

Critical Categories in the Study of Religion

Series Editor: Russell T. McCutcheon, Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama

Critical Categories in the Study of Religion aims to present the pivotal articles that best represent the most important trends in how scholars have gone about the task of describing, interpreting, and explaining the position of religion in human life. The series focuses on the development of categories and the terminology of scholarship that make possible knowledge about human beliefs, behaviours, and institutions. Each volume in the series is intended as both an introductory survey of the issues that surround the use of various key terms as well as an opportunity for a thorough retooling of the concept under study, making clear to readers that the cognitive categories of scholarship are themselves historical artefacts that change over time.

Forthcoming books in the series:

Ritual and Religious Belief

A Reader

Edited by Graham Harvey

Myths and Mythologies

A Reader

Edited by Jeppe Sinding Jensen

SYNCRETISM IN RELIGION

A Reader

Edited by

ANITA M. LEOPOLD

and

JEPPE S. JENSEN

equinox
LONDON

HERSKOVITS'S HERITAGE: RETHINKING SYNCRETISM IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA*

Andrew Apter

It is customary, if not mandatory, in contemporary African diaspora studies to invoke the pioneering spirit of Melville J. Herskovits (1895–1963), whose life's work was dedicated to the repossession of Africa's heritage in the New World.¹ Not that Herskovits was the first to engage in such research. Others before him included W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, as well as Jean Price-Mars of Haiti, Fernando Ortiz of Cuba, and—more his contemporaries than his predecessors—Zora Neale Hurston and the Brazilian ethnologists René Ribeiro, Arthur Ramos, and Gilberto Freyre.² But Herskovits more than any other scholar posed the African-American connection as a theoretical problem that, in the service of a progressive if intellectually circumscribed political agenda, demanded systematic research into an unprecedented range of West African and New World cultures. It is not my aim to praise a great ancestor, whose flaws and limitations are as legendary as his virtues, but to assess the relevance of his theoretical program to contemporary African-American research. In particular, I will focus on his syncretic paradigm, which continues—even among those who disavow it as crudely essentialist or unwittingly racist—to inform the current renaissance in studies of the African diaspora.

There is much that seems wrong, misconceived, and simply outdated in Herskovits's syncretic paradigm when it is evaluated against the current standards of a more critical anthropology. It is not difficult to see how Herskovits essentialized tribal origins in Africa, perpetuated myths of cultural purity in the New World, overlooked class formation, and developed passive notions of acculturation and cultural resistance, all of which distorted the ethno-

graphic record under the guise of an imputed scientific objectivity. But there is also something elusively tenacious about the concept of syncretism. Even when critically deconstructed, it somehow slips back into any meaningful discussion of Africanity in the New World. And even as we recognize that "Africa" has been ideologically constructed to create imagined communities in the black Americas—as Guinée in Haitian *Vodoun*, or the nations of Cuban *Santería* and Brazilian *Candomblé*—such invented identities cannot be totally severed from their cultural analogues (dare we say origins?) in West Africa. The objective of this essay is to rethink syncretism in a way that does justice to both sides of this methodological divide: to the inventedness (and inventiveness) of New World African identities as well as to their cultural and historical associations with West African peoples. This resolution requires greater clarity about just what it is we are comparing, contextualizing, and historicizing on both sides of the Atlantic, an exercise that gives a new twist to Herskovits's ethnohistorical method and owes its revisionary strategy to some critical lessons that I learned from the Yoruba in Nigeria.³

It is perhaps noteworthy that recent studies of "Africanisms" in the Americas, focusing on particular deities such as Ogun, on religions such as *Santería* and *Vodoun*, or even on transatlantic aesthetic and philosophical complexes, have effectively erased syncretism from their lexicons.⁴ These excellent studies indeed reveal that there is much more to such New World cultural forms than a blending of two distinct traditions into a hybrid form. Scholarly emphasis has shifted to disclose the nuanced complexities of the historical conditions in which African identities are remembered and forgotten, fractured and fused, invoked, possessed, reposessed, transposed, and reconfigured within rural peasantries, urban centers, immigrant communities, national arenas, even at transnational conferences on, for example, the Yoruba-based *Òrisha* tradition.⁵ Consistent with this move is a shift away from cultural form toward cultural performance and practice, to traditions in the making rather than those already made, preserved, or retained. These developments are welcome as part of the positive trend in cultural studies, but it is equally clear that nothing as powerful as the syncretic paradigm has arisen from its ashes, resulting in a compelling crisis of representation. In brief, what is Africa's place in the New World? Indeed, what is "Africa"?⁶

Rather than address this rapidly growing literature, I will return to the essentials of Herskovits's syncretic paradigm in order to extract the interpretive kernel from its scientific shell. This involves a pilgrimage to the classic shrines of New World syncretism where, in Brazilian *Candomblé*, Cuban *Santería*, and Haitian *Vodoun*, African gods embrace Catholic saints to promote new religious empires. I honor these sites not only because, for Herskovits, they represented the clearest cases of syncretism as such, but because for us, they provide the clearest examples of how African critical practices in the Americas can inform our own research.

1. The Syncretic Paradigm

Herskovits (1958, xxii) credited Arthur Ramos as one of the first to employ the concept of syncretism to account for the identification of African deities with Catholic saints in Brazilian Candomblé. Syncretism suggested, for Herskovits, "a pattern of first importance" in the study of Afro-American culture contact and change, the dynamics of which he continued to document and theorize while refining his method over the years. If the scientificity of this method appears contrived today, we should appreciate that Herskovits posed a radical challenge to the sociological interpretations of American and New World "Negro" institutions and practices which, according to E. Franklin Frazier and Robert E. Park (among others), represented functional adaptations to socioeconomic conditions rather than African cultural holdovers or survivals (see Frazier 1939; Park 1919; and Smith 1957). Herskovits called for greater sensitivity to history and culture in the acculturative process, arguing effectively that synchronic sociological reductionism not only violated the ethnographic record, but worse, supported the racist myth that the Negro had no meaningful African history or heritage. It is with this spirit and strategy in mind that his syncretic paradigm must be understood.

Under the rubric of "ethnohistorical method," Herskovits meant simply that ethnology and history should be combined "to recover the predominant regional and tribal origins of the New World Negroes" and "to establish the cultural base-lines from which the processes of change began" (1966, 49). This baseline, he argued, was restricted to the West African coastal and rain-forest belts, running from Senegal to Angola, since the smaller and later shipments of slaves from East Africa, Mozambique, and Madagascar had minimal cultural impact on previously established West African patterns in the New World. While this claim is debatable, although probably true, it is not my aim to evaluate its empirical plausibility in light of new evidence (e.g., Curtin), but to clarify its underlying logic. In this view, West African cultures are figured as discrete, coherent wholes, which, with varying degrees of purity and in different spheres of social life, left their impress on the black Americas. To assess the relative purity of African retentions and to specify their social domains, Herskovits developed a number of related concepts which together can be glossed as the syncretic paradigm.⁷ In addition to the ethnohistorical method, these concepts are: (1) scale of intensity, (2) cultural focus, (3) syncretism proper, (4) reinterpretation, and (5) cultural imponderables. I will review these concepts not only to point out their profound limitations, but also to draw out their theoretical relevance to contemporary diaspora studies.

If Herskovits regarded his scale of intensities as one of his greatest methodological achievements, with hindsight it seems to parody the epistemology of liberal social science. In an effort to quantify New World Africanisms,

albeit for heuristic rather than statistical purposes, Herskovits developed a logical continuum from most to least African, segmented into (a) very African, (b) quite African, (c) somewhat African, (d) a little African, (e) trace of African customs, or none, and (?) no report. These relative values were placed in a two-dimensional array, with New World regions and communities such as Guiana (bush and Paramaribo), Haiti (peasant and urban), and the United States (Gullah Islands, rural South, urban North) along a vertical axis, and with specific sociocultural domains (technology, economics, social organization, religion, art, music, etc.) segmented along a horizontal axis to represent variable degrees of African intensity within each region or community. Despite internal variations, the resulting table (Table 1, overleaf) reveals that "the progression of Guiana, Haiti, Brazil, Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba, Virgin Islands, the Gullah Islands, and southern and northern United States comprise a series wherein a decreasing intensity of Africanisms is manifest" (Herskovits 1966, 54). Today, the empirical conclusions can be revised. For example, we know from the Prices' work in Surinam that Guiana is much more creolized than Herskovits ever imagined (see R. Price 1976, 1983; S. Price 1984; and S. and R. Price 1980; 1991). But the conceptual problems of this schema are more serious. Clearly the intensities themselves (such as "very," "quite," and "somewhat African") are highly relative and subjective. Also, the sociocultural domains (social organization, religion, art) are in no way discrete and ignore class divisions, while the regional and community designations are inconsistent with each other. For example, only Haiti is divided into "urban" and "peasant," even though this is a distinction which Bastide has shown to be highly salient in Brazil.

As a form of knowledge, the scale of intensities resembles the anthropometric measures of physical anthropology, which Herskovits deployed in his postdoctoral research on the phenotypical effects of miscegenation in North America (1928). Although he was always explicit—following his mentor, Franz Boas—about separating race from culture and language, his scale of intensities echoes a blood-based logic by transposing notions of purity and dilution from racial stocks to cultural genealogies. Thus he could claim that "the Bush Negroes of the Guiana forests manifest African culture *in purer form* than is to be encountered anywhere else outside Africa" (Herskovits 1958, 124) and that "rural and urban Negro cultures took on *somewhat different shadings*" (135) (emphasis added), with the darker peasants more African than their lighter, more acculturated urban brothers and sisters. I do not mean to suggest that Herskovits was a closet racist—a rather cheap shot against a scholar whose progressive views were so ahead of his time.⁸ But it should remain clear how easily the language of race entered into the discourse of syncretism in the New World, particularly when the rhetoric of science was wedded to essentialized concepts of African culture in comparative studies funded by the Carnegie Corporation.⁹

	Technology	Economic	Social organization	Non-kinship institutions	Religion	Magic	Art	Folklore	Music	Language
Guiana (bush)	b	b	a	a	a	a	b	a	a	b
Guiana (Paramaribo)	c	c	b	c	a	a	c	a	a	c
Haiti (peasant)	c	b	b	c	a	a	d	a	a	c
Haiti (urban)	e	d	c	c	b	b	e	a	a	c
Brazil (Bahia-Recife)	d	d	b	d	a	a	b	a	a	a
Brazil (Porto Alegre)	e	e	e	d	a	a	e	a	a	c
Brazil (Maranhao-rural)	c	c	b	e	c	b	e	b	b	d
Brazil (Maranhao-urban)	e	d	c	e	a	b	e	d	a	b
Cuba	e	d	c	b	a	a	b	b	a	a
Jamaica (Maroons)	c	c	b	b	b	a	e	a	a	c
Jamaica (Morant Bay)	e	c	b	b	a	a	e	a	a	a
Jamaica (general)	e	c	d	d	b	b	e	a	b	c
Honduras (Black Caribs)	c	c	b	b	b	a	e	b	c	e
Trinidad (Port of Spain)	e	d	c	b	a	a	e	b	a	e
Trinidad (Toco)	e	d	c	c	c	b	e	b	b	d
Mexico (Guerrero)	d	e	b	b	c	b	e	b	?	e
Colombia (Choco)	d	d	c	c	c	b	e	b	e	e
Virgin Islands	e	d	c	d	e	b	e	b	b	d
US (Gullah Islands)	c	c	c	d	c	b	e	a	b	b
US (rural South)	d	e	c	d	c	b	e	b	b	e
US (urban North)	e	e	c	d	c	b	e	b	b	e

a: very African, b: quite African, c: somewhat African, d: a little African, e: trace of African, or none, ?: no report

Table 1. Scale of Intensities of New World Africanisms

Source: Adapted from Herskovits 1966, 53.

If the scale of intensities represented variable degrees and domains of African retention—high for religion, low for economics and art—it offered no explanations. To understand why some practices thrived when and where they did while others went underground or disappeared, Herskovits developed his general theory of syncretism, supplemented by concepts of reinterpretation, cultural focus, and what he called (no doubt echoing Malinowski 1961, 20–211) “cultural imponderables.” Narrowly defined, syncretism is produced in situations of contact between cultures from “the tendency to identify those elements in the new culture with similar elements in the old one, enabling the persons experiencing the contact to move from one to the other, and back again, with psychological ease” (Herskovits 1966, 57). Thus, he notes, in the Catholic New World, African gods are identified with saints of the Church, whereas in Protestant areas the religious associations are more subtle, and African cultural retentions (e.g., mourning and shouting) less intense. We can perceive in this notion a strong psychological emphasis on the individual as syncretic agent, on identification as the syncretic process, and on adaptation and integration (“psychological ease”) as syncretic functions, which extend secondarily to groups in their new cultural contexts. The same process occurs, according to Herskovits, “in substance rather than form, in psychological value rather than in name” (1966, 57) when the resemblance between cultural elements is too weak to afford a fully syncretic relationship but is strong enough to allow a reinterpretation of the new by the old. Herskovits’s favorite example of reinterpretation is his claim that African polygyny was retained under monogamous constraints, with his arguing that polygyny was reinterpreted in diachronic terms by the practice of serial unions. This example reveals Herskovits’s sociological naïveté in downplaying contemporaneous social conditions in favor of imputed cultural continuities, but the principle itself, I will argue, is extremely salient when recast as a revisionary strategy.

If syncretism and reinterpretation are mainly psychological concepts that explain how the new culture is adopted within the framework of the old, the concept of cultural focus shifts the analysis to culture *sui generis*. To explain why African religious beliefs and practices in the New World are retained with greater clarity and vigor than, for example, kinship, economic, and political institutions, Herskovits argues that religion itself constitutes the cultural focus of African peoples—their “particular emphasis,” “distinguishing flavor,” and “essential orientation” (1966, 59). That which is given highest cultural priority by a people will offer the greatest “resistance” to change, he argues, and will thus rank high on the scale of New World Africanisms. Therefore culture, by way of its distinguishing focus, plays a determinative role in the selective process of what is and is not retained, in what form, with what degree of intensity, and in what sphere of social life. Thus for Herskovits:

More elements which lie in the area of focus of a receiving culture will be retained than those appertaining to other aspects of the culture, acceptance being greater in those phases of culture further removed from the focal area. When a culture is under pressure by a dominant group who seek to induce acceptance of its traditions, elements lying in the focal area will be retained longer than those outside it ... (1966, 59)

We have no clearer commitment to (a relativized) cultural determinism than in this passage, which provides a rather strange take on the initial socioeconomic context of African culture contact—that of slavery in the New World. Elsewhere Herskovits was clearly aware of the different forms of plantation slavery and the modes of passive and active resistance that the slaves deployed, including foot-dragging, suicide, escape, *maronnage*, and organized revolt (1958, 86–109). But here we are led to believe that religion—more than kinship, politics, or economics—persisted in a world that turned Africans into laboring chattel and destroyed their families because it served as the dominant cultural focus. Such a position seems to defy rational argument if not common political sense, displaying what Jackson identifies, in another context, as Herskovits's "curious naivete about the relationship between culture and power" (Jackson 1986b, 144). But even here, I will argue, lies the germ of an idea that helps to explain the power of syncretic practices in real and effective terms. I will argue that the hermeneutical principles of West African religions—particularly Yoruba religion, which has thrived in various New World guises—have provided salient forms of popular resistance in a variety of oppressive conditions.

The final concept in Herskovits's syncretic paradigm—that of cultural imponderables—introduces the variable dimension of consciousness in African diaspora research and prefigures the study of practical and embodied knowledge in current anthropology. For, in addition to consciously retained Africanisms emanating from the cultural core, Herskovits discerned a range of "retentions" that "are carried below the level of consciousness" (1966, 59) and persist in everyday practices. These include the linguistic patterns of accents, dialects, and creoles; the musical styles of, for instance, Son, Rumba, Mambo, and Blues; the "motor habits" of expressive gestures and dance; and the "codes of etiquette" which inform greetings and politeness formulae. At a time when such phenomena were often explained in racist terms, as transmitted through blood, Herskovits took great pains to emphasize their cultural character, as acquired by successive generations. More interesting for us, however, was his understanding that such culturally embodied imponderables persisted as retentions because they resisted change. Clearly, this notion of resistance is passive, attributed elsewhere to "the force of cultural conservatism" (57), and is conceived negatively as the absence of assimilation. But as we shall see, when "updated," this notion

foreshadows theories of active resistance that identify bodily practices as contested sites of symbolic and ideological struggle (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 24–25).

Thus reduced to its essentials, Herskovits's syncretic paradigm highlights the limitations of American liberal scholarship. In retrospect, its major features—the racist overtones of the scale of intensities; the psychologistic orientation of syncretism and reinterpretation, which privilege adaptation and accommodation over opposition and contradiction; the absence of any sustained class analysis; the emphasis on an inertial cultural focus over and above the dialectics of power and identity construction; and finally, the essentially conservative vision of cultural retention as that which resists change—all seem to relegate Herskovits to a dubious past. Having dissected the syncretic paradigm to critique its component parts, highlighting their limitations while flagging their redeeming features for later discussion, I will now turn to the paradigm as a whole in its more substantive applications, in order to interrogate the notion of cultural origins that informs the syncretic process.

2. Deconstructing Origins

In Herskovits's "African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief," first published in *American Anthropologist* (1937), we find the official liberal blueprint of the science of New World syncretisms, based on fieldwork in Haiti as well as on published Cuban and Brazilian data. To be sure, Herskovits was one of the first North American anthropologists to recognize the validity—indeed the privileged status—of Caribbean societies as objects of ethnographic study, at a time when the discipline preferred "pristine" primitives in "natural" habitats to cultures reconstituted in "diluted" forms through slavery or other coercive dislocations. Such settings, he argued, provided "laboratory situations" (1966, 46) for investigating the dynamics of acculturation—of what is lost, modified, or retained through culture contact, and the mechanisms that govern the process.

In this respect, Herskovits perceived the universal significance of New World syncretisms for the "science of man," in that they provided the clearest cases, given adequate data, of more general principles of culture contact and change the world over. In this view, New World cultures moved from a marginal ethnographic status to center stage, and if the assumptions that guided his study appear simplistic and naïve, distorting (as I shall now illustrate) the very data themselves, the larger conceptual revolution that he inspired linked empirical studies of the African diaspora to a general theory of culture.

According to Herskovits, the syncretic identification of African gods with Catholic saints was shaped by two primary factors in the New World: by slavery as the dominant institution of social life (or, for Orlando Patterson, "social death") and by Catholicism as the official religion of the masters. These two factors together account for the distinctive patterns of syncretism found in Haitian Vodoun, Cuban Santería and Brazilian Candomblé, in that the slaves were summarily baptized as they came off the ships and were thrust into sugar mills and plantations, where they secretly continued to worship their gods under the cloak of official Catholicism. Banned by the authorities, the African cults were forced underground, where they provided a focus for sporadic slave revolts, were uneasily tolerated during Catholic holidays, and fragmented into local groups that were mainly shaped and dominated by the personalities of their leaders (Herskovits 1966, 322). I do not have space in this limited review to discuss the complex social, political, and religious variations that historically unfolded, except to mention the most general cultural consequence identified by Herskovits. This is the profound fragmentation of aboriginal African unities, a forced fusion of different African cultures and the dismemberment of religious cult hierarchies into shattered splinter groups, "reflected in a resulting confusion of theological concept" (1966, 322-23).

It is this model of cultural and theological fragmentation that I will challenge, focusing first on Herskovits's tropes of aboriginal unity. Despite his call for rigor in identifying the numerous cultural origins of New World slaves, Herskovits reduces African influences to two principal sources—Fon and Yoruba.¹⁰ The deities identified with Catholic saints are limited—at least upon first inspection—to the pantheons of these two great West African cultures, such that Fon gods such as the trickster Legba, the rainbow-serpent Damballa, and the Marassa twins were syncretized with Saint Anthony, Saint Patrick, and the twin saints Cosmas and Damien; while Yoruba gods such as the trickster Eshu, the thunder-god Shango, and the watergoddess Yemoja (Yemanjá) were similarly identified with the Devil, Saint Barbara, and the Virgen de Regla. The correspondences are based, we may recall, on the similarities of religious elements, such that the saintly icons depicted on Catholic chromolithographs exhibit symbolic features of African counterparts; thus, the serpents on Saint Patrick's image invoke the Fon serpent-deity Damballa, whereas the twin saints Cosmas and Damien resemble the Fon Marassa or Yoruba Ibeji twins. Under repressive conditions of official opprobrium, the slaves—so the argument goes—were able to worship in two worlds at once; outwardly Catholic, inwardly they honored their African gods.

Following this syncretic principle of identification, Herskovits constructed a table of correspondences between African gods and Catholic saints in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, listing African deities in a vertical left-hand column

with their saintly counterparts to the right (Table 2, below). Again, it is not the specific correspondences that I will challenge (since as Herskovits perceived, these vary both regionally and over time), but the table itself as a form of knowledge and the assumptions embedded within it. For these amount to a specific discursive modality, a way of constructing African identities and differences, of figuring (or as Mudimbe might say, conjugating) Africanity in the New World as an acculturative process. And it is this discourse that can be fruitfully deconstructed, not abstractly from the lofty heights of postmodern criticism, but concretely, on the basis of internal evidence supplemented by empirical data from Nigeria.

First, I would call attention to a subtle but powerful slippage subsumed by the category of the left-hand column—that of "African deities," wherein several significant contrasts are neutralized. Following the logic of the syncretic paradigm, "Africa" refers to a West African baseline, an ethnohistorical reality circumscribed by space and time and identified as the source of African influence in the New World. Here the Fon and Yoruba figure as dominant cultural origins (with Congo receiving a passing reference associated with Haitian Simbi deities), since either Fon or Yoruba deities can be identified with Catholic saints. But here is where the cultural waters get muddled, for apart from a few central deities like the Fon Damballa and the Yoruba Ibeji, it is impossible to distinguish the two religious pantheons as culturally discrete. I will not recount the complex history of Dahomean-Yoruba political relations, except to mention that from at least the sixteenth century (and probably earlier) through the mid-nineteenth century, warfare, slave-raiding, migration, and ritual reciprocity between the kingdoms of Dahomey, Ketu, and Old Oyo persisted, with much cultural mixing of religious deities and institutions (see Akinjogbin 1967; Law 1977; Parrinder 1956). There is a general historiographic tendency to see Yoruba gods like Ogun (of war and iron) and Ifa (of divination) recoded in Dahomey as Gu and Fa, suggesting a regional Yoruba diaspora to the west. But one equally finds the Yoruba trickster Eshu referred to as Eshu-Elegba as far east as the Ekiti region of Yorubaland, suggesting a complementary infusion of Fon deities into Yoruba pantheons. My point is not to argue which gods came from where—a possible and quite valuable regional exercise within limited terms—but to challenge the aboriginal purity of Herskovits's tribal baseline. In brief, Fon and Yoruba are not pure cultural categories. Indeed, the very notion of a singular Yoruba people was a missionary invention of the mid-nineteenth century, subsuming Egba, Egbado, Ijebu, Ijesha, and Ekiti peoples, among others, to a standardized Oyo-Yoruba linguistic and cultural model.

Whether wittingly or not, Herskovits avoids this problem of interposed origins by lumping them under the general category of African. His table of correspondences erases the difference between Fon and Yoruba, which remains implicit in the names of certain deities, but which also remains

highly ambiguous. The baseline is thus occluded by the trope of aboriginal Africa, grounding a primordial cultural genealogy that quickly vanishes into an unknown past. Nor does systematic slippage stop here. If we examine the left-hand column further, we find "African" deities such as la Sirène, loa Christalline, loa St. Pierre, loa Kpanyol (the Spaniard), Maitresse Erzulie, and 'Ti Jean Petro (little John Petro), deities that never did or could exist in pre-contact West Africa because they represent European mythic and historical allusions and social stereotypes.

Part of this problem lies with Herskovits's failure to distinguish what he as an external observer and trained anthropologist calls African from what Haitians, Brazilians, and Cubans call African. The table of correspondences confuses both perspectives under "Africa," merging the "etic" with the "emic." Thus Herskovits notes:

The Haitian ... does not merely stop at identifying the saints with African gods, for saints are occasionally themselves conceived as loa ... thus St. Louis, the patron of the town of Mirebalais where this field work was carried on, is a loa in his own right. Similarly two of the kings who figure in the *image* that depicts the Adoration of the Christ Child, Balthazar and Gaspar, are also held to be *vodun* deities. (1966, 325)

Before proposing a more critical solution to this problem, it is enough to point out that Herskovits has failed, in the terms established by his syncretic paradigm and table of correspondences, to clearly distinguish cultural origins and African deities from their reconstructed and syncretic forms. The ethno-historical baseline remains a myth of African origins, not a documented or even documentable point of empirical departure. This myth is significant not only as a foundational fiction, but because it was elaborated by Herskovits in substantive claims that have continued to misguide much New World research.

This brings me to the second tropic function of aboriginal unity, that of coherent, unified, and standardized theologies and pantheons in West Africa that were uprooted and fragmented through the slave trade to be reconstituted in locally variable and confused forms in the Catholic New World. I call this elaboration tropic because it establishes a nostalgic topos of a theological Golden Age that never existed in West Africa and should be abandoned as a comparative standard for studying New World religions. The general idea derives from Herskovits's discovery that *Vodoun* theology is highly inconsistent. He found differences of opinion not only from region to region, but within a given region even between members of the same group concerning such details of cult belief and practice as the names of deities, modes of ritual procedure, or the genealogies of the gods, to say nothing of concepts regarding the powers and attributes of the African spirits in relation to one another and to the total pantheon (1966, 323).

Eliciting lists of deities from a single Haitian valley, he discovered that "the differences between these lists were much greater than the resemblances; and ... in identifying deities with Catholic saints, an even greater divergence of opinion was found" (1966, 323). The same indeterminacies and patterns of variation apply, on a larger scale, to the African pantheons and their syncretic manifestations in Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Santería, summarized by the table of correspondences.

It is not the indeterminate character of Herskovits's data that I would challenge but his inference that a greater uniformity ever existed in West Africa. It is in fact the very idea of listing African deities as discrete mystical entities, in fixed relations within pantheons associated with stable sociological correlates on the ground, that my own research on Yoruba *òrìṣà* worship undermines. Yoruba deities are not only vested in lineages (what Bascom, following Herskovits, called "sib-based" cults), but articulate with more inclusive corporate groups (Bascom's "multi-sib cults"), such as quarters (*àdúgbò*) each ruled by a town chief, or in the case of royal cults, the town or kingdom as a whole (*ilú*). Thus, in a crude sense, the ritual configuration of *òrìṣà* cults within any kingdom represents its dominant relations of political segmentation, the patterns of which vary spatially, from one kingdom to another, and within kingdoms over time, accommodating (and on important occasions, precipitating) political fission, fusion, or the reranking of civil chiefs (see Bascom 1944; Barber 1981; Apter 1992, chs. 2, 3). The methodological implication of this politico-ritual complementarity—a very gross reduction of a complex dialectic—is that no two Yoruba kingdoms arrange their pantheon of *òrìṣà* in the same way. The situation is further complicated by the fact that within kingdoms, the *òrìṣà* cults of different town quarters organize their pantheons around their own principal deities, so that if, officially, a civil chief pays ritual obeisance to the superior *òrìṣà* of the town king, secretly, within the confines of his own quarter's cult, the chief and his followers recognize the hidden paramountcy of their *òrìṣà* around which their pantheon revolves (Apter 1992, ch. 6).

The cosmological principles that render such polyvocalities possible and intelligible are grounded in Yoruba notions of "deep knowledge" (*imọ̀ jinlẹ̀*) referring to the privileged access of powerful priests and priestesses to hidden truths and secrets. I will return to the power of such knowledge in due course. For now, it is enough to point out that within this ritually safeguarded space of interpretive possibilities, official dynasties and genealogies are revised, deities are repositioned to express rival political claims, and the deities themselves are fragmented and fused into multiple and singular identities. Small wonder that Herskovits had trouble with his lists, since even in Nigeria, no *òrìṣà* cult, community, or Yoruba kingdom (let alone two individuals) would produce the same list or pantheon of *òrìṣà*.

African deities as found in:	Brazil	Cuba	Haiti
Obatala		Virgen de las Mercedes; the Most Sacred Sacrament; Christ on the Cross	
Obatala; Orisala; Orixala (Oxala)	'Nosso Senhor do Bomfim' at Bahia; St. Anne; 'Senhor do Bomfim' at Rio (because of the influence of Bahia). St. Barbara at Bahia; St. Michael the Archangel at Rio; St. Jerome (the husband of St. Barbara) at Bahia		St. Anne
Grande Mambo Batala Shango			
Elegbara, Elegua, Alegu		'Animas benditas del Purgatorio'; 'Anima Sola'	St. Anthony; St. Peter
Legba Exu	the Devil St. George at Rio; St. Jerome; St. Anthony at Bahia		
Ogun		St. Peter	
Ogun Balandio			St. James the Elder; St. Joseph St. James
Ogun Ferraille			
Oxun	Virgin Mary; N. D. de Candeias	Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre	
Yemayá	Virgin Mary; N. S. de Rosario (at Bahia); N. D. De Conceicao (Rio)	Virgen de Regia	
Maitresse Erzilie; Erzilie; Erzilie Freda Dahomey			Holy Virgin (of the Nativity); Santa Barbara; Mater Dolorosa
Saponam	The Sacred Sacrament; St. George at Bahia; St. Sebastian at Rio	St. Alberto; St. Hubert	
Osa-Ose (Oxossi)			
Ololu; Omulu	St. Bento	St. John the Baptist	

African deities as found in:	Brazil	Cuba	Haiti
Agommé Tonnere			
Ibeji (Brazil and Cuba); Marassa (Haiti)	St. Cosmas and Damien		St. John the Baptist St. Cosmas and Damien
Father of the Marassa			
Orunbila (Orunmila)		St. Francisco	St. Nicholas
Loco	St. Francisco		
Babayu Ayi		St. Lazarus	
Ifa			
Yansan (wife of Shango)	The Most Sacred Sacrament St Barbara (wife of St. Jerome)		
Damballa			
Father of Damballa			
Pierre d'Ambala			
loa St. Pierre			
Agwe			St. Patrick Moses
Roi d'Agoueseau			St. Peter
Daguy Bologuay			St. Peter
la Sirene			St. Expeditius
loa Christalline			St. Louis (King of France)
Adamisu Wedo			St. Joseph
loa Kpanyol			the Assumption; N.D. de Grace
Aizan			St. Philomena
Simbi			St. Anne
Simbi en Deaux Eaux			N.D. de Alta Gracia
Azaka Meda			Christ (?)
Ti Jean Petro			St. Andrew
			St. Anthony the Hermit
			St. Andrew (?)
			St. Anthony the Hermit

Table 2. Correspondence between African Gods and Catholic Saints in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti

Source: Adapted from Herskovits 1966.

From this stems a second dominant misconception—that *òrìṣà* cults in West Africa represent discrete deities, with one cult worshipping Shango, another Yemoja, a third Obatala, and so on. In fact, all *òrìṣà* cults house clusters of deities that are represented by specific priests and priestesses, altars, and sacrifices, and are grafted onto an apical deity.¹¹ Within these microarenas, the configuration of these clustered deities also shifts with changes in the status of their associated lineages and titled representatives and according to contesting claims from within. Under these conditions, no definitive list of deities is possible. More significant for syncretic models is the mistaken claim—and here Bastide and Verger keep company with Herskovits—that formerly discrete cults in Africa were restructured, in the New World, to house a multiplicity of African deities and Catholic saints. The ethnohistorical record reveals that Yoruba *òrìṣà* cults were never discrete in the first place.

Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first to grasp the elusive polymorphism of the Haitian *loa* in her more personal (and in many ways proto-experimental) ethnography of Vodoun, understanding that “No one knows the name of every *loa* because every major section of Haiti has its own variation” (1938, 114), and that the *loa* themselves are both multiple and singular. My point has been to extend this indeterminacy back to southwest Nigeria where the Yoruba religion reveals much greater continuity with its syncretic manifestations than Herskovits ever imagined. The theological confusion in New World cults and pantheons which for Herskovits resulted from the upheavals of slavery is actually endemic to *òrìṣà* worship (and I suspect to Fon religion as well) and resolves into a critical hermeneutics of power, once its relevant dimensions are grasped. In thus reformulating Herskovits’s ideas, we will see that he was onto something very important. He concluded his seminal comparison of Brazilian, Cuban, and Haitian syncretisms with the observation that despite the confusion surrounding African deities and their Catholic correspondences, a general syncretic process was at work:

Considered as a whole ... the data show quite clearly to what extent *the inner logic* of the aboriginal African cultures of the Negroes, when brought in contact with foreign traditions, worked out to achieve an end that, despite the handicaps of slavery, has been relatively the same wherever the forces for making change have been comparable. (1966, 328) (emphasis added)

It is this inner logic, recast as a cultural hermeneutics, that provides the key to understanding the West African contribution to New World syncretic forms and does so without recourse to foundational fictions of essentialized aboriginal unity.

3. From Syncretic to Critical Practice

Thus far I have deconstructed Herskovits’s myth of African origins—its figures of cultural purity, theological unity, lineage-based cult organization, and cult singularity (i.e., one deity per ritual collectivity)—in order to extract the interpretive kernel from its ideological shell. If Herskovits distorted the West African baseline with misconceptions that can be scrapped or readjusted, he also established the ground of a cultural argument that can be further developed. The goal of this argument, as I mentioned earlier, is to determine what is African in the African diaspora, focusing on religious syncretism as a clear case of Africanity in order to theorize its subtler forms of influence in the New World.

First, however, we must acknowledge that the trope of “Africa” has served as a dominant ideological category in the service of empire, a category that has naturalized, as Mudimbe (1988) so cogently demonstrates, the normative and territorial dominions of Europe’s “civilizing mission” (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 86–125). But it must also be emphasized that a deconstruction of this master trope, as Mudimbe’s radical project demands, does not do justice to the other side, to that which lies beyond the ideological limits of an Africa produced by missionary-colonial discourse. This other side of Africa must not be taken to refer to the fiction of pristine cultures stipulated by Herskovits, but neither is it reducible to some unknowable Other in a move that annihilates the very histories of peoples who have come to define themselves as Africans with specific national and ethnic identities. If African worlds are as much the constructs of Africanist discourses as the objects of their inquiry, then it is within this dialectic of invention and observation that the concept of syncretism performs a double synthesis. In brief, Africa is assimilated to the New World through culture contact if and only if an invented Africa is assimilated to an Africa observed. We are caught in a double bind. Either we essentialize Africa or renounce it.

One way out of this ideological dilemma is to focus on the inner logic of syncretic practices as strategies of appropriation and empowerment. What Haitian Vodoun, Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Santería have in common is a history of accommodation and resistance, not merely in the cultural terms of allying uneasily with Catholicism but also in the political contexts of class division and the state. It is precisely this relation between implicit social knowledge and political economy—what in my Yoruba research has emerged as a hermeneutics of power—that defines the horizon of Africanity in the New World: not as core values or cultural templates but as dynamic and critical practices.

Nowhere is this critical relation between forms of knowledge and relations of domination more evident than in the history of Haitian Vodoun. The conventional historiography traces a grand development from the late eighteenth

century to the regime of Francois Duvalier ("Papa Doc"), over the course of which Vodoun's original revolutionary impulse was gradually co-opted by the state. Thus in 1791, rites conducted by the famous *houngan* (priest) Boukman inspired the first organized blow against the French plantocracy (see Courlander 1966). According to Haitian historical memory, it was in a clearing of the Bois Caiman that, "under a raging tropical downpour accompanied by lightning and the cracking of giant trees, [Boukman] performed a Petro ceremony" in which "a pig was sacrificed and its blood, mixed with gunpowder, was distributed among participants to strengthen their will to win" (Bastien 1966, 42).¹² The revolutionary triumvirate of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe were quick to capitalize on Vodoun's popular appeal and its secret channels of communication in mobilizing the masses. Hence it is generally accepted that Vodoun played a strategic role in achieving Haitian independence. After the revolution's success in 1804, however, Vodoun played into the hands of both the center and the opposition. In his efforts to stabilize the new government, Dessalines allied with the mulatto elite and tried to foster Catholicism. He was murdered in 1806 and then resurrected as a *loa*, thereby incorporated into the very pantheon of deities that as official leader he had grown to oppose. His successor, Christophe, suffered a similar reversal. As king of northern Haiti until his suicide in 1820, he encouraged Catholicism as the official religion of state administration and alienated himself from the peasantry. Subsequent Haitian leaders, such as the self-proclaimed Emperor Faustin Soulouque (1847-59), cultivated alliances and reputations among the *houngan* (priest) and their followers while paying official lip-service to Catholicism. Under Antoine Simon (1906-11), for example, the National Palace was recognized as a sacred site of Vodoun activities.

Thus in the first century of Haitian independence, Vodoun articulated with a complex set of emerging political and class divisions. Centralized government favored Catholicism as the official religion of administration, based in the urban centers of Cap Haitien, the northern seat of black elite power, and in Port-au-Prince, the southern seat of the mulattos. Vodoun remained a predominantly rural religion of the black peasantry, providing a powerful political resource for black leaders such as Soulouque, who could play the peasantry against the mulatto elite by invoking the popular religion of the people. In this postcolonial context, the religious syncretism of Vodoun and Catholicism played into the dialectics of class and color stratification. As Catholicism spread into the countryside and merged with Vodoun, the latter seeped, as it were, into the palace, providing unofficial access to leadership and state power. This trend was not constant, since Vodoun was periodically attacked by mulatto leaders who allied, after 1860, with the Vatican and waged at times brutal campaigns against the *houngan*. But these campaigns only reinforced the black opposition, which eventually united under Duvalier

into a deadly combination of Vodoun, *noirisme*, nationalism, and state power.

The stage for Duvalier's appropriation was prepared by the American occupation of Haiti (1915-43), which inspired Haitian intellectuals such as Jean Price-Mars to rediscover within Vodoun the "genius" of the Haitian people in his celebration of *negritude*. Formerly disdained by the educated elites, Vodoun was suddenly elevated in the respectable language of poetry and folklore to the status of national heritage and identity (Derby 1992). Leftist intellectuals allied with the peasantry to demand an authentic and truly autonomous Haiti. It was in such an atmosphere that Papa Doc appropriated Vodoun to consolidate dictatorial control. As a peasant religion, Vodoun mobilized enough popular support to counterbalance mulatto and church opposition; as a symbol of Haitian nationalism, it appealed to leftist intellectuals and *noiristes*; and with its underground network of secret Bizongo and Secte Rouge societies (Davis 1988, 241-84), it provided an ideal channel for administering state power and terror while effectively dividing all organized opposition to the self-proclaimed President-For-Life.

It appears that the history of Haitian Vodoun is a history of popular resistance and state appropriation—of the high and official appropriating the low and popular—in that the religion which originally inspired revolution came to uphold a dictatorial state. In a basic sense this is true, but what is lost in such an instrumental interpretation is how Vodoun and its associated notions of Africanity (Guinée) have mediated the complex dialectics of political competition and class division. To be sure, Vodoun remained a powerful resource in the hands of revolutionary leaders and shrewd politicians and has clearly made a difference to Haitian history. But what has made Vodoun... so powerful? Strategic explanations that it mobilized collective action only beg the question of how this was done.

At this point, I would like to tie the various threads of this discussion together, rethinking syncretism in the African diaspora as a critical and revisionary practice, one that reconfigures dominant discourses with variable, and at times quite significant, consequences. Haiti provides the clearest illustration that resistance waged through syncretic struggle—through the appropriation by African powers of Catholic saints, post-revolutionary kings, and nationalist rhetoric—was more than symbolic wish fulfillment. But it also illustrates the other side of syncretism, in that the dominant categories which were semantically revised were also, in more formal terms, reproduced and perpetuated.¹³ If Vodoun took possession of Catholic hierarchies through the very gods that possessed their devotees, it also reproduced the authoritative structure of God the Father and his saintly messengers, disseminating popular Catholicism throughout the countryside. It was this double aspect of syncretism that Herskovits identified as an acculturative process, as the uneasy adaptation of cultures in collision. What Herskovits missed was the

critical relation between cultural form and hegemony, although he intuited the variable modalities that this relation could take.

Returning to the classic syncretism of African gods and Catholic saints, we can recast its historical genesis as a grand counter-hegemonic strategy. What Herskovits perceived as a psychological mechanism of cultural integration, allowing blacks to move between African and colonial orders with relative conceptual and emotional ease, was in fact a much more powerful process of discursive appropriation. If in Haiti, as in Cuba and Brazil, the dominant discourse of Catholicism baptized Africans into slavery, it was also Africanized through syncretic associations to establish black nations, identities, and idioms of resistance. The role of Vodoun in the Haitian revolution may stand out for its outstanding impact, but parallel developments occurred throughout the New World. Thus in Brazil, the *quilombos* and *mocambos*, or black republics of escaped slaves, began as religious protest movements which Africanized Portuguese Catholicism along various ethnic lines. Palmares, the largest and most famous of the *quilombos*, recreated Bantu models of social organization and government, combining African effigies with Catholic icons in its shrines as early as 1645 (Bastide 1978, 83–90). And in Cuba, the 1844 slave revolt called *La Escalera*—so named to commemorate the ladders to which the vanquished slaves were tied and tortured—grew out of “an elaborate conspiracy in Matanzas, organized through the *cabildos* and drum dances of the sugar estates, the ‘king’ and ‘queen’ of the weekly dance being the agents of conspiracy” (Thomas 1971, 205). I mention these famous uprisings not merely to illustrate a strategic relationship between slave religion and organized revolt but to argue that the power of syncretic revision was real and that when conditions were right, the African communities thus imagined and organized asserted themselves with considerable impact.

The syncretic revision of dominant discourses sought to transform the authority that these discourses upheld. To be sure, radical ruptures were exceptional and stand out in Caribbean history as memorable flashpoints in the perduring black struggle. But the general point I wish to emphasize is that the power and violence mobilized by slave revolts and revolution were built into the logic of New World syncretism itself. The Catholicism of Vodoun, Candomblé and Santería was not an ecumenical screen, hiding the worship of African deities from official persecution. It was the religion of the masters, revised, transformed, and appropriated by slaves to harness its power within their universes of discourse. In this way the slaves took possession of Catholicism and thereby repossessed themselves as active spiritual subjects. Nor was this revisionary strategy specific to slavery; it developed also under subsequent conditions of class and color stratification, among black rural peasantries and urban proletariats (Bastide 1978). The political dimensions of such syncretic revision began not with social protest and calls to arms but with the unmaking of hegemony itself. As carnival and

possession rituals so clearly illustrate, this is accomplished by reversing high and low categories with blacks above whites in the Africanized streets and shrines, by recentring Catholic hierarchies around African gods, by reinscribing ritual space with palm fronds, crossroads, and kingly thrones, by marking time to different drum rhythms and ritual calendars, and by liberating the body from its disciplined constraints (see DaMatta 1991; Parker 1991; Alonso 1990). Possession by spirits—which include Catholic saints as well as African deities, for even these two orders ritually collapse—involves sexual transgression and gender crossing because it transcends and transforms the most fundamental categories of the natural and social worlds.

But if hegemony is unmade through syncretic ritual, it is also remade, and it would be wrong to equate its religious impulse with proto-revolutionary struggle pure and simple. As noted earlier, the ritual revision of dominant discourses also reproduces their grammar and syntax, which it reconstructs from below. In Vodoun, this unmaking and remaking of hegemony corresponds to two sets of spiritual powers: the cool Rada deities of the right hand (often traced back to Allada in Dahomey), who sanction authority, and the hot Petro deities of the left hand (identified as chthonic), who lampoon and decenter the *status quo*. In Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Santería, as in Yoruba *òriṣà* worship, both types of power inhabit one general pantheon and associate with cool and hot deities such as Obatala and Shango. One can trace the permutations of this basic opposition through innumerable examples, but the point I wish to highlight is that syncretism necessarily involves both the unmaking and remaking of hegemony and thus is intrinsically political.

Returning to Herskovits's syncretic paradigm and locating it within a context of cultural hegemony, we can reduce its basic concepts to a more general dialectic of revision and reproduction. Those things Herskovits reified into categorical distinctions—between syncretism proper, reinterpretation, cultural focus, and embodied forms of expressive culture—reflect variable modalities of cultural resistance, not in his passive sense of resisting change, but actively, as counter-hegemonic strategy. By appropriating the categories of the dominant classes, ranging from official Catholicism to more nuanced markers of social status and cultural style and by resisting the dominant disciplines of bodily reform through the “hysterical fits” (Larose 1977, 86) of spiritual possession, New World blacks empowered their bodies and souls to remake their place within Caribbean societies. As we have seen, the material consequences of these revisionary strategies range from negligible to revolutionary, from the spiritual nationalism asserted, for example, by Vodoun sword-flags brandished before the National Palace, to the self-conscious nationalism of Jean Price-Mars, reclaiming Vodoun as the model of negritude, to the Haitian revolution itself. And, as we have also noted, the power of revisionary challenges from below could be reappropriated by

the elites in the academic folklore of Fernando Ortiz and Gilberto Freyre, or in the Machiavellian statecraft of Duvalier. There is no single trajectory of exalted class struggle built into syncretic forms of revision and resistance, or vice versa (as has been suggested for Haiti). What concerns us is the hermeneutics of revision as such and the interpretive conditions of its possibility.

This final concern brings us back to our initial inquiry into what is properly African in the African diaspora. I have deconstructed Herskovits's essentialized cultural baseline, its trope of an aboriginal Golden Age, and its attendant reifications of cultural purity and dilution, without renouncing the logic of cultural genealogies. I will conclude by making my position explicit, by establishing the historically critical relationship between West Africa and the New World.

Boldly stated, the revisionary power of the syncretic religions derives from West African hermeneutical traditions which disseminated through the slave trade and took shape in black communities to remake the New World in the idioms of the old. It is not the elements of Old and New World cultures that should be meaningfully juxtaposed in the concept of syncretism—as Herskovits maintained—but the orthodox and heterodox discourses in which such elements have been deployed and the tropic operations that they have performed. I have dwelt perhaps excessively on refiguration and revision because these are the strategies that have made, and continue to make, a difference—rhetorical, pragmatic, and, in key moments, political—among blacks, mulattos, and whites in the Americas (see Gates 1998). These are also the discursive strategies that characterize West African religions, particularly Yoruba religion, which has had a long history of reconfiguring hegemony, documentable from the rise and fall of the Old Oyo empire (1600–1836), through the nineteenth-century Yoruba wars, to the appropriation of Christian and colonial rhetoric in Nigeria's long march to independence. Thus West Africa's contribution to the African diaspora lies not merely in specific ritual symbols and forms, but also in the interpretive practices that generate their meanings. In Yoruba cosmology, for example, deep knowledge (*imọjinlẹ*) has no determinate content but rather safeguards a space for opposing hegemony. Sanctioned by ritual and safeguarded by secrecy, deep knowledge claims are invoked to revise dynastic genealogies, the rankings of civil chiefs, and even the relative positions of deities within official pantheons. Deep knowledge by definition opposes public discourse, and the authoritative taxonomies that it upholds—whatever they may be. If this is what has made West African religions powerful in relation to local, colonial, and postcolonial hegemonies, it has also informed syncretic revisions of dominant hierarchies in the New World, incorporating them within more popular pantheons and cosmological fields of command.

The concepts of syncretism, reinterpretation, and cultural imponderables, which for Herskovits distinguished different types of African retentions, are recast in my argument as modalities of revision and resistance. I have traced them back not to a pristine cultural baseline but to a dynamic variety of West African interpretive strategies, thereby revising Herskovits's concept of cultural focus into a more critical concept of cultural hermeneutics. If I seem to have succumbed to the indeed substantial hegemony of Yoruba chauvinism in black diaspora debates, it is not to assert that Yoruba cosmology has had the greatest impact in the New World, although its impact has been and remains profound, but because its hermeneutical principles of refiguration and revision are so clearly at work in the classic syncretic religions and illuminate their power. I have restricted my discussion to Herskovits's ethno-historical project (which, if groundbreaking in its time, appears narrow next to current research on colonial mimesis, public culture, and transnational identity) because within this more global set of issues, it reminds us that even after they are deconstructed, the Old World origins of the African diaspora can be recovered and their heritage explored in endless depth.

Notes

- * This essay was first presented at the African Studies Public Lecture Series, Northwestern University, 28 October 1991. I would like to thank David Cohen, Ivan Karp, Karin Hansen, Bill Murphy, and Teju Olaniyan for their challenging and insightful comments.
1. The term "New World," which denotes the post-Columbus Americas, is full of ideological problems all the more pressing in this quinquennial year. I retain the term uneasily for the sake of historiographic continuity, with the qualification that invisible quotes surround each of my usages to bracket its pejorative connotations.
2. See, for example, Du Bois 1939; Woodson 1936; Price-Mars 1983; Ortiz 1916; Hurston 1938; Ribeiro 1952; Ramos 1937; Freyre 1956.
3. The Nigerian fieldwork on which this argument is based took place from October 1982 to December 1984 and during three months of summer 1990. I gratefully acknowledge funding from Fulbright-Hays, the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the American Philosophical Society.
4. See, for example, Barnes 1989; D. Brown 1989; Murphy 1988; K. Brown 1991; Thompson 1984. Of these, only Murphy (1988, 120–24) discusses syncretism.
5. These conferences have been held in such cities as Ife (Nigeria), Bahia (Brazil), Miami, and New York City. They mark the self-conscious transnationalism of the *orisha* tradition, and deserve a special study.
6. For a sustained and rigorous critique of the rhetoric and ideology of Africanist discourse, see Mudimbe 1988.

7. I use the term *syncretic paradigm* to identify the larger model (and its additional concepts) within which the more specific meaning of syncretism proper is located.
8. In his essay "Tolerance," Fernandez recounts Herskovits's affiliation with the NAACP after expressing an initial reluctance (1990, 150-51).
9. For a glimpse of the ideological conflict that Herskovits experienced with the Carnegie Corporation, as well as the corporation's colonial epistemology, see Jackson 1986b, 117-18, and 1986a.
10. The "Fon" (also called Dahomeans by Herskovits) and the "Yoruba" are missionary-colonial ethnic designations that emerged in the nineteenth century to refer to peoples of what is today the southern half of the Republic of Benin and southwest Nigeria. The infamous slave port of embarkation was at Ouidah, controlled for a long time by the Portuguese.
11. Thus in Ayede, the Yemoja cult houses the additional deities Orisha Oko, Shango, Ogun, Oshun, Oya, and Olokun.
12. For a more detailed version of this story, see Metraux 1972, 42-43.
13. In her discussion of Tshidi Zionists, Jean Comaroff notes how the intent "to deconstruct existing syntagmatic chains to disrupt paradigmatic associations and therefore to undermine the very coherence of the system they contest" inevitably reproduces, on a formal level, aspects of the symbolic order which it reconfigures, so that "subversive bricolages always perpetuate as they change" (Comaroff 1985, 198). It is her association of "syncretistic movements" with subversive bricolages that I am calling "critical practice."

References

- Akinjogbin, I. A. 1967. *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708-1818*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alonso, Ana M. 1990. "Men in 'Rage' and the Devil on the Throne: A Study of Protest and Inversion in the Carnival of Post-Emancipation Trinidad." *Plantation Society in the Americas* 3: 73-120.
- Apter, Andrew. 1992. *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Barber, Karin. 1981. "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Toward the *òrìṣà*." *Africa* 51(3): 724-45.
- Barnes, Sandra T., ed. 1989. *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bascom, William. 1944. "The Sociological Role of the Yoruba Cult Group." *American Anthropologist* NS (46) 1.2 (Memoirs, 63): 1-75.
- Bastide, Roger. 1978 [1960]. *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of Interpenetration of Civilizations*. Trans. H. Sebba. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bastien, Remy. "Vodoun and Politics in Haiti." In *Religion and Politics in Haiti*, ed. H. Courlander and R. Bastien. Washington, DC: Institute for Cross-Cultural Research.
- Brown, David H. 1989. "The Garden in the Machine: Afro-Cuban Sacred Art and Performance in Urban New Jersey and New York." Diss. New Haven: Yale University.
- Brown, Karen McCarthy. 1991. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Comaroff, Jean. 1985. *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff. 1991. *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Courlander, H. 1966. "Vodoun in Haitian Culture." In *Religion and Politics in Haiti*, ed. H. Courlander and R. Bastien. Washington, DC: Institute for Cross-Cultural Research.
- Curtin, Philip. 1969. *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- DaMatta, Roberto. 1991 [1979]. *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma*. Trans. J. Drury. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Davis, Wade. 1988. *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Derby, Lauren. 1992. "Caribbean Nationalism and the Science of Folklore in the Early Twentieth Century." Unpublished essay.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1939. *Black Folk: Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race*. New York: H. Holt and Co.
- Fernandez, James W. 1990. "Tolerance in a Repugnant World and Other Dilemmas in the Cultural Relativism of Melville J. Herskovits." *Ethos* 18(2): 140-64.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. 1939. *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Freyre, Gilberto. 1956. *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*. New York: Knopf.
- Gates, Henry Louis. 1988. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1928. *The American Negro: A Study of Racial Crossing*. New York: Knopf.
- 1937. "African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief." *American Anthropologist* NS 39: 635-43.
- 1958. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 1966. *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hurst, Zora Neale. 1978 [1935]. *Mules and Men*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1938. *Tell My Horse*. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- Jackson, Walter. 1986a. "The Making of a Social Science Classic: Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*." *Perspectives in American History* 2: 43-61.
- 1986b. "Melville Herskovits and the Search for Afro-American Culture." In *Malinowski, Rivers, Benedict and Others: Essays on Culture and Personality*, ed. George Stocking Jr., 95-126. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Larose, Serge. 1977. "The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou." In *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, ed. Ioan Lewis, 85-116. London: Academic Press.
- Law, Robin. 1977. *The Oyo Empire, c.1600-c.1836*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1961 [1922]. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: Dutton.
- Métraux, Alfred. 1972 [1959]. *Voodoo in Haiti*. Trans. H. Charteris. New York: Schocken.
- Mudinbe, Valentin Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1990. "Which Idea of Africa? Herskovits's Cultural Relativism." *October* 55: 93-104.
- Murphy, Joseph. 1988. *Santería: An African Religion in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ortiz, Fernando. 1916. *Hampa Afro-Cubana: Los Negros Esclavos, Estudio de Sociología y Derecho Público*. La Habana: Revista Bimestre Cubana.

- Park, Robert E. 1919. "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro." *Journal of Negro History* 4: 111-33.
- Parker, Richard G. 1991. *Bodies, Pleasures and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Parrinder, E. G. 1956. *The Story of Ketu: An Ancient Yoruba Kingdom*. 2nd ed. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Price, Richard. 1976. *The Guiana Maroons: A Historical and Bibliographic Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 1983. *First Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Price, Sally. 1984. *Co-Wives and Calabashes*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Price, Sally, and Richard Price. 1980. *Afro-American Arts of the Surinam Rain Forest*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1991. *Two Evenings in Saramaka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Price-Mars, Jean. 1983 [1928]. *So Spoke the Uncle*. Trans. M. Shannon. Washington, DC: Three Continents.
- Ramos, Arthur. 1937. *As Culturas Negras no Novo Mundo*. Rio de Janeiro.
- Ribeiro, René. 1952. *Cultos Afrobrasileiros de Recife: Um Estudo de Ajustamento Social*. Special issue of *Boletim do Instituto Joaquim Nabuco*.
- Smith, M. G. 1957. "The African Heritage in the Caribbean." In *Caribbean Studies: A Symposium*, ed. Vera Rubin, 34-46. Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University College of the West Indies.
- Thomas, Hugh. 1971. *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Thompson, Robert F. 1984. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York: Vintage.
- Verger, Pierre F. 1982. *Orisha: Les Dieux Yorouba en Afrique et au Nouveau Monde*. Paris: A. M. Metailie.
- Woodson, Carter G. 1936. *The African Background Outlined*. Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

THE CARIBBEAN: MARVELOUS CRADLE-HAMMOCK AND PAINFUL CORNUCOPIA

Carlos Guillermo Wilson

Translated by Elba D. Birmingham-Pokorny and Luis A. Jiménez

In 1492, the three caravels—the *Santa María*, the *Pinta*, and the *Niña*—landed on the coast of the island of Quisqueya, where later Santo Domingo, the oldest Spanish colony in the New World, was founded. This event was the beginning of an impressive historical Caribbean phenomenon: a marvelous cradle-hamock and painful cornucopia.

The ceremonies of the quincennial (1492-1992) of that historic October 12, jubilantly celebrated the marvel born in that cradle, or better yet, Caribbean "cradle-hamock." In the fifteenth century, the legends of El Dorado and the Fountain of Youth called attention to the marvelous and obsessive search which started in the Caribbean, and consequently caused much interest in Spain in the news about Tenochtitlán, the great center of the Aztecs; Chichen Itza, a great center of the Mayas; Darién and the Pacific Ocean (then known as the South Sea); and Cuzco, the great center of the Incas. One of the most important legacies of the marvelous cradle-hamock is the Spanish spoken in the Caribbean.

In 1492 Antonio de Nebrija published the *Castilian Grammar*, the first grammar of any European language. Curiously, Nebrija's *Grammar* was published in the same year as the Catholic monarchs' soldiers finally took the Alhambra, the last Moorish fortress, thus ending almost eight centuries of Moorish domination of the Iberian Peninsula—a domination initiated in the year 711 by the African general Tarik in Gibraltar and later supported by another African general, Júsuf.