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On the Miracle of Creolization¹

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Some twenty years ago, when we were colleagues at Johns Hopkins, Sid Mintz used to tell me that when he opened his mouth to say something in a seminar, he was often afraid that moths might fly out. Getting up to the age he was then, I'm beginning to know whereof he spoke. In Kevin Yelvington's proposal for this School of American Research seminar, my specific assignment was to expand upon certain ideas in the essay I wrote with Sid in 1972—which we presented publicly in 1973, brought out in offset in 1976, and published commercially, with a new preface, as *The Birth of African-American Culture* in 1992. The preface went over some history of the work's reception, noting that the original publication

was greeted in some quarters by a—for us—surprising hostility, accompanied by the charge that it denied the existence of an African heritage in the Americas. It seemed that many such reactions originated in a desire to polarize Afro-Americanist scholarship into a flatly “for” or “against” position in regard to African cultural retentions. For instance, Mervyn Alleyne dubbed us “creation theorists,” charging us

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with exaggerated attention to the cultural creativity of enslaved Africans in the New World; yet his own book reaches conclusions close to our own (1988). Daniel Crowley castigated Sally and Richard Price's *Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest*, which develops the conceptual approach in a particular historical context, as "badly overstating a good case" (1981). Joey Dillard found the authors "not completely on the side of the angels," their arguments "controversial if not positively heretical" (1976). (Mintz and Price 1992:viii)

During the past few years, since that essay has reached a wider audience, these controversies have intensified. Indeed, I now find myself (and my work, including but hardly limited to the Mintz and Price essay) caught up as never before in a series of sometimes acrimonious debates. My intent in this paper is to try to define some of the issues, clarify what is theoretically and methodologically at stake, and suggest ways that aspects of the "M&P model" might usefully be employed in the continuing exploration of African American pasts.²

It is among historians of North American slavery that these issues have come under fiercest debate of late (perhaps because American historians of slavery have come to the study of "process" so recently). As has now become clear, many of the canonical works on US slavery and slave communities—for example, Blassingame (1972), Genovese ([1974] 1976), and Rawick (1972)—treated the "peculiar institution" largely synchronically, basing their interpretations almost exclusively on the seductively rich nineteenth-century antebellum record. During the past several years, however, a virtual flood of historical works has been devoted to the uneven and regionally variable *development* of North American slavery, and much of that debate has turned on changing aspects of the slaves' cultural life. With increasing frequency, American historians are now asking the following sorts of (formerly anthropological) questions: How "ethnically" homogeneous (or heterogeneous) were the enslaved Africans arriving in particular localities, and what were the cultural consequences? What were the processes by which these Africans became African *Americans*? How quickly and in what ways did Africans transported to the Americas as slaves, and their African American offspring, begin thinking and acting as members of

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new communities—that is, how rapid was creolization? In what ways did the African arrivants choose to—and were they able to—continue particular ways of thinking and doing things that came from the Old World? How did the various demographic profiles and social conditions of New World plantations in particular places and times encourage or inhibit these processes? Even a cursory glance at such much-discussed works as Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone*, Michael Gomez's *Exchanging our Country Marks*, Philip Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint*, or John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*—all published within the past several years—shows how important, and contentious, these questions have suddenly become for practitioners of American history.

A second set of issues—arguably of less interest to historians proper—has surfaced most forcefully in an essay by Jamaican anthropologist David Scott (1991), who suggests that anthropologists studying Afro-America ought turn their attention away from the futile and perhaps even morally suspect effort to represent, verify, or corroborate “authentic Afro-American pasts” (“what really happened”) and focus instead on how African Americans in various parts of the hemisphere envision, talk about, and act in terms of their pasts.³ Our focus, he argues, should be on “tradition”—the ways that African Americans employ, for example, “Africa,” “slavery,” or “the Middle Passage” “in the narrative construction of relations among pasts, presents, and futures” (278). “What space,” he says we should be asking, “do Africa and slavery occupy in the political economy of local discourse?” (279). In short, we should focus on “discourse” and the realities it creates rather than engage in futile attempts to reconstruct “event.” Throughout his essay, Scott uses the work of Melville Herskovits and my own *First-Time* (R. Price 1983a) as exemplars of two stages in what he views as a unitary anthropological quest. “Not surprisingly,” he argues, Afro-American anthropology “manifests a deep, humanist inclination toward a story about continuities and embraces the earnest task of demonstrating the integrity and the intactness of the old in the new, and of the past in the present” (262). And in this narrative, “Africa” and “slavery” form the points of reference. “In the discursive or narrative economy of this anthropological problematic, *slavery* and ‘*Africa*’ function as virtually interchangeable terms, or, to put it in another way, slavery in the work of Price comes to perform the same rhetorical-conceptual labor as

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Africa in the work of Herskovits" (263). "Both" he continues, "turn on a distinctive attempt to place the 'cultures' of the ex-African/ex-slave in relation to what we might call an authentic past, that is, an anthropologically identifiable, ethnologically recoverable, and textually representable past" (263).⁴

Whatever Scott's discomforts about this master narrative of continuity and the ideology he believes underlies it, there seems little doubt that historians of slavery, like Afro-Americanist anthropologists, have generally endorsed it. (Indeed, I would argue that it is a quintessentially *American* [US] narrative, arising in part from the specificities of North American racism, rather than a strictly anthropological one. Europeans, Africans, and South Americans—scholars and laymen alike—have, with a few notable exceptions, been uninterested in the particular polemics under discussion here.)

I would like to distinguish and explore two competing versions of what Scott sees as a single master narrative, for I believe there remains a considerable and significant chasm between the Herskovitses' account of Saramaka pasts and that of the Prices, or between John Thornton's or Michael Gomez's account of the development of slave life in colonial North America and that of Ira Berlin or Philip Morgan. I would also insist, for present purposes, that these competing versions of this master narrative of continuity differ significantly—ideologically, methodologically, and theoretically. Later on, I will try to suggest how Scott's focus on discourse might be combined with an interest in more traditional history to generate an anthropological approach to Afro-American pasts that is at once robust, rigorous, and ideologically defensible.

The contemporary version 1 of the master narrative of continuity is militantly Africa-centric, stressing the continuing role of African ethnicities in the Americas, and is often explicitly mounted against the arguments of the M&P essay. I take two recent works to be exemplary: Gomez (1998) and Thornton (1998a). But I would first set the stage with some snippets from a more programmatic piece by Paul Lovejoy (1997), which captures the flavor of the discourse:

An "African-centric" perspective overcomes a fundamental flaw in the history of Africans in the Americas as analyzed by many historians of slavery, particularly those identifying with

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the “creolization” model articulated by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price....The focus from Africa implies that not all of the enslaved who went to the Americas were thoroughly deracinated[,] as the “creolization” model assumes....The implications of these Africanist assumptions are in sharp contrast to those of the “creolization school,” which implicitly denies the possibility of significant ongoing links, even if intermittent, between Africa and the diaspora....The creole model assumes that African history did not cross the Atlantic because the enslaved population was too diverse in origins to sustain the continuities of history. Disjuncture is the key concept.... Because of this depersonalized background, only “deep-level cultural principles” survived the Atlantic crossing... [According to the creolization model,] [c]reolization resulted in the rapid assimilation of enslaved Africans to a “new” hybrid culture evolving in the Americas.... In rejecting Herskovits’s preoccupation with “survivals,”...Mintz and Price and their protégés in effect subscribe to E. Franklin Frazier’s view that the culture of the Americas was “new”.... For creolists...“creole” inevitably meant the “Europeanization” of the oppressed slaves....I would argue that the concept of creolization as usually applied is Eurocentric, emphasizing how African culture becomes subsumed and amalgamated under slavery into an “American” mold that reenforced the domination of people of European descent.... The Mintz-Price process of adaptation and invention in the Americas assumes the destruction of African cultures....The focus on the Americas, which is explicit in theories of creolization, effectively neutralizes African history....The perspective of the Americas as conceived by the creolization school often misrepresents Africa and indeed is ahistorical. (1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 16)

In my view, this currently popular⁵ “African-centric” rhetoric unfortunately serves to polarize and inflame—by the creation of “schools,” by the insistence on the superior perspective of Africanists, and by egregious distortions of the M&P model—distracting scholars and students from the properly historical challenges that confront us.

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The story that Michael Gomez tells in *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* follows in the cultural nationalist tradition of Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture* (1987) but is inflected by a far more detailed knowledge of Africa. The book's overarching claim is that "From the colonial to the antebellum periods, Africans gradually underwent a process whereby the basis of their self-concept changed from ethnicity to race" (Gomez 1998:242). But this anodyne assertion is complemented by countless anecdotes and examples intended to bolster the hypothesis that particular African ethnicities played a more determinant role—and for a much longer period—in the lives of American slaves than was previously thought. To cite a typical example, Gomez writes that

Anna Miller of Frogtown and Currytown, on the western limits of Savannah, also testified in the 1930s that several of the older workers on the Butler Island plantation spoke a "funny language." Tony William Delegal, more than one hundred years old at the time, could even sing an African song.... The fact that Delegal (a form of Senegal?) could remember these words is itself testimony that African languages were kept alive by the African-born and passed on to descendants in certain instances.⁶ (174)

Such anecdotes and examples are bolstered by what seem to me quite groundless (and usually unhistoricized and unregionalized) assertions. For example,

There exists sufficient evidence to demonstrate that many, if not most, Africans continued to speak their native language in North America.... There is no hard evidence to support the popular notion that newly arrived Africans of the same ethnicity or area of origin were separated. Rather, there is every reason to believe that they were kept together.... In the absence of information that would support intraethnic divisions as a general phenomenon, one can only posit the likelihood that captives from the same area were purchased and housed together.... At any one time prior to 1830, it is possible that from two-thirds to three-fourths of all African-born

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slaves either could not or did not speak recognizable English or French. This means that they were either speaking their native languages to one another or a version of English/French so Africanized as to be unintelligible to whites, or both.... The removal to the Maroon was an attempt to re-create Africa in the swamps and inner recesses of America, and as such would have entailed to some degree a reaffirmation of ethnicity.... In 1720, then, the slave community [in North America] was for all practical purposes African.... Throughout the colonial period, the vast majority of African-born slaves and their progeny continued to practice various African religions.... The development of African American society through 1830 was very much the product of contributions made by specific [African] ethnic groups. (172, 173, 180, 184, 194, 246, 291)

It is worth noting that the challenges faced by the slaves, as Gomez depicts them, sound very much like those evoked by M&P—for example,

In the course of African-African American interaction, there were many items to be negotiated. Day-to-day concerns provided the framework for a great deal of the exchange. Women and men from both sides of the Atlantic would have necessarily discussed what were the best ways to nurse children and instill discipline, the proper care of the aged and infirm, the best fishing methods, and what constituted respectable behavior in the company of elders.... That is, black folk had to re-create their society, their collective inner life, drawing from any number of ethnic paradigms and informed by the present crisis. (14–15)

But Gomez's understanding of how the slaves met these challenges differs radically from the M&P model, consistently emphasizing the persistence of (quasi-essentialized) African ethnicities. His detailed maps of West and Central Africa, with the putative destinations of various African ethnicities in North America, beg exactly those questions I think historians should be exploring with as open a mind as possible. For me, the organization of Gomez's book—with central chapters

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devoted to the fate in the Americas, first of people from Senegambia and the Bight of Benin, then of Islamicized Africans, next of Sierra Leoneans and the Akan, and finally of Igbos and West Central Africans—constitutes a hypothesis that remains both unproven and, in many cases (some of which should be clear from the citations above), entirely counterfactual. In my view, Gomez is at his best in maintaining an emphasis on the importance of hegemony and subjugation—and resistance—as he explores the development of African American culture, and in reminding us that African Americans often “engaged in polycultural rather than syncretic life-styles” (1998:10).

John Thornton, in *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (1998a), reiterates the plea for a specifically Africanist perspective on the playing out of ethnicity in particular places and periods in the Americas. Nevertheless, his materials seem to me to be far more convincing regarding Africa—particularly West Central Africa—than the Americas. (Indeed, the first edition of his book broke new ground in demonstrating the pervasiveness and significance of movements of people and ideas, of exchanges between cultures, and of various kinds of syncretisms and creolizations—sometimes involving European invaders and traders and sometimes not—within Africa itself.) Once he turns to the Americas, however, Thornton begins to write explicitly against the M&P model, claiming that it depicts “the resulting mixture” as “distinctly European and European-oriented, with the African elements giving it flavor rather than substance” (184). And on the crucial question of the cultural heterogeneity of Africans imported into the New World, while Thornton notes that “on the whole, modern research has tended to side with Mintz and Price, who argue that there were major differences among the cultures of the Atlantic coast of Africa” (184), he tries to show that this argument represents an exaggeration and that Africans were “not nearly so diverse as to create the kind of cultural confusion posited by those who see African diversity as a barrier to the development of an African-based American culture” (187). (Needless to say, neither Mintz nor Price has ever imagined that there was “cultural confusion,” nor has either ever seen diversity as a “barrier.” Rather—and here I speak explicitly for myself—I have consistently presented African cultural diversity *as an encouragement to inter-African syncretism and creolization.*)

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Thornton further claims that on large plantations in the Americas, “slaves would typically have no trouble finding members of their own nation with whom to communicate” (199) and that “the slave trade and subsequent transfer to New World plantations was not, therefore, quite as randomizing a process as posited by those who argue that Africans had to start from scratch culturally upon their arrival in the New World” (204). I would note that the idea of Afro-Americans “starting from scratch” is not a position anyone has endorsed for decades, despite Lovejoy’s claim (cited above) that “Mintz and Price and their protégés in effect subscribe to E. Franklin Frazier’s view that the culture of the Americas was ‘new.’”

In Thornton’s version of the Big Picture, Africa consistently reigns triumphant. For example, he writes that

On the eve of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, Kikongo was also, in all likelihood, the most commonly spoken first language, or was a close runner-up to French. In fact, the creole leaders of the revolution in 1791 complained that most of their followers could “scarcely make out two words of French” (321).

But from an Americanist perspective, it might be useful to signal that these people’s speech options were not simply limited to an African mother tongue or French. Indeed, these Haitians would in great majority have been speaking to each other in *their own shared language*—neither Kikongo nor French but a new language that they (and the generations of enslaved Africans and their descendants who preceded them) had created in Saint-Domingue: Haitian Creole.⁷

I would note the tendency for proponents of the Africa-centric position to systematically ignore the mass of contrary data that continues to accumulate across the Americas (including work by Sally and me on rapid creolization in Suriname). It was with great eagerness that I awaited the publication of the revised edition of Thornton’s *Africa and Africans*, the first edition of which ended in 1680—that is, just before the founding of Suriname’s Maroon communities. Since the second edition promised to bring things up to 1800, I had it FedExed from the US to Brazil, where I was teaching for the semester. But as the French say, *Quelle déception!* Not a word (not even a typo) was changed or

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revised in the first ten chapters. And the new, final, eighteenth-century chapter devotes but a single paragraph to the Suriname Maroons (whose early history and cultural development is now as carefully documented as perhaps any society in Afro-America, and who by themselves constitute such a powerful counterexample to Thornton's generalizations), and that paragraph is based on a single source—a brief article by a Dutch lecturer in anthropology who has never done fieldwork among Maroons.

Surely this sort of motivated erasure of countervailing scholarship is as unfortunate as it is unnecessary.⁸ The two camps purport to share the same intellectual goals. We would seem to be in the presence of a (pseudo)debate based to some extent on careerism (a rivalry between Africanists and Americanists and sometimes between historians and anthropologists) but more importantly on underlying ideologies or partis-pris (which have barely been acknowledged and certainly not yet analyzed in print). As Trouillot remarks dryly:

Theories of creolization or of creole societies, assessments of what it means to be “creole” in turn, are still very much affected by the ideological and political sensibilities of the observers....All seize creolization as a totality, thus one level too removed from the concrete circumstances faced by the individuals engaged in the process. All these models invoke history...Yet the historical conditions of cultural production rarely become a fundamental and necessary part of the description or analyses that these models generate. Calls for a more refined look at historical particulars [and here he points to a footnote to the M&P essay] remain unheeded. (1998:8–9)⁹

The M&P essay tried first and foremost to propose an *approach* for studying the African American past (indeed, this effort was explicit in its original title: *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past*). For the study of slavery across the Americas, it tried to lay out the kinds of constants (for example, the realities of power differences) and the kinds of variables (for example, demographic, cultural, geographic) that merited scholars' attention. It assumed that, despite certain commonalities based on relations of power, slavery in nineteenth-century

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Virginia, for example, was in significant ways a different institution from slavery in seventeenth-century Mexico or slavery in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, and it tried to point to the kinds of processes that brought about these differences. The clarion call of the M&P essay was historicization and contextualization—the same careful exploration of sociohistorical particulars that Mintz had first called for in the study of creole languages in the 1960s (Mintz 1971). Yet in arguing its brief, the M&P essay seems to have given the impression to some readers that processes of creolization that were relatively smooth and rapid and irreversible were necessarily the norm throughout the Americas. That is, it may at times have gone further in suggesting a model of “what really happened” (as opposed to a *methodological* model) than its authors intended. And here, I would suggest, my own then-recent Saramaka experience may be partly to blame.

David Scott has suggested that both Herskovits and I “found” our models for Afro-American anthropology among the Saramaka (who he says have thus become “a sort of anthropological metonym...providing the exemplary arena in which to argue out certain anthropological claims about a discursive domain called Afro-America” [1991:269]). And a recent reading of Herskovits’s Saramaka field diaries (R. Price and S. Price 2003b) supports Scott’s implication that Herskovits largely found that which he set out to demonstrate (see also F. Herskovits 1966). But in my own case, I believe I was genuinely surprised by (and unprepared for) the importance of “first-time” (resistance-to-slavery) discourse in present-day Saramaka life. In any case, to the extent that Scott is underlining that the anthropologist is a product of his time and place and (dare I say?) subject position, and that Africa was very much in the air in 1920s Harlem-Renaissanced New York City, just as resistance (to slavery and other more current oppressions) was very much in the air (as was tear gas) in 1960s Cambridge and New Haven (Bobby Seale and the Panthers were on trial a few blocks away from my first day of teaching at Yale), he’s undoubtedly on to something. While collaborating on the M&P essay, I had my recent Saramaka experiences very much in mind, and much of my contribution to that work must have been shaped by them. And the fact that the ancestors of modern Saramakas—because of the specificities of their historical situation—forged their society via more rapid, smoother creolization processes

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than did African arrivants in some parts of the Americas may well have influenced the summary sketch we gave. Which is why it remains crucial to separate out the methodological model, which I believe still has quite general relevance, from the particular examples we presented (which today could be very much expanded on the basis of all that scholars have learned in the intervening twenty-five years).¹⁰

As Trouillot suggests, we must continue to insist on historical particulars.¹¹ And when Thornton and other Africa-centric historians move from the Big Picture (where “ideological preferences” drive their narrative) to “the concrete circumstances faced by the individuals engaged in the process” of creolization, they often provide provocative insights and raise important problems for further study.¹² For example, Thornton’s explorations of the role of Kongo-born slaves among participants in the 1739 Stono Rebellion (1991) and the Haitian Revolution (1993) open intriguing new perspectives.¹³ It would appear that the more specific (limited in time and space) the Africa-centric study of American phenomena, the better its chances of being historically persuasive. An article by historian of the Gold Coast Ray Kea about an eighteenth-century slave rebellion in the Danish West Indies is a case in point: he is able to tease out the consequences of the “Amina” backgrounds of the slaves involved with considerable subtlety, helping us imagine something of the mindset (ideologies, notions about authority, ideas about death) held by people being shipped out of a particular port at a particular time because of particular local circumstances in Africa, and describe how some of these features played themselves out in a specific event in the New World (Kea 1996). In short, there is little doubt that such an Africanist perspective has its place in our tool kit for understanding the ways enslaved Africans and their descendants created communities and institutions in their new homes. If used in the service of greater contextualization and historicization, rather than to promote a generalizing, creolization-bashing *parti-pris*, such perspectives, informed by rich knowledge of African history, cannot but add to our understandings of events on this side of the Atlantic.

Returning to the Big Picture—the master narrative of continuity—we might sum up version 1 as a militantly Africa-centric contemporary successor to the narrative of African survivals crafted by Herskovits in

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the 1920s and 1930s and embellished by Robert Farris Thompson in the 1970s and 1980s. Compatible with African American cultural nationalist positions, it stresses the staying power of African ethnicities and plays down processes of creolization or blending.

Version 2, as expressed by contemporary American historians, grows out of scholars' deep knowledge of New World as opposed to African realities and is therefore richer in its historical texture regarding slavery. It is fully compatible with the project of the M&P essay as well as with other roughly contemporaneous writings that stressed New World creativity, blending, and creolization, such as Bastide ([1960] 1978), C. Joyner (1984), or Levine (1977). For present purposes, we may take recent works by Ira Berlin and by Philip Morgan as exemplary.¹⁴ In each, the starting point is systematic comparison (among regions and through time), and the complexity of cultural development is highlighted.

Berlin opens his book with the credo that "Understanding that a person was a slave is not the end of the story but the beginning, for the slaves' history was derived from experiences that differed from place to place and time to time and not from some unchanging transhistorical verity" (1998:3) And he generalizes shortly thereafter that "Rather than proceed from African to creole or from slavery to freedom, people of African descent in mainland North America crossed the lines between African and creole and between slavery and freedom many times, and not always in the same direction" (5).

Berlin's developmental model of North American slavery begins with the charter generation—the first slaves off the ships, who in no way fit the time-worn stereotypes of saltwater Africans. In the Chesapeake region, for example, "although some of the new arrivals hailed directly from Africa, most had already spent some time in the New World, understood the languages of the Atlantic, bore Hispanic and occasionally English names, and were familiar with Christianity and other aspects of European culture" (29). In Florida, the equivalent charter generation of "Atlantic creoles" managed to survive into the late eighteenth century, while in the South Carolina Lowcountry the charter generation was much more quickly swamped by new Africans imported to labor on the great rice plantations that sprang up at the end of the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, Berlin argues, Louisiana

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witnessed a different (more Caribbean-like) progression, a smoother and more unidirectional passage from African to creole but also a passage from being a “slave society” to becoming “a society with slaves” (77).¹⁵ Overall, in Berlin’s North America, slavery and race were being constantly constructed and reconstructed according to changing historical circumstance.

Berlin’s description of the dramatic re-Africanization (and subsequent recreolization) of the Chesapeake contrasts with the picture drawn by Gomez or Thornton. In describing how, under the new harsh tobacco regime, “African slaves and their descendants, sometimes in league with remnants of the charter generations, began to reshape black life,” Berlin insists that “Through the entire period [of re-Africanization], the majority came from ports as distant from one another as Senegambia and Angola” (114). And after discussing where slaves came from, how they arrived and were sold, and where they ended up during this period of intense re-Africanization, he summarizes: “Thus the slave trade in the Chesapeake operated to scatter men and women of various nations and diminish the importance of African nationality” (115). The “African moment” ended in the fourth decade of the eighteenth century, when Chesapeake life was once again transformed “as a new generation of African Americans eclipsed the African majority, ending the era of African domination.... The Chesapeake once again became a creole society.... The African moment in Chesapeake history was passing, as the African population aged and the rising generation of African Americans came into its own” (126–128).

In short, for this one region—and Berlin takes us through similar changes for other parts of North America—we get a picture of immense variation in which African ethnicity plays a role only selectively, in both time and space, and in which creolization—though rarely discussed explicitly in this book, which focuses more on results than process—is an ever-present motor of development and change.

Berlin’s book makes clear how foolhardy it would be to base a general model of the development of slave culture on Lowcountry South Carolina in the early eighteenth century (where, in Thornton’s fine phrase [1998a:320], “African culture was not surviving—it was arriving”), on the Chesapeake during the Revolutionary era, or on early-

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nineteenth-century Louisiana (or for that matter on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Saramaka). The historical particulars *matter*, and the pace and rhythm and nature of creolization differed. But the methodological and theoretical assumptions matter, too. Berlin's understanding of ethnicity (like Morgan's, see below) strikes me as sensitive and theoretically informed and comes much closer to that shared by most anthropologists than does that of Gomez, Thornton, or the other Africa-centrists. Berlin points to the absence of an idea of "Africa," and the ultimate flexibility of ethnicities, in the minds of the recently enslaved:

Africa houses hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different "nations"....The language, religion, domestic organization, aesthetics, political sensibilities, and military traditions that Africans carried from the interior to the plantations cannot be understood in their generality but only in their particulars, for the enslaved peoples were not Africans but Akan, Bambara, Fon, Igbo, or Mande....New identities [in the Americas] took a variety of forms....Competition, as well as cooperation, within the quarter compounded the remnants of ancient enmities, giving nationality or ethnicity an ever-changing reality and with it new meanings to Akan, Bambara, and Fon identity. In this changing world, nationality or ethnicity did not rest upon some primordial communal solidarity, cultural attribute, or common experience, for these qualities could be adopted or discarded at will. In the Americas, men and women identified as Angolans, Ibos, or Males frequently gained such identities not from their actual birthplace or the place from which they disembarked but because they spoke, gestured, and behaved like—or associated with—Angolans, Ibos, or Males.... For most Africans, as for their white counterparts, identity was a garment which might be worn or discarded....Choice, as well as imposition or birthright, determined who the new arrivals would be....In short, identity formation for African slaves was neither automatic nor unreflective, neither uniform nor unilinear. (103–105)¹⁶

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If Berlin's book paints the Big Comparative Picture for North America, Philip Morgan's equally ambitious *Slave Counterpoint* focuses more single-mindedly on the development of slave culture itself.¹⁷ Unlike Berlin's book, which is organized by a regional and chronological grid, Morgan's is organized by institutions (viewed through time), examining material life, work in the fields, skilled labor, exchanges between whites and blacks, family life, and so forth. Morgan synthesizes a remarkable amount of data in comparing cultural developments in the Chesapeake and the Lowcountry, beginning with the demographic givens: creoles formed a majority in Virginia by 1720 (and by 1780, 95 percent of Virginia slaves were creoles), while in South Carolina the African-born held a majority till mid-century, with creoles making up a two-thirds majority by 1780 (Morgan 1998:95). Morgan treats African ethnicity as important at certain moments but as a variable that faded relatively quickly in terms of the slaves' identity politics, both because of rapid creolization and because of the growth of widespread race consciousness in the later eighteenth century. "In the Chesapeake, creoles were a majority on most plantations and neighborhoods by the early eighteenth century; they set the tone and tenor of slave life in the region remarkably early. Africans learned the ropes from them.... The lessons largely flowed from creoles to Africans" (460–461). Though Lowcountry developments were different in detail—"In Charleston, even the most sophisticated creole slaves lived cheek by jowl with Africans" (461)—"in the long run, however, Africans, even in the Lowcountry, were aliens in a strange land" (456). Indeed, Morgan ultimately views ethnicity, as well as other aspects of African culture, mainly as "a resource on which...slaves could draw" in forging a new African American culture (457). And his detailed discussion of the development of slave religion in North America likewise draws on M&P-like assumptions:

The religion of slaves in eighteenth-century British America highlights how blacks, laboring under extreme hardships and in radically different settings, managed to preserve some deep-level principles drawn from their African heritage. Much was lost: few priests and almost no collective rituals survived the passage.... [But] at the fundamental level

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of epistemological beliefs, interpersonal relations, and expressive behavior, slaves kept alive a measure of their African “character.” They engaged in a process of selective appropriation or structured improvisation in which values and practices were reinterpreted as they were incorporated.¹⁸ (657–658)

That Morgan (and Berlin) draws on many of the same sources (and often the same quotations) as Gomez only serves to highlight the extent to which their interpretations of “what really happened” contrast. Morgan has Africans “learning the ropes” from creoles; Gomez has second- and even third-generation African Americans being “dominated” by first-generation and “native” Africans. In one of the more bizarre twists to this debate, a recent book by Lorena Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter’s Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (1997), seems to be read almost like a Rorschach test by the various players. A review in the *William and Mary Quarterly* (Sidbury 1998) states that

the most important issue that Walsh discusses involves the ways enslaved Africans became Afro-Virginians, processes outlined in the pioneering work of anthropologists Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price. Walsh’s portrayal fits their creolization model, as new Africans and creole slaves forged a syncretic culture during the eighteenth century.... Historians of early American slave communities have been reevaluating the Mintz-Price model for understanding the emergence of African-American communities under slavery. Some insist that, contrary to the model, early slave communities retained ethnically specific African cultures.... Walsh’s work suggests that even in conditions that were, by Virginia’s standards, ideal for testing this revisionist position—Carter’s Grove contained many slaves who shared a regional African heritage—creolization proceeded rapidly. (631–633)

And Berlin draws similar conclusions from Walsh’s book: “A close analysis of the holding of a single planter family over more than a century [Walsh 1997] reveals how, even when slaves derived from a single catchment area, changes in the slave trade over time, the entry of small

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groups from other parts of Africa, and the internal sale and movement of slaves prevented the direct transfer of any single African nation or culture to the Americas” (Berlin 1998:410). Nonetheless, Walsh herself appears to resist these conclusions at any cost. In a recent overview of the role of African ethnicity in North America, drawing heavily on the data from her book, she criticizes Morgan (for such statements as “The homogenizing tendency of stressing cultural unity in Africa, of emphasizing the non-random character of the slave trade, and of seeing the dominance of particular African coastal regions or ethnicities in most American settings, is at variance with the central forces shaping the early modern Atlantic world” [Morgan 1997:142]) and lauds Gomez (for such statements as “A more informed discussion of the role of ethnicity can only further elucidate an examination of acculturation” [Gomez 1998:9]). It is hard to escape the conclusion that ideology and politics—the specificities of North American identity politics—continue to direct the master narratives, as well as influence how they are read (see Mintz and Price 1992:xiii–xiv; H. Gates 1998).

Perhaps, as Trouillot suggests, it is simply too early to generalize about creolization—“we have not thought enough about what went on in specific places and times to produce a framework sensitive enough to time, place, and power” (1998:20). But the North American cases we have examined here suggest we may need more than increased knowledge about sociohistorical particulars. In anthropology, the classic cases of rival interpretations involve restudies (from Redfield versus Lewis on Tepoztlán to Mead versus Freeman on Samoa), where changes resulting from the lapse of several decades of change on the ground are not always easy to separate out from paradigm shifts in the discipline or differences due to the ethnographers’ skills and personalities. What is striking in the current North American slavery debates is that we have scholars writing simultaneously, using much the same data—and often citing the exact same primary sources—coming to opposing conclusions. Perhaps in the present case, the players simply need to continue to duke it out in public and in their publications, in the hope that Truth and Reason will emerge victorious.

As one who, in the wake of Herskovits and Mintz, has always argued for a pan-Afro-American perspective (see, e.g., R. Price 1996), I would advocate here also the need for broader comparison, both

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across Afro-America and across disciplines, as a way of nudging these debates beyond particular ideological battlegrounds. (American historians seem even more parochial in these respects than their colleagues abroad.) For surely, similar general processes of culture-building were at work everywhere. To cite but two examples of the kind of work that might help bring peace to the protean wars of North American historians: In an erudite book that crossed my desk shortly before I was writing this chapter, *“Chi ma nkongo”: Lengua y rito ancestrales en El Palenque de San Basilio (Colombia)*, Armin Schwegler (1996) demonstrates first, that songs sung at the most apparently African of all Palenquero rites, the *lumbalú*, are (in the words of one reviewer) “not the partially decreolized outcome of original African songs, but rather are essentially modern [that is, eighteenth-century or nineteenth-century] creations, based on a combination of regional Spanish and Palenquero [the local creole language], to which African and pseudo-African words and onomatopoeic elements have been added,” and second, “that the active use of spoken African languages in Palenque disappeared very early, if in fact the population ever used an African language as the primary means of communication” (Lipski 1998:357). (This second point about the early development and predominance of a creole language is especially interesting in that Schwegler is able to show that the Africans who founded Palenque were characterized by a relative linguistic homogeneity, with Bantu languages, particularly ki-Kongo, providing the main substratum for the new creole.) In his review, Lipski calls this book “at once a masterful analysis of the elusive *lumbalú* language and a major breakthrough in Afro-creole studies...a benchmark against which future studies of creole languages and cultures will be measured” (359–360).

More generally, how can we best encourage our students, and each other, to read and react to such work—in this case, an expensive two-volume work published in Germany, written in Spanish, and about a black community in the hinterlands of Colombia, but one that has crucial lessons to teach every one of us interested in questions of “Africanisms” and African ethnicity in the Americas, whether in tide-water Virginia or Bahia? Or again, I had the privilege of reading in manuscript J. Lorand Matory’s historical study (Matory forthcoming a), which brilliantly analyzes the ideological role of African ethnicity,

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and the ongoing creation and redefinition of African ethnicities in Bahia. My own strong feeling is that we must follow such leads and get on with the work of historical interpretation, leaving the posturing to others. In my view—which on this issue has not budged since the M&P essay—African ethnicity remains *one* (among many) of the ways enslaved peoples brought to the New World thought about (and in some parts of the Americas continue to think about) themselves, and it played varied roles in different aspects of life for varying periods in different places in the New World.

Perhaps the most thoughtful and up-to-date summary of this position may be found in an article by Philip Morgan (1997), in which he draws on the latest data about the Atlantic slave trade to consider the overall cultural implications for New World societies. And for some very important recent materials from the African side, which afford detailed support to this position, see the work of David Northrup (2000, 2002).

As noted earlier, David Scott has suggested a reorientation of Afro-American anthropology away from “this sustained preoccupation [which he finds in the work of Herskovits and Price] with the corroboration or verification of authentic pasts” and toward “discourse”—“Between that event (Africa or slavery) and this memory,” he writes, “there spreads a complex discursive field we may usefully call ‘tradition’” (1991:278). As I read it, Scott’s radical critique would deny the primary object of historical study—pasts that exist independent of a cultural imagining of them. But I am not enough of a postmodernist—or so afraid of essentializing—to be willing to discard, say, the facts of eighteenth-century demography or colonial statutes or accounts of tortures meted out to recaptured Maroons. For all these I believe have *effects*, and not just on discourse or tradition, in the present. I submit that we should embrace the written, oral, and artifactual traces left us by the past in all their epistemological complications (and fully accepting their constructedness) and then do our level best to re-present them honestly. Saramakas are more than an “anthropological metonym...providing the exemplary arena in which to argue out certain anthropological claims” (D. Scott 1991:269). They are at once socially and politically marginalized African Americans who have heroic Maroon traditions, who have against all odds created a vibrant cul-

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ture, and whose lives (and way of life) are as threatened today as they have been at any moment since the end of the colonial wars two and a half centuries ago. Sally and I feel a deep responsibility, as anthropologists and friends, to help Saramakas tell their story, in part as a means of self-defense against severe ongoing repression (see R. Price 1995, 1998a; R. Price and S. Price 2001, 2003a).

The agenda of *First-Time* was multiple, and not all of its aims fit together smoothly. Like any ambitious work, it tried to address several quite different concerns that were in the air at the time of its composition. One of its targets was skeptical historians, those powerful traditionalists in every university who continued to deny the possibility that “primitive peoples”—particularly those without writing—could have a sense of their own past that transcended “myth.” My book, like that of my undergraduate- and graduate-school buddy Renato Rosaldo on the Ilongots of the Philippines (1980), was in part intended to give historians (and some anthropologists, including Sahllins and Lévi-Strauss) a wake-up call on this hoary issue. A related concern, more resolutely Herskovitsian in nature, was to demonstrate that these particular African Americans did have a past—the project that Scott is more directly concerned about. (Here the aim was double—showing not only that there were, among Saramakas, historians who behaved, despite cultural differences, rather like our own but also that their collective vision of the Saramaka past could be fruitfully compared to more traditional records constructed by non-Saramakas.) A third goal of *First-Time* was purely documentary—to present, and thus preserve for posterity, “the historical vision” of the Saramaka Maroons (generalized in the book’s subtitle to “an Afro-American people” in order, if memory serves, to try to appeal to a wider-than-anthropological audience).¹⁹

In addition to these concerns, *First-Time* tried to focus attention on the dialectic between event and memory, in the belief that Afro-Americanist anthropologists must ultimately figure out how to analyze and represent both. Scott suggests that *First-Time*’s “bold and innovative ethnographic strategy” is plausible “only...insofar as we accept the conceptual premise that pasts are preservable and representable,” and he chooses to “differ with what appears to be Price’s view, namely that both the oral testimony of his Saramaka informants and the written texts of the Dutch colonizers are culturally different, yet conceptually

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uncomplicated ways of re-presenting the past in the present” (Scott 1991:267–268). Perhaps because it is not my style to wear my theoretical assumptions on my authorial sleeve, I am probably partly responsible for Scott’s misunderstanding of my views here. So I would like to put on record that *First-Time* takes off from the credo that both ethnographic truths and historical truths are always *partial* truths—as Jim Clifford quickly understood (1986).²⁰ And (again *pace* Scott) I begin with the assumption that both oral testimony and archival documents are enormously complicated conceptually. From this perspective, my aim in *First-Time* was not to corroborate contemporary Saramaka memories by using eighteenth-century archives but to show how (and in many cases why) modern Saramaka discourse on the one hand and colonial Dutch documents on the other each constitute partial truths—that is, I tried always to keep in mind the relevant political, ideological, and other influences on the selection, transmission, and silencing of the past—the production of history—in each case. Such a strategy poses severe representational challenges, which is why *First-Time* assumes its unusual organization and page layout. And it is also why I do not discuss at greater length the political, ideological, and other considerations that shape the Saramaka discourse I present in the book (though I do offer examples of how these work themselves out)—that is, I explicitly choose not to overwhelm the reader with local clan and personal names and the detailed history of internal political disputes. Nor do I rehearse at length the complicated issues of the making of the Dutch archives and other written sources, which I cover more extensively in another book published the same year (R. Price 1983b). In any case, my concerns about problematizing oral, written, and ethnographic sources are, I believe, ever-present in *First-Time*, but I chose not to dwell overly on them in order to achieve even that level of representational clarity I managed in presenting quite foreign and complex cultural realities to an English-speaking audience.

I believe that rather than privileging discourse, which runs grave dangers, Afro-Americanists must embrace both discourse and event, figuring out imaginative representational strategies to handle them together. (Trouillot notes that “As social theory becomes more discourse-oriented, the distance between data and claims in debates about creolization...increases. Historical circumstances fall further

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into a hazy background of ideological preferences” [1998:15].) One strategy, which I used extensively in *First-Time*, is to hold both in mind but to treat them, alternatively, as figure and ground. Several of the essays in Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1995) constitute admirable attempts to achieve similar ends for Haiti in the revolutionary period. *Alabi’s World* (R. Price 1990) and particularly *The Convict and the Colonel* (R. Price 1998b) constitute other attempts of my own, adopting different representational strategies, toward the same ends. At the simplest level, I am arguing that to fully understand “discourse” (collective memory and the ways meaning is attributed to such figures as slavery, resistance, or Africa in the present), we must simultaneously consider “event” (demography—including ethnicity—through time, the sociology and economics of particular plantation regimes, and so on), and that in order to understand “event” or “history,” we must also consider “discourse” and ideology. For example, how can one begin to comprehend the significance (the enormity) of current erasures and silencings of the slave past among peasants and fishermen in Martinique without knowing that Martinique was, in some sense, the slave society par excellence—one-fourth the size of Long Island but receiving roughly the same number of enslaved Africans as the whole of the United States (R. Price 1998a)? In sum, I believe our understanding of the African American past must embrace both memory and event if we are to understand either. Which is why (in my writing and teaching) novels and poetry rub shoulders so closely with historical and anthropological monographs. History depends in part on the imagination, just as collective memory depends in part on past event.

Undoubtedly, generational differences underlie some of the gap between Scott’s critique and my response.²¹ In a sense, to consider the M&P essay or *First-Time* as canonical is to convert them into artifacts of a status quo ripe to be surpassed. Given the new and often competing (even contradictory) agendas that relate to their respective *problématiques*—and all the attached anxieties—in the modern academy, it is hardly surprising that critiques as divergent as Lovejoy’s and Scott’s have now been voiced. Despite continuities in the brute realities of North American racism through time, the academy has undergone a sea change in the last three decades. Identity politics, issues of race and postcolonialism, postmodernism, and much else situate the young fin

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de siècle scholar very differently from the anthropologist trained at the end of what George Stocking (1992) called the “classical period” of the discipline (circa 1925 to circa 1965). But that doesn’t prevent the old anthropologist from playing new tricks. If *First-Time* was marked by a tension between event and discourse—between trying to corroborate authentic Afro-American pasts and trying to deconstruct the production of history—*Enigma Variations*, a recent novel written with Sally (R. Price and S. Price 1995), is marked by the tension between its protagonists trying to appraise the authenticity of pieces of “primitive art” and the authors trying to deconstruct the idea of authenticity. *The Convict and the Colonel*, about a rather different postcolonial African American society, takes on event (slavery, the *bagne*), memory (mine, theirs), and discourse (academic, literary, and “folk”), as well as nostalgia, to consider more generally where we’ve been and where we might be going. As Stocking found, it is far more difficult to historicize the extended present—the period since the 1960s, now almost as long as the “classical period”—than the more distant past. Many of the concerns in the academy and society at large when the M&P essay or *First-Time* were written have faded, and a very different set has taken their place. The passions remain, whether about ethnicity or discourse, but they have been radically displaced.

At last, perhaps anticlimactically, we arrive at the “unconscious principles” that Kevin Yelvington asked me to elucidate. As Trouillot now frames the project:

Sidney Mintz and Richard Price suggest that the West African cultural heritage is to be found mainly in unconscious, underlying “grammatical principles”: cognitive orientations, attitudes, expectations common to the diverse communities whence most of the enslaved came. They argue that these underlying principles ordered the process of creolization by making certain choices more appealing or more significant than other possible ones. This argument needs to be refined in light of more sustained research on the institutional impact of African ethnicity on slave practices in specific territories. In other words, the underlying principles that Mintz and Price highlight had to work through tensions among Africans in order to produce

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meaningful practices and we need to know how and when they did so. More important, however a *modus vivendi* on cultural grammar was obtained among slaves, shared principles—old and new—had to survive the European exercise of power. How did they do so? When and how were they given space and time to breathe and to breed? How did they survive and reproduce themselves enough to generate new institutions? (1998:21)

The idea of deep-level, unconscious principles as a key to unraveling the African American past is an old one (for Herskovits's "grammar of culture" statement, see Mintz and Price 1992:11). One could read much of Sally's and my work as an attempt to demonstrate its power in specific domains—from an overview of Afro-American naming patterns written three decades ago (R. Price and S. Price 1972) to a recent book that deals in detail with a range of aesthetic domains (S. Price and R. Price 1999). From postures to costume, from embroidery to narrow-strip sewing, from woodcarving to calabash carving, and from music and dance to tale telling, we try to show how widely shared African aesthetic principles have played themselves out through three centuries of Saramaka history, beginning with the demographics of the slave trade and working our way through event and memory up to present-day production techniques. Since that lengthy work is now available for critical consideration and the argument about "unconscious principles" is laid out in some detail (see also Sally's chapter in this book), neither our descriptions and analyses of "creolization Saramaka-style" nor our accounts of the intricate fieldwork involved in teasing out these "unconscious principles" require rehash or re-presentation here. The proof, as far as we are concerned, should not be in our claims but in the pudding.

It is worth noting, however, what that 1999 book—the fruit of more than three decades of thinking about the development of Saramaka culture—does *not* (indeed cannot) say about creolization. Miracles ultimately depend on faith, and the miracle of creolization has not yet proved to be an exception. Berlin and Morgan for North America, or Matory and the Prices for South America, provide extensive contextualization for the processes of culture change among the recently enslaved and their descendants in the New World. When such works

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are at their best, we feel almost as if we are witnesses to the particular conflicts and acts of solidarity and imagination involved in the shift from one kind of identity to another, or from an Old World tradition to a new one. But however far we are able to push back in time the documented beginnings of such cultural developments, we find ourselves stuck in the paradoxical position, like Achilles in Zeno's paradox, of never quite being able to catch the tortoise. Like physicists with their big bang birth of the universe, we can theorize the event (or the process), but we seem ever unable to observe it effectively. So the ultimate miracle of creolization remains, at least for now, impenetrable. We can imagine (or theorize) how the women and men on Plantation X worked out the procedures—the rites, the music, the beliefs—appropriate to the birth of twins, beginning when that first hypothetical mother brought her babies into the New World, but we can never be present at the blessed event itself. We know that it must have happened, and that it happened over time in tens of thousands of often-independent cases throughout the Americas. A miracle that repeated itself endlessly.

For Saramaka, we can now reliably push its date back before the mid-eighteenth century—three decades of archival research since the M&P essay permits unequivocal demonstration that in general, African ethnicities were not by that time salient for Saramakas culturally, in terms of identifying individuals or as markers for groups. In other words, we can demonstrate that Saramaka society at the time of the Peace Treaty of 1762 was far closer to Saramaka today, in terms of cultural development, than it was to Africa. Yet though we have been able to push the major creolization processes ever earlier in time, we are still unable to examine them directly.

Since our anthropological model of creolization derives from linguistics, it may be worth a final detour to briefly consider the state of the art among our linguist cousins. Even in a discipline that prides itself on relative systematics and scientific method, ideology and partisanship (and subject position) seem to dominate at least as much (and for similar reasons) as they do in other disciplines related to Afro-American studies. Exclusivistic and monocausal theories of creole genesis—whether based on Portuguese-pidgin monogenesis, African

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substrata, European superstrata, or the putative bioprogram—seem as prevalent today as in the past. One example may suffice. In a recent review article on historical creolistics, Derek Bickerton casually but pointedly notes that “Like many (most?) Francophone creolists, and unlike most, if not all non-Francophone creolists, Guy Hazaël-Massieux sees creoles as modified continuations of their superstrates” (1999:98). Is it not remarkable—however understandable, given the way the French think about their language—that Francophone creolists still insist on—despite all the evidence brought by non-Francophone creolists—the primacy of French in the creation of Haitian, for example?²² Or again, consider the vitriol Bickerton summons up to characterize John McWhorter’s account of creolization on the west coast of Africa (1997), which is filled, Bickerton claims, with “half-truths, non-sequiturs, and mistakes [and] also plain falsifications,” adding that “To support such a sociolinguistically unlikely scenario, McWhorter can produce not a single citation, not one iota of historical evidence” (Bickerton 1999). Even a glance at the *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* would show that such inflated (and self-serving) rhetoric is almost par for the course on all sides of the debate. To the extent that creolist linguists depend ultimately on historians for their sociocultural context and must infer the actual process of creolization from post-facto linguistic features, they are really little better off than the rest of us. Whether it’s Bickerton’s Saramaka Adams and Eves in the Suriname rain forest or McWhorter’s ancestors of the Saramakas hanging out at Coromantee, we can still only imagine, using all the data at our disposal, something of what it might have been like.

Which leaves us, I suppose, considerably humbled, with our task to once again put our collective noses to the grindstone. In the end, it is only when the competing narratives are confronted, and weighed carefully against each other, that we can begin to develop reasons for giving greater credibility to one or the other. We have little choice but to keep on tilling the fields. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, “creolization”—even if resistant to direct observation—still remains, in Trouillot’s apt characterization (1998:8), “a miracle begging for analysis.”



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Notes

I wish to thank Phil Morgan, Peter Redfield, David Scott, and Rolph Trouillot, as well as the members of the SAR seminar, for their generous and helpful comments on a draft of this essay. I would also like to thank the College of William and Mary for a faculty summer research grant that in part supported this project.

1. The title phrase is shamelessly borrowed from Michel-Rolph Trouillot's recent excursion into the wondrous phenomenon of creolization (1998).

2. I wish to make clear at the outset that I speak here only for myself. I have not discussed any aspect of this paper with Mintz.

3. Writing against "the ideological assumptions that serve to secure the seeming authority of such anthropological arguments regarding [Afro-American pasts]," Scott says:

These ideological assumptions have to do with the kind of anthropological object that the Afro-American or the Afro-Caribbean (or anyway the New World Negro) has historically been constructed as. I would argue that at least one of the pervasive ideological assumptions through which this theoretical object has been constructed is that peoples of African descent in the New World require something like anthropology, a science of culture, to provide them with the foundational guarantee of an authentic past" (1991:268)

4. It may be worth noting that in contrast to the recent attention given by card-carrying historians and anthropologists to the history of such debates in Afro-American studies, Afro-Americanist scholars in the discipline of cultural studies have tended to ignore the debates of the past fifty years, thus leaving the field rhetorically free for their own "discoveries." Brackette Williams makes the point in her trenchant critique of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) when she urges attention to its silences. In this much-discussed book, she argues,

we lack an intellectual connection with past efforts to understand processes of cultural production which are products and producers of trans-cultural, pre-national, or extra-national conceptual and grounded unities....Silenced are several generations of scholars from and students of the Caribbean and Latin America whose work speaks to the issues Gilroy raises throughout the *Black Atlantic*. With differing degrees of success, these scholars of varied hues have tried to understand processes of cultural production and identity formation in conceptual units spanning geographical spaces and overlapping economic regimes (Brackette Williams 1995:181, 188).

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And in a note, she makes clear she is referring to, among other works, the M&P essay. In a separate comment, Mintz opined similarly that “The recent fuss about Caribbean modernity and the Black Atlantic is just the wheel being rediscovered—C. L. R. James, among others, knew it long ago” (1998:128).

5. Lorena Walsh goes so far as to point—I think with considerable exaggeration—to “an emerging orthodoxy that sees slaves as forming identifiable communities based on their ethnic or national pasts” (1998:2)

6. If such anecdotes prove anything, we might add that one of my Russian-born grandmothers taught me a song, and Sally’s Swedish grandfather taught her a single phrase—“Do you like to fish?”—each of which constitute the only words of their mother tongues they passed on directly, or via their children, to their American grandchildren.

7. Thornton’s consistent use of the phrase the colonial language (that is, the European colonizer’s language, which he opposes to various African languages) throughout his new, eighteenth-century chapter exposes his *parti-pris*. In his account, creole languages—which in most territories at most times were the most widely used means of communication among slaves—scarcely exist.

8. I should add that none of this is, to my knowledge, in any way personal. The opposing scholars hardly know one another and have no private grudges known to me—which makes it all the more interesting intellectually.

9. Stephan Palmié makes similar observations about the misuse or misreading of the M&P essay:

Despite its theoretical sophistication and methodological soundness, the “rapid early synthesis” model suggested by Mintz and Price fell short of stimulating a thorough historicization of African-American anthropology. Instead, and quite contrary to these authors’ intentions, it sometimes seems to have encouraged hypostatizing the concept of creolization to a degree where it allows glossing over history. (1997)

10. By trying to heed the Saramaka proverb “Lizard says: ‘Speed is good, but so is caution’” and thus achieve some balance, I may protest too much in this paragraph. Two readers of this paper—Phil Morgan and Rolph Trouillot—while agreeing that the thrust of M&P is surely methodological (an “approach to”), both urged me (in Trouillot’s words) “not to give up the central point of the speed issue,” though of course “to leave room for decreolization, recreolization, or other processes, which is another matter” and (in Morgan’s words) “to hold on to the early creolization model and not give too much ground on that score....I would guess early creolization applies in most places.”

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This may be the place to acknowledge explicitly the influence of the late Dutch missionary-linguist Jan Voorhoeve on the notion of early creolization used in the M&P essay, since a major reassessment of his work has recently appeared (Meel 1997).

11. This is very much the tenor of Sally's and my most recent visit to this general issue, in a footnote to Maroon Arts (S. Price and R. Price 1999:329–330), where we note that

Monica Schuler has taken R. P. to task for (over)emphasizing the rapidity of creolization and has, in contrast, stressed what she sees as the continuing importance of African ethnic solidarity (Schuler 1970, 1979, 1980; see also Karasch 1979). Some scholars have claimed that planters in some colonies at some moments encouraged the maintenance of African ethnic solidarity as a means of control, while others have pointed to widely-attested planters' practices of separating slaves of a particular ethnic origin for the same purpose (see, for references, R. Price 1979:142). R. P. has cautioned that "such statements, which originate in data from particular societies at particular historical moments, can be converted into generalizations only at the risk of obscuring the very variation that is crucial to understanding the nature of New World slavery." (R. Price 1979:143)

We go on to suggest that Roger Bastide, working with Brazilian materials, espoused a perspective that dissolves many of these difficulties. "We know little about Afro-Brazilian religions in those distant times," wrote Bastide,

but we should certainly give up the notion of [African] cult centers surviving through centuries down to the present day...and think rather of a chaotic proliferation of cults or cult fragments arising only to die out and give way to others with every new wave of [African] arrivals. The candomblés, xangôs and batuques of today are not survivals of ancient sects reaching back into the Brazilian past but relatively recent organizations....We should therefore think of the religious life of Africans in Brazil as a series of events lacking any organic links—traditions that were broken and resumed but that nevertheless retained from one century to the next...the same fidelity to the African mystique or mystiques. ([1960] 1978:47–48)

And J. Lorand Matory's recent research on Bahian Candomblé and on Yorùbá religion lends considerable muscle to Bastide's assertions (Matory forthcoming a).

Finally, we express our sympathy with Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poetic

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and imaginative critique of Monica Schuler's attempt to specify Jamaican myal as a solar, "Kongo" retention. "It may have been so in Central Africa," writes Brathwaite, "but in Jamaica it was (and is) a fragment or aspect of a larger creolised form which includes obiah, jonkonnu, and kumina/pukumina, 'convince,' congo and ettu" (1979:152).

12. There exists a substantial bibliography of works emphasizing the cultural contributions of specific African ethnicities to one or another New World colony. Among the more interesting I would cite Chambers (1996); G. Hall (1992); Karasch (1987); Littlefield (1981); Palmer (1995); Reis (1993); Schuler (1980); and Walsh (1997).

13. More recently, Thornton has suggested an Africanist perspective as a more general research strategy, though the two case studies he presents in support—one from early-eighteenth-century Kongo and the other from nearly contemporaneous Dahomey—however rich in their African texture, in fact tell us little about the consequences of the specific African events for the New World communities in which the expelled slaves landed (1998b). Years ago, I wrote an extended critique of (it so happens) a Kongo-centric approach to the study of Saramaccan lexicon (R. Price 1975a), trying to suggest some of the dangers within—dangers I believe are not entirely absent even from the more sophisticated recent Africa-centric works.

14. At the time of the SAR seminar, these two books had only recently been published. By the time of the first draft chapter submission for this collection (six months later, in October 1999), they had already garnered, between them, well over a dozen major book prizes.

15. In another context, I might argue with some of the particular trajectories Berlin posits for his various regions, for example the Lower Mississippi Valley. But his general stress on variation and uneven development nevertheless seems cardinal.

16. Paralleling this position from an African perspective, Kwame Anthony Appiah has written eloquently on the historically contingent nature of ethnic identities—part of the reason why the idea of establishing an African "baseline" for New World studies has been so fraught with problems. He cites Chinua Achebe's remarks about the relative recency of the "Igbo" identity in Nigeria: "For instance, take the Igbo people. In my area, historically, they did not see themselves as Igbo. They saw themselves as people from this village or that village. . . . And yet, after the experience of the Biafran War, during a period of two years, it became a very powerful consciousness." And then he cautions that

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Recognizing Igbo identity as a new thing is not a way of privileging other Nigerian identities: each of the three central ethnic identities of modern political life—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo—is a product of the rough-and-tumble of the transition through colonial to postcolonial status. David Laitin has pointed out that “the idea that there was a single Hausa-Fulani tribe...was largely a political claim of the NPC [Northern People’s Congress] in their battle against the South,” while “many elders intimately involved in rural Yoruba society today recall that, as late as the 1930s, ‘Yoruba’ was not a common form of political identification.”...Modern Ghana witnesses the development of an Akan identity, as speakers of the three major regional dialects of Twi—Asante, Fante, Akuapem—organize themselves into a corporation against an (equally novel) Ewe unity....Identities are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political, and cultural forces, almost always in opposition to other identities. (Appiah 1992:177–178)

17. Growing in part out of the same intellectual milieu as the M&P essay—the Johns Hopkins Program in Atlantic History and Culture of the 1970s and 1980s—Morgan’s book could be read as the most detailed implementation of the general M&P project yet attempted for North America (though of course it is much more than this). Indeed, it uses language of a strikingly similar kind in discussing a range of cultural issues throughout its more than seven hundred pages (see, e.g., xxii, 257, 261, 442, 559, 580).

18. Contrast these passages with the following ones from Gomez’s book (parts already quoted above): “In 1720, then, the slave community [in North America] was for all practical purposes African. The American-born constituent was present, and continued to grow from 1740 to 1760....However, many of these were first-generation Americans, so that they would have fallen under the enculturative provenance of African parentage. The combination of these first-generation blacks and a native African population resulted in their domination of second- and third-generation African Americans.” (194)

19. In a reading very much of its time and place, Scott seems to suggest that the fact that Saramaka Maroons represent, particularly from a North American perspective, a relatively noble response to slavery makes them (and their ethnographers) somehow suspect. Such reasoning meshes with the “demotion” of the figure of the once-heroic (literary) Maroon by the contemporary Martiniquan *créolité* movement (see R. Price and S. Price 1997) and would seem to be part of a more general postcolonial Caribbean intellectual move.



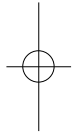
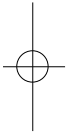
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20. First-Time, Clifford writes,

offers a good example of self-conscious serious partiality...evidence of the fact that acute political and epistemological self-consciousness need not lead to ethnographic self-absorption, or to the conclusion that it is impossible to know anything certain about other people. Rather, it leads to a concrete sense of why a Saramaka folktale, featured by Price, teaches that “knowledge is power, and that one must never reveal all of what one knows.” (1986:7)

21. For more on Scott’s project of retheorizing the horizons of postcolonial politics, see his most recent book (1999). His chapter on the poetry of Kamau Brathwaite (106–127), in which he attempts to “disarticulate Brathwaite’s vision from the anthropological epistemology through which he seeks to guarantee it” (127), is particularly relevant to the issues in this chapter.

22. See R. Price and S. Price (1997) for a discussion of the anti-African (pro-French) extremes to which Martiniquan créolistes have carried such arguments about the development of their native tongue.





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