

Identity in the Shadow of Slavery

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How do we conceptualise the African diaspora? The forced migration through the slave trade and its impact on the cultures of origin that slaves brought with them to the Americas has constituted an important area of academic research since the pioneering work of Melville Herskovits and Roger Bastide. Prior to their studies, it was assumed that slaves in the Americas quickly lost their own language and cultures whereas Herskovits and Bastide argued that African cultural influences were retained and persisted into the 20th century.⁽¹⁾ In contrast, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1976), prioritised the ways in which ethnically fragmented slaves created new creole cultures.⁽²⁾ Revisiting these debates over African retentions, Ira Berlin and John Thornton argued that slaves were far less heterogeneous than Mintz and Price suggested. Slaves, argues Thornton, came from only three diverse linguistic and cultural areas, Upper Guinea, lower Guinea and Angola and this fostered communication and common cultural understandings and practices amongst slaves.⁽³⁾ Thus evolved a contentious and ongoing debate regarding the persistence of cultural links between Africa and the Americas to which *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* contributes in extending the analysis of diasporic links to include the areas of West Africa that many slaves were drawn from.

Identity in the Shadow of Slavery was first published in 2000 and originated from papers presented at a forum held at York University, Canada, in 1997 linked to the UNESCO Slave Routes project. This forum was also the origins of the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on the Global Migrations of Africans and this collection has been published as part of the Institute's 'Series on the African Diaspora'. The editor, Paul E. Lovejoy, Distinguished Research Professor at York and the director of the Institute, has published prolifically on African and African diaspora history. The collection, states Lovejoy in his introductory essay, challenges assumptions that slaves came from diverse backgrounds, and thus Mintz's arguments for creolisation. He provides an effective critique of the idea of a cultural 'melting pot' in the diaspora and also

the concept of 'plural societies' pointing out that several ethnic groups stand out in African diaspora history – Yoruba (Nago or Lucumi), Ewe/ Fon and Igbo from West Africa, and Kongo and Mbundi (Bantu from Congo/ Angola). *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* thus adopts an Africanist approach as reconstructing the 'fragmented lives' of Africans who crossed the Atlantic, argues Lovejoy, cannot be divorced from these African origins that shaped creolisation (p. 19). Africa is 'the source of cultural change in the Americas': the middle passage is firmly located in the middle; what happened before the trauma of the middle passage had ramifications for historical development in the Americas (p. 2).

Reflecting this broad focus, the articles in the collection are diverse in location and themes, embracing *Cimarrón* (maroon) communities in the early Spanish Circum-Caribbean (Jane Landers); Yoruba and Igbo identities in Brazil and the Caribbean (Olabiyi Yai, Maureen Warner-Lewis, Douglas B. Chambers, Christine Ayorinde); free African visitors to, and residents in, Brazil and Georgia (Alberto da Costa e Silva, Lillian Ashcraft-Eason); slavery in West Africa (Sandra E. Greene and Francine Shields); slave culture and gender ideologies, including marriage and kinship in Brazil (Monola Garcia Florentino and José Roberto Góes) and transformations in slave women's identities in the Caribbean (Hilary McD. Beckles). The authors of the articles have all produced original and influential research in their field and/ or made research contributions to support such research. Most of the articles focus on areas where slaves were in the majority; the slave experience in North America is barely mentioned, highlighting perhaps the problems of integrating analyses of the African-American minority which has been absorbed into the American, rather than pan-American, historical canon as shaped by the 'unique' North American experience. An exception here is AshcraftEason's intriguing article on Fenda Lawrence, an Atlantic Creole and female slave trader from Senegambia who travelled as a free black woman on a slave ship to Savannah, Georgia in 1772 where she settled, possibly to protect her rights and estate after the death or departure of her English husband (pp. 209–10). The fact that Fenda Lawrence needed a deposition testifying that she was free highlights the important differences between European / African social relations in West Africa and the slave societies of the Americas. The article also challenges some conventional ideas about women and slavery.

Lovejoy's introductory essay provides a thoughtful and scholarly orientation to the collection that considers the key concepts of diaspora, ethnicity, identity and creolisation. Diaspora is defined as a 'web of connections' that ensured cultural continuities between Africa and its diaspora during slavery (p. 21). The diaspora, argues Lovejoy, reflects layers of influences and 'it is not always easy to determine which directions ideas or even people flowed' (p. 8). Creolisation, he observes, is thought to be a term of Portuguese origin reflecting the fact that the first creolisation of African cultures began on the West coast of Africa with the arrival of Portuguese traders in the 16th century. In relation to the Americas it has been used in different ways; to define those born in the slave societies of the Americas, including whites; to denote the creation of new societies and cultures arising from interaction between Western European and African cultures and to describe 'trade' languages that developed to facilitate communication where there was no common language (p. 13). Lovejoy rightly acknowledges that identity is a 'shadowy' concept (pp. 23–4) and the articles in this collection demonstrate how identities change over time and are subjected to multiple influences. Ethnicity is also a complex, slippery and much debated concept and, as Lovejoy points out, 'ethnic terms reveal historical processes that were far from static'; for that reason, he adds, 'the meaning of ethnic and national identity in the early modern era remains a central problem in African history' (p. 12). In addition to the ways in which slaves identified themselves, ethnic definitions were also derived from European labelling of slaves. This issue of fluid ethnic identities is explored in more depth in Sandra Greene's article on 'Cultural zones in the Era of the Slave Trade: Exploring the Yoruba Connection with the Anlo-Ewe' and Warner-Lewis' study of ethnic and religious plurality among Yoruba immigrants in the 19th century.

Academic debates fundamental to this collection of articles are still very much alive. Support of the creolisation position first proposed by Mintz, and Price has been provided by more recent studies influenced by postmodernism that have explored the '*bricolage*' and 'hybridisation' of cultures in the Americas through creolisation, *métissage* and transculturation. There has also been a greater emphasis on exploring transnational links across the Atlantic world.⁽⁴⁾ Richard Price has recently revisited these debates and

argued that an understanding the extent to which African culture was retained calls for a ‘pan-Afro-American perspective’ that takes in broader comparisons across Afro-America and across disciplines.(5) Research into diaspora cultures was initially spearheaded by anthropologists and more recently archaeological and ethnographical research has provided new evidence of the influence of certain ethnic groups and the tenacity African traditions and material culture from the slave era to the present.(6)

The articles in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* are written mainly by historians, with the exception of Maureen Warner Lewis, Christine Ayorinde, and Olibiyi Yai, a linguist. This raises important issues about the possibilities and pitfalls of interdisciplinarity. Lovejoy regards anthropological studies as ahistoric and with ‘too much reading backward from the present’ and claims that anthropology assumes a ‘static ethnographic past’ (p. 20). But as John Comoroff, whose research has made an important contribution to Southern African history, has observed, there should be no division between history and anthropology: it is the emphasis on empiricism in history that has created these divisions.(7) Dialogue across as well as within disciplines can expand and enrich our understanding of the complex nature of African diaspora identities and cultures, past and present. As Lovejoy has acknowledged elsewhere, historical sources relating to slave cultures are scattered and fragmentary.(8) White men and women had only superficial insight into the hidden world of rites, rituals and beliefs of Africans and their descendents in the Americas. African-derived cultural practices in slavery and freedom, unless they posed a threat to security and/or profits, were of little interest to slave owners or colonial authorities. Thus evidence and conceptual frameworks from other disciplines, including anthropology, have some validity in reconstructing a past that escaped the formal records and enabling us to get a sense of the dynamics of cultural change over time.(9)

Additionally, a little more ambitious overview and emphasis of common themes and issues linking the collection of articles would have enhanced this collection. Lovejoy criticises historians such as Karen Fog Olwig, who argue for certain cultural commonalities across the West African regions from where most slaves originated (pp. 16–17). But arguments for a single cultural zone embracing West Africa and the Congo, reconfigured by Thornton into ‘three zones’, still has some validity particularly in relation to shared practices and beliefs relating to family, kin, gender roles, and religion in the slaves’ cultures of origin in West and Central Africa. Sandra Greene’s study of links between the Yoruba and Anlo in the 18th century lends support for the idea of cultural zones, albeit that these were ‘constantly shifting and changing under the economic and political forces that shaped African history’ (p. 98). Lovejoy is right to criticise superficial generalisations about culture but in so doing may over-particularise and thus make arguments rather dense and difficult to follow. David Cannadine has commented on the differences between the ‘parachutists’, with the wider overview, and the ‘truffle hunters’ who amass the detailed evidence that supports the illuminating, but broad, insights of the ‘parachutists’. Both have their place in the production of rounded histories.

Finally, more mention may have been made about the relationship between culture and resistance. This is touched on in Ayorinde’s paper on African-derived religions in Cuba and Olabiyi’s interesting article analysing two Brazilian documents produced during slavery on Fon vocabulary and sentences and Yoruba words respectively. The documents provide evidence that the majority of slaves in Minas Gerais in the 18th century were Mina people (now Ghana, Togo and Benin) who used Fon as a *lingua franca* and Yoruba was a common language among slaves in Pernambuco. They were probably written for slave owners in recognition of the threat posed by slaves (particularly slave revolt) in the belief that knowledge of the slaves’ languages facilitated control (pp. 106–7, 112). These documents highlight how the evolution of African diaspora culture represents a continuous dialectic between African and European value systems that involved creative merging and compromises but also conflict and resistance. The theme of religion and related belief systems, the focus of Ayorinde’s paper on African Cuban identity and the *Regla de Ocha* or Santería, and referred to in a number of other articles, may also have been more firmly highlighted, as one of the strongest areas where Africanisms have persisted and also around which some of the fiercest cultural struggles have ensued. As Ira Berlin has stressed ‘the slaves struggle to give meaning to their music, dance and devotions were no less political than their struggle over work’.(10)

In all fairness edited collections are always vulnerable to accusations of omission and coherence of themes

and conceptual frameworks. On balance *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* remains an important and stimulating collection and in many ways the title does not do full justice to the breadth of content. Tables and illustrations enhance the articles and there is a detailed and updated bibliography that will be a welcome aid to students and scholars wishing to pursue further enquiry in to any of the varied topics covered in the collection. The book is reasonably priced and the articles illuminate the sheer geographical and chronological scope needed to understand cultural dynamics within the African diaspora. Together they demonstrate effectively the continuous links between Africa and this diaspora and meticulously analyse the evidence for cultural continuity and the formation of new cultural forms in response to the exigencies of slavery and the specific economic, cultural and linguistic milieux in which African slaves lived and laboured. Gendered experiences of enslavement are also addressed. The claims made in the introduction (p. 1) of recognizing the agency of the subaltern, and providing an ‘African centred focus’ that challenges Eurocentric prioritization of the North Atlantic (p. 4) may now have lost their innovatory edge. But the diverse contributions remain relevant as they provide rich detail and solid historical evidence and insight into the complexities of the Atlantic world that complement inspired but generalised studies of diaspora cultures emanating from social and cultural studies. Thus the distinguished Nigerian historian Toyin Falola’s endorsement in the preface that *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* is the ‘best book so far to analyse a neglected theme’, providing a ‘sociology of the reshaping of traumatised lives’ (p. xiii) still has validity.

Notes

1. Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, 1976, first published c. 1941). Roger Bastide, *African Civilisations of the New World* (London, 1967), p. 42.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture: an Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, 1976).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Thornton, *Africa and the Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1682* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 186–192; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: the First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, (Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. 103–5.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Seminal texts on creolisation include Antonio Benítez-Roja, *La Isla que se Repite: el Caribe y la Perspectiva Postmoderna* (Hanover, NH, 1989) and Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais*, (Paris, 1981). For a more recent perspective, see Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religions, Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Richard Price ‘On the Miracle of Creolization’ in *Afro- Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora*, ed. Kevin A. Yelvington (Oxford, 2006), pp. 113– 46, pp. 130–1.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For instance Laurie A. Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots: an Archaeology of Memory and Tradition at a Bahamian Plantation* (Miami, FL, 2005); Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time. Transforming Cultures* (Kingston, Jamaica, 2003).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. John L. Comoroff ‘Dialectical systems: history and anthropology: units of study and questions of theory’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 8, 2 (1982), 144, 145–72.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Paul Lovejoy, ‘The African diaspora: revisionist interpretations of ethnicity, culture and religion under slavery’ in *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* 11, 1 (1997).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Alice Bee Kasakoff ‘Is there a place for Anthropology in Social Science History’, *Social Science History*, 23, 4 (1999), 535–59, 536.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 103–5.[Back to \(10\)](#)

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