CULTURE AND CREOLIZATION: THE WORLD THE SLAVES MADE

However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source.
--Yoruba proverb

Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.
--James Baldwin

Culture and Survival: translating our legacies

T.S. Eliot once said, and anyone who has ever taught school knows, that a culture is not something you inherit, but rather something that you acquire through great labor. That is what you are doing here—acquiring your culture, and reinventing it in the process. The purpose of all this great labor, simply put, is survival. The struggle that faces all of you is different from the one that confronted the enslaved Africans. We cannot trivialize the horrors of the Middle Passage and the auction block and the whipping post and a system of hereditary bondage grounded in violence and cruel exploitation by comparing them to our own comparatively comfortable predicaments. But as long as we remember that the slaves speak from their unique and historically specific worlds, we can let them speak to us, wherever we may be today.

Like the enslaved Africans of old, we make our way through a world at times hostile and oppressive, yet like them we do not face that hostility alone. We have resources. We have the strength of our cultures, the things we learned at our mother’s knee, our own inimitable gifts. The eternal human question, for them and for us, remains how to turn what we have into what we need in order to survive. That is the real meaning and work of human culture, no matter whether it is African American and Southern or Chinese and Eastern.

Culture is the transformation and preservation—these are really the same thing—of those parts of our past, those achievements of our history that we deem so crucial that we cannot get along without them. When people hear the word “culture,” they might think about opera or Beethoven or Shakespeare or haiku. And of course that’s culture, though somewhat high culture. But human cultures have more basic functions: culture is the stories, songs and insights that we teach our children because we dare not let
them go out into the world without them. Where I come from, it was “Jesus loves me, this I know,” and “Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight,” and “The Little Engine That Could”—“I think I can, I think I can.” Mama and Grandmama before her did not want us wandering around the world not knowing who we were and whose we were. They wanted us to know that God loved us, but no more than anyone else. They insisted that we think we could, think we could, think we could, as the little engine proclaimed. You and the people around you no doubt grew up on stories and songs of your own cultures. “Know from whence you came,” writes James Baldwin. “If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.”

Culture is the way that we turn what we have into what we need, the way that we transform the past into the future. That is the work of the student, whether in a school or in the world writ large: trying to turn our past into our future. Trying to turn the things we brought with us—our talents, our tenacity, our beauty, our love, our sense of humor, our stories, and, perhaps most importantly, our heritage—into a life for ourselves and for those who come after.

We know that strength comes from our roots, and so we cling to them. But life will not permit us to turn our past into a shrine. Our past is either a living fountain or simply a dead weight. And turning that weight into wings—that is the work of culture.

Here we find ourselves, confronting our own New Worlds, wedged in a system not of our own making, not designed for our benefit, often indifferent to our individuality and at times contemptuous of our highest capacities. And we are armed only with the legacies of a distant shore. But in these legacies are the seeds of our survival.

Being a cook and altogether too literal-minded, I picture these seeds literally—dried seeds and musty tubers in an earthenware jar, stowed in the bottom of a slave ship—rice, okra, yams, peanuts, field peas, eggplant. All of these seeds, like the captives, were stolen away from the shores of Africa.

And yet these seeds, like the ones we have with us, must be sorted and culled, the withered and useless ones thrown away, the good ones watered with the fresh streams of this far country where we have landed. We need what we brought with us, but there may be something here we can use, too. This was the challenge that the enslaved, stolen from Africa, surviving the horrors of the Middle Passage and the auction block, faced with such enormous creativity and discipline. How to translate their rich and diverse legacies and adapt them to a New World. How Yoruba and Ibo and Wolof became one people—African Americans. That dynamic process of
preservation, translation, and renewal we are going to call creolization. And so we proceed to examine a few of the ways in which this enormous cultural achievement manifested itself.

A Metaphor for Creolization: the model of language along the South Carolina Coast

Africans spoke hundreds of different languages. They could not understand each other automatically in the hold of that slave ship, though they understood that they were in the same boat. No doubt that was where some stripe of black nationalism was born, in the embattled solidarity among shipmates. The Africans even developed a word for the special relationship among those who had made the Middle Passage together: melunga. In our communities of learning, in a certain sense, we are melungas—we make this voyage together, though I do not mean to literally compare our predicaments to those of the enslaved Africans in the carnage and hell of the Middle Passage. And yet we must make this voyage together, toward our futures and toward our graves, and we try to find a language to understand one another. An unbridgeable ocean divides us, divides every human being from every other human being, and our only hope is the frail languages we share, learn and teach, or devise among us, and the cultures we build from them.

The language that the newly-arrived enslaved created among themselves in this part of the world was a pidgin form of English: a tongue developed as a means of communication among speakers of different languages; by definition, it has no native speakers. Wait people at restaurants develop a pidgin: “two dogs dressed and walking,” someone might say, rather than “two hotdogs, chili, mustard, slaw and onions, to go.” Or they might say, “86 the hotdogs,” meaning that they are out of hotdogs. This kind of pidgin provides functional communication but it does not necessarily do everything that a language needs to do. And it has no native speakers.

When children are born to a people who speak a pidgin, the pidgin becomes those children’s native language. Linguists call a pidgin that acquires native speakers a “creole.” That is, unlike a pidgin, a creole serves all of the functions of a language. Consequently it grows and deepens immensely, often picking up shards and splinters of other languages.

Along the South Carolina coast, on the Sea Islands, the resulting creole language was Gullah. It continued to develop, taking on mostly English vocabulary while retaining a largely African grammar; that is, the deep structure of Gullah was mostly African, while most of the individual
words were English. And thus black culture in the South was never fully separate from white Southern culture, and yet it was always separate, too, in another sense.

This process of creolization did not limit itself to language but was about the whole creation of the most powerful expressive culture in the history of the world. Creolization established “Africanity,” in a sense; the pressures of slavery in the New World clarified underlying commonalities among the many African nationalities, and then created African American culture. And it was never entirely separate and never even close to fully assimilated, either. Even when it seemed consonant with white European culture, its purposes were always different, because the culture of the black South was inherently an oppositional culture—oppositional, necessarily so, to the very idea that a person can be a thing; this remains a radical concept in many quarters. Martin Luther King used to speak of the “thingification” of human beings, and the concept will not likely become obsolete on this side of the river Jordan.

The creation of this creole language in coastal South Carolina was an important cultural event in itself, but the important thing that I am trying to communicate here is that the creolization of language is a great metaphor for the creation of African American culture as a whole. Now let us look at religion, which we let us look at music, which may help explain why this particular community of learning spends so much energy on music. It isn’t just about Mary D. Williams’s beautiful voice, though our jaws may drop at its power, but it is also about a language as rich and subtle as Dante or Shakespeare or Baldwin, something that speaks to the ages in a profound voice and deserves our serious attention.

**Religion and creolization**

The African American conversion to Christianity was probably the most decisive and important step in the development of African American culture—maybe in the creation of American culture, for that matter, since culture will not stay in a box, and this theology of liberation that developed in the black South, in opposition to slavery, was our first abolitionism, in the beginning, and in the end was the only thing that granted the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution their full meaning for the world.

When we say “conversion,” it is important to remember that African Americans did not so much convert to Christianity as convert Christianity; they don’t so much adopt Christianity as adapt Christianity, adapting this faith to both their own enduring religious traditions and sensibilities and to
the oppressive new realities of their lives. In fact, it might be more proper to say that the enslaved discovered the religion of Jesus, because certainly the one they practiced had little in common with the Christianity of the slaveholders. We could even say that the distinctive Afro-Christianity that is born in the antebellum South is itself a kind of creole religion.

This creolization of religious expression brought about a dramatic cultural transformation, from a wide range of African beliefs and practices to a distinctive Afro-Christianity that reflected both this newly acquired faith and inherited African religious traditions. And it went on to transform the culture of the South and the nation, though it turned out to be a three or four-hundred-year project, depending on when you start counting.

Masters of the enslaved encouraged the conversion of their alleged property for a wide range of reasons, which no doubt sometimes included genuine concern for the spiritual well-being of the Africans. We cannot dismiss the religion of the masters just because they were hypocrites like us; indeed, many of them were probably fervently devout Christians who simply could not see themselves. And certainly they could not always see the philosophical perils of their position, because Christianity—as the enslaved Africans saw instantly--also had the potential to call masters to account. If the masters were as responsible to the demands of the Christian faith as their slaves were, that could present a challenge to the designated roles and racial boundaries on the plantation. And so the masters carefully taught the slaves highly selective version of Christianity, which stressed obedience and long-suffering. They were aware that religion had the capacity to be a more subtle and perhaps even more effective means of control than the whip.

In the library you could find a book, for example, by Reverend Alexander Glennie of Allsaints’ Parish on the coast of South Carolina in the 1840s, and it begins with a long quote from the Bible. The book is intended to instruct white preachers who might address slave congregations—"talking points," we might call them today—draft sermons. Here’s what Rev Glennie recommended:

``Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eye service as men pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart: with good will doing service, as to the Lord and not to men; knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.’ This passage from the Bible shews to you, what God requires from you as servants; and there are many other passages
which teach the same things. You should try and remember these parts of the Bible, that you may be able `to do your duty in that state of life unto which it has pleased God to call you.’ For although a bad servant may not wish to know what God requires of him, yet a Christian servant will desire to know this, and to do His will in every thing.”

One slave complained: “Church was what they called it, but all that preacher talked bout was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal. Nothing about Jesus was ever said and the overseer stood there to see the preacher talked the way he wanted him to talk.”

The dilemma that faced the slaveholders was that, despite a light sprinkling of Bible verses that could be interpreted as acceptances of slavery, Christianity and the Bible were inherently subversive of slavery. For example, the poor slaveholders were certainly were in no position, bless their little hearts, to preach to their slaves that Pharoah had enslaved the children of Israel and held them in bondage in Egypt, but that the Lord had visited a series of plagues on the slaveholders, and that Moses had parted the waters of the sea and led a mass escape from slavery.

There was also a problem in the general egalitarianism that adheres in the Christian faith: God is no respecter of persons, so the Bible says, but instead all human beings are equal before Him. The Pharisees don’t come off so well. Jesus had a very problematic habit of associating with the lowly and snubbing the powerful. It was awkward.

The central dilemma was that Christianity—any religion, for that matter, that might have been shared by slaves and masters—set up an otherworldly system of values, standards external to the plantation, grounds upon which the slaves might actually judge their masters, and find them wanting. Listen to the lyrics here of “I Got Shoes,” and imagine the enslaved Africans, standing barefoot in church and performing these lines for their legal owners: “Everybody talking `bout heaven ain’t going there.”

Don’t think the slaveholders had no idea about the contradictions. During the 1834 legislative debate in South Carolina, which passed laws prohibited teaching slaves to read or write, one planter noted that anyone who wanted slaves to read the ENTIRE Bible belonged “in a room at the Lunatic Asylum.” And he had a very good point.

Like the metaphor of language, in which Gullah had English vocabulary but African grammar, the distinctive Afro-Christianity that emerged in the slave quarter had a vocabulary that was largely European but a “grammar”—that is, the deep structure of slave religion—was African.
Out of the ongoing cultural creolization came a unique Afro-Christianity that became the beating heart of African American culture. This faith focused not on God the Cosmic Overseer, not so much the judge of human behavior, but a god more like African deities: God the transcendent spirit. Theirs was a distinct Afro-Christianity that concerned itself with freedom in this world, not just salvation in the next world, and which was filled with what Cornel West calls “subversive joy.”

**Creolization and the Spirituals**

The spirituals created by the slaves furnished a virtual theology in song, and are the central texts of slave Christianity. They are complex, and provide many different kinds of solace, inspiration, instruction and belonging. Their themes and lyrics are generally from the Bible that the Europeans gave them, but their style of singing was African: poly-rhythms; syncopation; notes slide from one to the other rather than distinct and separate notes; hand-clapping and foot-stomping and body movements of African origins. And then there is the creolized heart of the spirituals, which is their many-sided visions of liberation.

The music displayed a flexible, improvisational style with both individual and communal structure: one person sings verses while “the community” repeats a chorus known to all in “call and response” style. The original expression is a “call,” the response both answers that call and in the same moment creates another call, and then the original caller responds to that one in a democratic and improvisational music that creates a community.

Often the music had veiled meanings and even community announcements: “Meeting at the Building” was a notification that church would be held in the barn or in the woods or in the slave quarter. “Wade in the Water,” “Steal Away,” and “Run, Mary, Run” are practically instructions for running away.

Other songs unfurl visions of liberation: “Go Down, Moses,” “I’ll Fly Away,” and “Shadrach,” which Mrs. Williams will share with us soon, are all visions of liberation from slavery, as well as from the troubles of this world. Listen to “Go Down, Moses,” please: “Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land/ Tell old Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go.’” You don’t have to be much of a literary critic to catch that one. “I’ve Got a Right to the Tree of Life” is a declaration of universal human equality, as is “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel”—and, as the nameless author of the spiritual demands to know, “and why not every man?”
Some of these visions of liberation are downright apocalyptic. We will ask Mrs. Williams to sing “Looking for the Stone.” Here is a snatch of the words: “I’m looking for the stone that was hewn out of the mountain, Lord, I’m looking for the stone to come rolling down through Babylon / I’m looking for the stone that was hewn out of the mountain, Lord, tearing down the kingdom of this world.” And we’ll hear “Sampson and Delilah” declaration that “If I had my way, I would tear this whole building down.” Maybe I would have been a paranoid slaveholder, but I am not sure those folks are singing purely and only about the Bible. And in “Mary Don’t You Weep,” why are they so happy that “Pharoah’s army got drowned,” may I ask?

Other songs are more about solace and comfort and emotional release. “Soon I Will Be Done,” for example, or “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” The God of the oppressed was comforting, soothing, inspiring, and revolutionary by turns, promising comfort in this world and freedom in the next—or even in this world. When Dr. King said at the March on Washington in 1963, “Out of the mountain of despair, we will hewn a stone of hope,” he was looking for the stone that would tear down the kingdom of this world. This was a culture with a revolutionary project.

Birth of the Black Church: “The Invisible Institution

Masters and slaves often worshipped together, but some blacks had separate churches even before Emancipation, when virtually all black Southerners fled into their own institutions. In racially-mixed churches during slavery, the enslaved often outnumbered whites and Southern religion generally underwent enormous African American influence that can still be seen, heard and felt today.

But black religious life extended far beyond the walls of the formal church: “the invisible institution” huddled in woods and barns and secret places, in the “brush arbor,” as the enslaved call it, where they could express themselves freely. The masters knew these gatherings were a threat and often forbade them. Slaves faced severe punishment for attending secret religious gatherings, but did so just the same.

In his Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, Karl Marx dismisses Christianity as “the opiate of the people,” and perhaps there is truth to that assessment in some instances. It is worth noting that in the preceding sentence, however, Marx calls religion “the heart of a heartless world.” That seems closer to the mark. It is true, no doubt, that Christianity among the enslaved brought comfort to the afflicted, and they tried to use it to afflict
the comfortable, too. It probably did undercut to some extent the spirit of revolt, building communities that slaves hesitated to risk losing, salving wounds that might have driven some to revolt. But to a much greater extent, and especially over the long haul, this distinctive Afro-Christianity became a revolutionary creed of self-affirmation and resistance.

The creolized faith of the enslaved said to them, like the unknown poet of the spirituals, “I’ve Got a Right to the Tree of Life.” And in a world that still seeks to make persons a means rather than an end, in a world that persistently treats people as things, those words are still revolutionary.

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