing oppressive racial archetypes and transforming them into new authenticities.

Scholars have gone to different paths on their investigation of the question of cultural representations of Africans in the New World when they first started research on the field. Their analyses resulted in various outcomes varying from acculturation, reinvention to syncretism; some denying any sort of continuity of Africanisms, others supporting a hybrid and creolized culture. However, it is important to know that Africa was extremely symbolic for the free Africans as it “signifies an escape from racial discrimination and an epitomized pride in heritage” (Asante, 168). To some extents, they had strong motivations to draw more from each other than from elsewhere in their struggle for individual and collective survival.

From the beginning of the twentieth-century, African-American culture started to be investigated in order to determine constituents from Africa and the New World. Remarkable and tremendous works have been done in the US, the Caribbean and in Latin America in determining the degree of Africanity of cultural legacy on the people of African descent. In the Americas, especially the United States, it has been discovered that elements of African culture had a long persistence. In some areas where there were large groups of enslaved Africans, they kept much of their heritage. For instance, the African-American linguist, Lorenzo Dow Turner (1949), discovered a Gullah family in coastal Georgia, which had preserved in the 1930s an ancient song in the Mende language that was passed down for two-hundred years. In

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the 1990s, a Mende village in Sierra Leone where the same song is still sung today was located by three contemporary researchers Cynthia Schmidt (ethnomusicologist), Tazieff Koroma (Linguist) and Joseph Opala (anthropologist). In addition, Melville J. Herskovits (1990) and Lawrence Levine (1977) have also done a path-breaking ground-clearing on the issue, arguing that despite racism, injustice, and social and economic hardships, African-Americans formed and cherished a culture that was plainly African.

Basically, most of the cultural retentions in the New World were located on religious practices. There are more than ten African religions which have survived with more or less transformations such as Abakua (originating from the Ekpe in Nigeria and practiced in Cuba), Hoodo (originating from Benin, Togo and Kongo and practiced in the southern U.S), Umbanda (originating from the Yoruba in Nigeria and practiced in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina). Nevertheless, the most famous ones are Candomblé which originates from the Yoruba and which is practiced in different countries in the Americas, including Uruguay, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama and Mexico; Santería, loosely translated from Spanish as “way of the saints,” which is a concoction of Yoruba religion, Roman Catholic and Native American traditions practiced in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the southern U.S); and Voodoo, a traditional polytheistic organized religion originating in southeastern Ghana, southern and central Togo, southern and central Benin, and southwestern Nigeria, is present in Louisiana, the Dominican republic and in Haiti.

Many researchers are increasingly suggesting that what we would ordinarily call retentions are actually re-inventions. Such re-inventions give the retentions historical depth and validity. Yet, with the recent developments of Diaspora studies, it has been made clear that some patterns of African-American culture can be directly traced back, almost with a perfect resemblance, to a specific place of origin in the Old World. Richard Price cites Melville J. Herskovits who illustrates this point in his memories in Suriname: “In the Guiana bush..., nearly all of western sub-Saharan Africa [is] represented, from what is now Mali to Loango and into the Congo—and the Loango chief who came to our base camp [in Saramaka] invoked both the Great God of the Akan of the Gold Coast, *Nyankompon*, and the Bantu *Zambi*” (*The Root of Roots*, 4). Price has also made another great illustration in his ethno-cultural masterpiece, *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African-American Imagination* (2008). In this forty-year research work among the Saramaka Maroons (descendants of slaves who escaped from the Dutch Suriname plantation between 1690 and 1712 and formed the Saramaka culture), Price lays bare the cultural practices of these people who basically drew on a typical inter-African syncretism

of Komanti (Gold Coast, Nigeria), Daome (Benin), and Luangu (Angola, Congo). He supported that “while waging war and trying to survive in an unfamiliar and hostile environment, they drew on their immense riches of their African pasts” (294).

Conclusion

The question of subjecthood of people of African descent in the New World is still at stake among researchers of the transatlantic slave trade. It is never finished as this historical event is full of enigmas and continues to yield new findings. Overall, we have tried to show in our analysis that during slavery as well as in the plantations and after emancipation, enslaved Africans have articulated individuation strategies to fight against alienation and dishonor contrary to some commonly held views that they docilely and fatally surrendered to the rigors and shackles of these events. Then, we have also demonstrated that these strategies of resistance and survival, which culminated to more or less successful insurrections, were inspired by their rich African past. Finally, we have contended that the latter was instrumental in their existential quest for new identities after they were granted freedom. Today, the context of their struggles has probably changed but other areas of their lives in the New World (social, economic, and political survival) still inspire research.

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