

Standard Mappings and Theorizing of African American Experience

What is African American religion? Really, how does one define African American religion in a way that acknowledges and wrestles with the similarities and contradictions emerging when one thinks about this question in light of a full host of traditions with a long presence within African American communities? Answering this question points in a variety of directions. Yet all these various directions draw from the historical reality of the Atlantic slave trade—the violent and widespread movement of Africans to the American hemisphere for the purpose of free labor.

It is true that an effort was initially made to use European servants and Indians as a labor force. Indentured European servants actually provided an important labor pool for colonists, although the financial benefits for servants were minor and the ability to progress socially was limited. While there were distinctions to

be made between free colonists and servants, these differences were lodged in cultural, social, and economic opportunity and access—not in racial distinction. In some cases freed servants left with a trade and perhaps a bit of land, and one might assume servants would be exposed to the workings of the Christian faith. More importantly, free colonists and servants might have different levels of “refinement,” but they were considered essentially of the same substance as their employers. For example, they were servants, but they were not Indians. The latter were assumed barbaric and prone to all types of despicable activities.

The “New World,” as the Americas were named, was thought to be Canaan set aside for colonists. But it was not without its perils, including the “heathen” who called it home. Prior to periods of war, there was a general interest on the part of New England colonies to avoid harming Indians. In fact, colonists who did harm them often suffered legal recourse. Colonists of course assumed that their laws, based upon the word of the Christian God, superseded any laws and customs practiced by the Indians. Furthermore, regulations that on the surface protected Indians did not entail strong positive feelings toward them. Various wars waged between the Puritans and Indians testify to this. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for Indian prisoners of war and debtors to

fall into the existing system of indentured servitude noted above. However, in the long run, indentured servitude proved an unreliable and costly form of labor.¹

Whereas European servants and Indians proved problematic, hope was held out for the African slave trade as a source of an easily distinguished and capable labor force.

Historical studies of slavery clearly indicate Europeans did not invent the institution. One can go back to the Greeks and other early civilizations. Europeans during the age of exploration, however, certainly perfected its racial, psychological, and socio-political mechanics and structures. As John Hope Franklin insightfully argues, the Renaissance and the Commercial Revolution in Europe made perfecting such a long standing arrangement possible because the former ushered in a sense of freedom entailing the welfare of both the soul and body. Most profound and tragic about this freedom is the manner in which it was denied to those without means. The economic holdings necessary for this philosophical position were made available through the shift from feudalism to a town-based commerce secured through capital. While making impressive claims, a strong moral consciousness was not the hallmark of freedom and commerce emerging during the modern period. For example, Portugal and Spain decided early that African goods and bodies could play an

important role in the further development of their economies and overall well-being. Hence, as early as the mid-1400s, these two countries were importing both goods and bodies, and with the exploration of the so-called “New World,” the labor of Africans would only increase in value.² The enslavement of Africans was more than a century old when England got into the business in the 1600s.

The first Africans—also called Negroes or Negars—were brought to Virginia in 1619. And before the mid-1600s, Africans in North American colonies were few and worked under similar arrangements as European servants. It was not until England participated in the slave trade on a larger scale that Africans began to serve for life in extremely large numbers. When the Royal African Company held a monopoly on England’s slave trade (1670s through the late 1680s), it transported roughly five thousand slaves per year to the English colonies.

With time and with a greater number of companies participating in the process, the number of slaves moved by England radically increased with cities such as Bristol and Liverpool accounting for more than eighteen thousand slaves transported annually. Although there were enslaved Africans in New England representing roughly 10 percent of the population by 1775, the bulk of this forced labor was on the tobacco and rice plantations of the south where

slaves represented a much larger percentage of the overall population. The Carolinas were particularly aggressive in bringing slavery into the territory. For example, in 1633 colonists were given at least ten acres of land for each slave entering the colony and, within a short period of time, the number of slaves equaled that of colonists—only to grow beyond it by 1715. According to estimates, by the end of the eighteenth century there were less than one million slaves, but before the nineteenth century was four decades old the slave population had grown to better than two million. Although the importation of Africans was outlawed in 1808, the number of slaves had grown, with the epicenter in Virginia, to almost four million by 1860.³

The above figures are noteworthy, but also important is the structuring of thought that made possible this exploitation of Africans in such a systematic and sustained manner. Through a discussion of historical thought patterns, one begins to see the rationale and outline for African American religion.

Defining "Black" Bodies

Philosopher Cornel West, in *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, argues that a "normative gaze"—an ideal of beauty and values that marked the Greek physical form as superior—develops

during the age of exploration. And as of the 1600s, this theory of ideal form was applied in natural history as a way of categorizing and ranking races. The closer a race was in appearance to the Greek body, the closer that race was to the ideal.

It takes little imagination to realize that Africans, defined as dark skinned, having typically thicker lips, broader noses, and more coarse hair, were far from this ideal form. By implication and based on the normative gaze, Africans were inferior in beauty to Europeans, who more closely resembled this subjective ideal. The discipline of physiognomy (used to assess character from physical appearance) connected physical attributes and character by suggesting that “a beautiful face, beautiful body, beautiful nature, beautiful character, and beautiful soul were inseparable.”⁴ During the eighteenth century, phrenology (the reading of skulls) argued for a connection between the size of the skull and the depth of character. Although these disciplines said more about the likes and dislikes, idiosyncrasies and biases, of investigators than about humanity, such “disciplines” held sway over popular and academic attitudes. What is more, a pseudo-science such as phrenology gave these assessments philosophical and biological grounding and thereby provided an authority for racist depictions of Africans as by nature less than fully human.

While the genealogy of racism offered by West is philosophically and culturally insightful, a more historically detailed account of the development of racialism is given by historian Winthrop Jordan. Although West and Jordan may disagree on some points, they both understand racism as a modern invention. According to Jordan, ocean voyages in the modern period (beginning in roughly the mid-fifteenth century) brought the differences between groups of people into full view and fueled increased interest in making sense of these differences. For the English in particular, the recognition of Africans was made first in soft ways through literature that referred to Ethiopians, but not until the Venetian monopoly of England's foreign trade was broken after the sixteenth century did direct and rapid contact with Africans begin. English settlements in Africa beginning in 1631 and the activities of the Royal African Company, chartered in the 1670s, brought the English and Africans into close and sustained contact.

This contact did not immediately entail the description of Africans as inferior. While travelers noted difference in color, they did not frame these differences in terms of problematic sensibilities and racialized assumptions. However, this rather non-judgmental response to the African's blackness was not sustained. The English popular imagination was too loaded with negative

color symbolism for non-prejudiced difference to remain the norm. Jordon concludes that, as of the eighteenth century, the African's different color was connected to a different nature that rendered the African ugly and flawed in character. So for the English, whose idea of beauty depended on paleness, Africans represented a people unattractive and with odd practices. Differentiated from the English, Africans became the "Other." They, Africans, during this period were often used as a measuring stick by which the English assessed themselves and their society, both in religious and mundane terms. At its worst, differences in appearance, social habits, and cultural production were interpreted in ways that painted Africans as barbaric and of less value.⁵

The African as a scientific, social, cultural, philosophical, and physical problem persisted and intensified as English involvement in the slave trade grew.

Black Bodies and Religion

There was a growing desire to understand the African's place in the created order in keeping with the scriptural depiction of one source or one creation, and the book of Genesis offered a theological framing fit to fulfill this desire. The story of creation in Genesis, for example, suggested a theological framework providing

parameters to define the nature and character of Africans. In short, scripture required that English Christians begin their thinking on Africans with an understanding that Africans had the same creator. A sense of shared creation, however, did not prohibit a ranking of the created order, one in which Africans were much lower than Europeans. Africans and Europeans were at least physically and culturally different, and this difference had to be accounted for.

Contained in this assertion is the groundwork for a theory of white supremacy that would take various forms. Some argued that the color of the African was a consequence of close proximity to the sun. Yet this did not hold based on the movement of Europeans into similar areas without permanent change in pigment. Furthermore, based on this argument, one would assume that taking Africans out of the sun would eventually result in a permanent shift in skin color from dark to white, the assumed natural color of humanity. But this did not happen. Such naturalistic explanations proved faulty.

Others seeking an explanation of the African's blackness turned to scripture and found what seemed both a theologically and philosophically reasonable argument, one that buttressed the physical evidence provided by the scientific community. Genesis contained the answer within the story of Noah and the cursing of Ham through his son (9:20-22; 24-25):

“Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. . . . When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan: lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.’” The failure of Africans to be beautiful, Christian, and English—or in more general terms “civilized”—was explained through this biblical story of socio-cultural difference.

It is possible, but unlikely, that a hierarchy of being could develop without the intent of degrading certain groups. But degradation is exactly what takes place with respect to enslaved Africans, and this spectrum of status was used to map out social relationships. As England’s role in the “New World” and the slave trade used to meet labor demands increased, theological rationales (and “proof-texting” of biblical passages) offered useful justification for growing economic and social arrangements in the colonies. One can ask why a biblical text addressing a labor arrangement (and one not based on physiological ranking) as opposed to physiological distinctions between races was found so useful in attempting to understand the differences between Europeans and Africans. Nonetheless, regardless of how faulty

contemporary readers may find the logic, the above passage held sway.

By the mid-seventeenth century, the differentiation of black bodies, with all the implied psychosocial and cultural implications, was solidified by legal restrictions and theological argument. For example, it was understood that baptism might pose a problem with respect to the black labor force: Does baptism confer humanity and brotherhood and thereby prevent perpetual bondage?

Virginia's answer came in 1667 when it was decided that "the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedome." Maryland's regulations governing slaves were just as strict, as evidenced by a 1663 regulation that sought to make all Africans in the colony slaves and to apply this same status to all children born to Africans at any time. Ultimately, this law failed in that it was softened to account for the freedom of black children born to white women and to free black women. Colonies further south also enacted laws to solidify the dominance of white colonists over enslaved Africans by requiring the latter to carry passes when off plantations and by giving whites permission to search Africans for passes and weapons. Georgia, which had been established as free from slavery, found it necessary to remove this restriction in 1750 and develop laws—drawn heavily from South

Carolina laws—to regulate the person and activities of enslaved Africans. Laws, or Slave Codes, in all of the slave states pointed to the same assumption: slaves were less than fully human, a form of property—both as body and labor—over which whites had clear rights that needed protection.⁶

Prior to the massive influx of slaves to North America, there seemed no real need to justify the purchase of Africans beyond character assassination and arguments of natural inferiority. While Africans often were referred to as beast-like in behavior, the notion of one creation as found in the book of Genesis prevented these depictions from going so far as to say that Africans were *completely* non-human.

This was the case until the Enlightenment, with its increased attention to the so-called scientific analysis and classification of the human as a physical being as opposed to the earlier and more theological analysis of the human as defined by relationship to God. The arguments concerning the status or nature of the African that developed in the early eighteenth century tended to revolve around the idea of the African as a different kind of human or perhaps not fully human. Although the color black was often associated with negative images of sin, this, according to historian George Fredrickson, does not suggest the enslavement of Africans was initially premised on personification of negative

color symbolism. There was an economic need and a readily available source of cheap labor. Preexisting prejudices and stereotypes may not have created a desire to enslave Africans, but they certainly made this action more manageable over time.⁷

The "Making" of African Americans

While there are various layers to the slave trade—its longevity, deep destruction, and lingering consequences—slavery's power lies in the attempt to eradicate systematically the subjectivity of Africans and recreate them as objects. As such, enslaved Africans occupied a strange space in that they existed outside the recognized boundaries of human community while also being a necessary part of that same community—as a work force and as the reality against which whiteness was defined. Slaves had the physical form of the human but because of their social death possessed none of the attributes, rights, and liberties associated with being human.

Slaveholders believed that maintaining this boundary between persons and their black property was necessary to maintain their social world and avoid chaos, and this feeling only intensified when slaveholders were confronted with abolitionist demands for an end to the slave system.

The rationale against abolition was usually expressed through two competing and rather contradictory depictions of slaves. On one hand, slaves were considered dangerous, subhuman predators who would destroy white community if they were not kept in their place through force. On the other hand, slaves were described as childlike creatures that were responsible and untrustworthy but harmless if handled properly. George S. Sawyer, a slave holder from the deep south, argued that slavery is the natural state of the black and when treated properly the slave is content: “the very many instances of remarkable fidelity and attachment to their masters, a characteristic quite common among them, are founded not so much upon any high intellectual and refined sentiment of gratitude, as upon instinctive impulse, possessed to an even higher degree by some of the canine species.”⁸

The nature of the slave defined by status as property is only adequate if it is also argued that the slave is not conceived as being a person in the same sense as the master. Yet the notion of the enslaved African as simply one without “legal personality” is inadequate in that laws and codes meant to restrict and punish rebellion by slaves speak to a sense of recognition of personhood within the law.⁹ For example, the fear of rebellion was widespread after 1832 in part because of the uprisings lead by figures such as

Denmark Vesey (South Carolina, 1822) and Nat Turner (Virginia, 1831).

In addition to these plots, slaves also demonstrated rebellion on a more localized and covert manner through work slow-down, destruction of equipment, and in some cases the poisoning of masters and mistresses. Such activities were aggressively dealt with, and measures were taken to prevent such problems. These measures included night patrols by whites through which an effort was made to keep blacks from wandering around and gathering after dark. Again, such precautions imply recognition of a fundamental quest for autonomy that marks humanity.

Slaves were considered somewhat human as a pragmatic move when it benefited and helped to secure the existing social, economic, and philosophical grounding of society. This, of course, is a restricted sense of personhood in that it recognizes enslaved Africans and holds them persons socially accountable only with respect to so-called crimes that threaten the social ordering of North American life. Along with this restricted identity came restrictions on movement, independent thought, and relationships. Life became defined by prohibitions as opposed to a wide range of life options and opportunities.

The bottom line is clear: the dehumanization of Africans was not a smooth process. Although a difficult tension to hold—slaves

as both property and persons—the new world enterprise came to depend on this dehumanization to stabilize and legitimize the slave trade. The questions concerning personhood and the tension between images of blacks as dangerous animals and as reliable and loyal child-like creatures took a new form after the emancipation of enslaved Africans in 1863.

Constant supervision and discipline by whites had kept blacks in line, but once free from such supervision, the southern popular imagination assumed blacks would go wild and destroy life as southern whites knew it. As one might imagine, the image of the black as a dangerous beast became a more dominant image. After the death of the slave system, the “Peculiar Institution,” it no longer was necessary to justify enslavement through an appeal to the child-like and needy character of blacks. No, with the social world developed by white supremacy in jeopardy, it became important to present images of blacks as a threat.

This depiction, however, could not stand alone. As blacks began to strengthen demands for full inclusion in society, it became necessary to present them also as bumbling fools incapable of full participation in the life of society. Whether considered a beastly threat or a relatively harmless buffoon, the dominant perspective meant a fixed identity for blacks and a primary concern with the economic gain

achievable through the abuse of black bodies. In this sense, blacks remained objects of history.

People of African descent in North America experienced a rupture that affected perceptions of the world and the place of blacks in it: blacks do not make history but are the raw material others use to shape history. This is more than a historical dislocation or displacement; it is the very definition of blacks as objects. The forced recognition of this promoted a sense of dread or terror. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, this terror or dread would play a significant role in the development of what we have come to call African American religion.