

“We Wear the Mask”: Kongo Folk Art and Ritual in South Carolina

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Abstract: This article argues for a vision of the African diaspora as an arena of “insurgent nostalgia,” a restive remembrance and embodiment of the past. Blacks throughout the diaspora reconstituted and reconfigured elements of African culture through a series of sacralized and ancestral elements created, imagined, and remembered in ritual practice. But the black cultures that subsequently arose throughout the plantation Americas were not mere broken fragments of African cultural precedents. Instead, they comprised wholly formed cultures in the Americas that claimed certain historical relationships with African art and aesthetics—to be sure—but that also reflected a communion with larger communities of black people around the diaspora for whom “Slavery” was the name of a history, yet to be overcome; and “Africa” the clarion call for a world of new horizons, hopes, and possibilities.

Introduction

*“Dave belongs to Mr. Miles,
Where the oven bakes, and the pot biles”
--Dave the Potter*

In the Introduction to *Kongo across the Waters*, editors Susan Cooksey, Robin Poynor and Hein Vanhee suggest that the book, its accompanying exhibition, and perhaps even the conference Kongo Atlantic Dialogues, are all “metaphor[s] that describe one of the rich historic cultures of our world, having developed *on this side of the water* into a complex set of ideas, beliefs and forms of expression” and on “*the other side of the water*” to include ideas about Africa and Kongo as a land of origin in a vast diaspora; or as an “Other World” veiled behind the land of the living.¹ Much of the scholarship devoted to these metaphors has been driven by the impetus to document, historicize, codify, and display the connections that pertain between the cultures of Africa and those of the plantation Americas. This work enjoys a fruitful historiography evident in the various projects that populated the panels of the Kongo Atlantic Dialogues Conference held at the University of Florida in February 2014.

The work of drawing these links has been a long and arduous task due, in part to the difficulty of registering documentable relationships that are legible in the sundry disciplines—

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history, art history, anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics, among others—that comprise our various professional vocations. Our source material is strewn about in archives, scattered across continents, and hidden underfoot. From these fugitive sources, we work feverishly to document cultures and connections that can be verified and validated through the various methods of our chosen disciplines.

But the work has been made difficult also by the hefty weight of academic opposition that has often accompanied the work. Writing in *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach, following Michel Foucault, argues that because memory (read: history) is constituted by a process of nonlinear and continual surrogations, the search for origins is a futile, if not misguided, enterprise: “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.”² Writing similarly, Paul Gilroy argues that although African linguistic, political and philosophical themes are still visible in Black Atlantic cultures “for those who wish to see them, they have often been transformed and adapted by their New World locations to a new point where the dangerous issues of purified essences and simple origins lose all meaning.”³

Taken together, these criticisms make clear that the question of Africa’s role in the development of African American culture can be a vexed matter; “inevitably, it is highly political,” as one historian recently noted.⁴ But going even further, anthropologist Richard Price suspects that something even more nefarious is afoot in this persistent desire to see African pasts in the cultures of blacks throughout the plantation Americas. Writing in “On the Miracle of Creolization,” Price maintains that it is “hard to escape the conclusion that ideology and politics—the specifics of North American identity politics—continue to direct the master narratives, as well as influence how they are read.”⁵ Amounting to a “motivated erasure of countervailing scholarship,” Price suggests that these identity politics are “rooted in ideological partis-pris.”⁶ In effect, Price charges scholars who chart the persistent role that the long arm of Africa played in the cultures of blacks throughout Americas—as well as their sympathizers and apologists—with bending or ignoring counter evidence to support ideological positions. In this sense, scholars who argue for the centrality of Africa in the study of African American cultures are likely representing an ideological position based on identity politics, rather than an academic position based on evidence. Of course some have bristled under these criticisms. Michael Gomez, for example, responded to Price and others by suggesting that “the cultural and social formations of transported Africans tend to invite a quality of critique unique in its level of elevated scrutiny.”⁷

In my own contribution to *Kongo across the Waters*, I argue that in creating folk cultures around the Diaspora, enslaved Africans drew on remarkably resilient aspects of African culture that spurred on cultural developments in the Americas even as these cultures remained plastic, being malleable enough to adapt to new conditions.⁸ In this vast field of cultural inheritance and ingenuity, Africa is what you make it. It is a language and the folklore that flows from it; a song and the ring shout that circles us. It is carved, molded, woven and crafted into shape.

Following Saidiya Hartman, I am proposing a vision of the African diaspora as an arena of “insurgent nostalgia,” or a sort of restive remembrance and embodiment of the past. For Hartman, blacks throughout the diaspora reconstituted and reconfigured elements of African culture through a series of sacralized and ancestral elements created, imagined and

remembered in the use of prayer trees and inverted pots, performed in the ring shout, called up in sacred gatherings, devotional dances to ancestral spirits and in otherwise “remembering things they had not witnessed or experienced.” In this view, insurgent nostalgia “transformed the space of captivity into one inhabited by the revenants of a disremembered past.”⁹ When followed to its logical conclusion, this argument has led some scholars to suggest that certain aspects of black culture in the Americas reflect merely the “confused remnants” of older African traditions; “traces of memory that function in a manner akin to a phantom limb,” once viable and functional though now irrevocably ripped away and unrecoverable. What is felt is no longer there.¹⁰ While I find great value in Hartman’s notion of “insurgent nostalgia,” I want to challenge the idea that blacks in the plantation Americas understood themselves most significantly in terms of loss and displacement or that “the history of the captive emerges precisely at this site of loss and rupture” as Hartman suggests.¹¹ Whatever we might say about black cultures in the plantation Americas, and whatever claims we might make about the relationship between these cultures and the cultures of Africans from the principle slaving regions of the continent, my own view is that African diasporic cultures are whole, notwithstanding their distance, both temporal and geographic, from a supposed African precedent. They reflect fully realized cultural expressions, even when expressed under the greatly attenuated circumstances of slavery.

Black culture in the plantation Americas is not only connected to African pasts through a set of documentable cultural behaviors, practices or beliefs—as indeed it is—but is also connected to similar insurgencies around the Atlantic—in Africa, throughout the Americas and in Europe. In each instance, these cultures are drawing on the past to create cultures that critique their societies by expressing pressing political, cultural, and social concerns. At the beginning of this essay, I noted that the conveners of the Kongo Atlantic Dialogues conference use water as a metaphor to help articulate the historical and cultural relationships between Kongo and the United States. Veering just a bit from that model, I would like to consider another meteorological metaphor—the wind—as a way of illustrating some of my own ideas. Writing in *Mama Day*, novelist Gloria Naylor describes a wind that started

on the shores of Africa, a simple breeze among the palms and cassavas, before it's carried off, tied up with thousands like it, on a strong wave heading due west...Restless and disturbed, no land in front of it, no land in back, it draws up the ocean vapor and rains fall like tears...It rips through the sugar canes in Jamaica, stripping juices from their heart, shredding red buds from royal Poincianas...A center grows within the fury...A still eye. Warm. Calm. It dries a line of clothes in Alabama. It rocks a cradle in Georgia.¹²

By the time the winds spin back around to the Carolina coast, they are all a rage. An old oak tree holds, “the rest is destruction.”¹³

Those winds are, as Ntozake Shange writes it, the slaves who were ourselves.¹⁴ They are people tied up with thousands like them; they are the vast and varied cultures of the African diaspora. Those winds comprise cultures of succor and reprieve when they dry a line of clothes in Alabama or rock a baby to sleep in Georgia. But they are also a furious rebellion in Carolina or Haiti or Brazil. Rather than see these American winds as merely derivative of the African breeze that preceded it—lesser, lost, and alienated winds—I am arguing that a vision of the

African diaspora as an arena of insurgent nostalgia recognizes the entire space as a crosshatch of currents scratching, cutting, and clawing their way around the Atlantic rim. These winds have histories. They follow roughly proscribed patterns and currents, but they are not mimetic or derivative. Taken together, they comprise vast network of trade winds that crisscross the ocean.

Unlike some who see futility in the search for African pasts, I want to emphasize that this insurgent nostalgia is rooted in the historical connections that bind African diasporic peoples together. These connections are meaningful and worth exploration and the results of this research cannot be dismissed as mere fantasy or base reduction. For example, Kamau Brathwaite is not producing a phantasm of Africa when he recalls the Caribbean winds that signaled St. Lucia's annual dry season. He writes:

it was the seasonal dust-clouds, drifting out of the great ocean of sahara—the harmattan. By an obscure miracle of connection, this arab's nomad wind, cracker of fante wood a thousand miles away, did not die on the sea-shore of west africa, its continental limit; it drifted on, reaching the new world archipelago to create our drought, imposing an african season on the caribbean sea. And it was these winds too, and in this season, that the slave ships came from guinea, bearing my ancestors to this other land...¹⁵

Braithwaite's Caribbean season originates in Africa, to be sure, though it is no mere derivation.

The benefit of seeing the African Diaspora as an arena of insurgent nostalgia is that it allows for the real (read: documentable) relationships that connect the waters and the winds and the peoples of the Atlantic. This goes a long way, I think, to respond to the charge made by Richard and Sally Price suggest that any determined researcher "who is intent on proving a chosen historical scenario can almost always locate some objects or design styles in one tradition that closely resemble some objects or design styles in another."¹⁶ To my mind, the formal and aesthetic relationships at play here are not merely the result of some random comparisons of what seem to be similar cultural practices. Instead, they emerge out of the historical relationships between peoples. At the same time, insurgent nostalgia encourages a full consideration of the ways that cultural practices and behaviors provide pressing political, social, and aesthetic critiques, highlighted by their urgency and immediacy.

I would like to turn now to a consideration of how an idea of the African diaspora as a field of insurgent nostalgia might contribute to our understanding of the historical and continuing relationships between Kongo and the United States. In the mid-nineteenth century, African American potters in the Edgefield district of South Carolina produced a fascinating set of ceramic face vessels that have since inspired scholarly controversy across disciplines as successive generations of historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and others have debated their provenance and ultimate significance. At the turn of the century, ceramic historian Edwin Barber described the vessels as "weird-looking water jugs, roughly modelled [sic]...in the form of a grotesque human face,—evidently intended to portray the African features." For Barber, these vessels held particular interest "as representing an art of the Southern negroes, uninfluenced by civilization...the modelling reveals a trace of aboriginal art as formerly practiced by the ancestors of the makers in the Dark Continent."¹⁷

More recently, Robert Farris Thompson and John Michael Vlach have provided more serious and sustained treatment of the African origins of the face vessels. Thompson, citing a vast tradition throughout West Africa of using multi-media in figural sculpture—and the absence of such in European pottery traditions—argues that “there is nothing in Europe remotely like” the face vessels.¹⁸ For his part, Vlach has drawn links between the face vessels and the *n’kisi* tradition in West-Central Africa. For Vlach, “the face jugs with bulging white eyes and the small wooden statues with eyes made from white shells are end points of a stylistic continuum stretching the breadth of the ocean.”¹⁹

These formal and aesthetic connections have since been strengthened by reference to the 1858 arrival of a slave ship, *The Wanderer* that illegally imported a cargo of some four hundred captive Africans onto Jekyll Island, Georgia in 1858, half a century after the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade was made illegal in the country. Many of the captives on board that ship were from West-Central Africa and about one hundred ended up in Edgefield, South Carolina as slaves at area potteries. These newly arrived captives, then, provided the initial spark that inspired the subsequent, though brief production of face vessels.

Opposition arose soon after Thompson and Vlach proposed what might be called a Kongo thesis for the face vessels. Some critics have been vocal in their opposition to the idea that South Carolina face vessels bear the mark of Kongo influence, or even, in some cases, that they were made by blacks at all.²⁰ Writing in “Afro-American Folk Pottery in the South,” John Burrison rejected the idea of an African connection on grounds “that in order to seriously propose an African genesis for a Black American tradition, the same tradition...must first be found in Africa...Further, one must demonstrate that the Black American tradition in question is more likely to have been imported from Africa than developed independently and coincidentally as a domestic phenomenon, or borrowed from whites or Indians here who may have had a similar tradition.”²¹

The problems with this critique are several not least of which is that it presumes, even requires, cultural practices on both sides of the Atlantic to be static, frozen in time as if awaiting some future formal comparison. Not only that, but the cultures must also remain hermetically sealed from any outside influences. Nevertheless, this sort of criticism—not only in the case of face vessels, but in other arenas as well—has often driven subsequent research and shaped the historiographical questions in the field. Elsewhere I have expressed concern that too often, the central questions in these debates have been whether or not and to what extent African American cultures are authentically African; and whether or not and to what extent black people in the United States have retained (one might say, performed) an authentic African past.²² In order to enter the fray, one must engage the debate on its own terms by presuming, on the one hand, that pasts are such as can be identified in their authenticity and, on the other, that the special task of an anthropology of peoples of African descent consists of providing the evidence, both theoretical and methodological, necessary to debate the role of African pasts in black American culture.²³

While I acknowledge not only the need, but indeed the importance of tracing African influences in black cultural practices throughout the plantation Americas, I also want to emphasize that these practices are not to be mined only as inventories of African pasts. As it relates to face vessels, one can immediately imagine the ways that these vessels might be put to

use to better understand a whole range of projects, including the continued significance of African cultural continuities in the United States, but also the persistence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the late 19th century, as a possible new idiom for sustaining African American religious beliefs while resisting slave power, and as an early inspiration for the subsequent development of 20th century African American visual cultures. These vessels are one among many insurgencies happening around the Atlantic that communicate a particular relationship to Kongo art and aesthetics—to be sure—but that also reflects a communion with larger communities of people “for whom ‘Slavery’ is the permanent name of a trial and tribulation which they are yet to overcome, and ‘Africa’ the name of a difference, of a refusal, and therefore of a horizon of hopes at once moral, and historical, aesthetic, and political.”²⁴

Notes

- 1 Cooksey, Poynor, and Vanhee 2013, p. 13.
- 2 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” quoted in Roach, p. 25.
- 3 Gilroy 1993, p. 48.
- 4 Hall 2005, p. xxi.
- 5 Price 2006, p. 132.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 7 Gomez 2006, p. 2.
- 8 Young 2013.
- 9 Hartman 1997, p. 72.
- 10 Piersen 1977, p. 153; Hartman 1997, p. 74.
- 11 Hartman 1997, p. 74.
- 12 Naylor 1988, pp. 249-50.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 14 Shange 1982, p. 36.
- 15 Brathwaite 1974, p. 73.
- 16 Price and Price 2000, p. 296.
- 17 Barber 1905, p. 466.
- 18 Thompson 1983, p. 39.
- 19 Vlach 1990 [1978], p. 86.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 21 Burrison 1983, p. 332. Still Burrison did gesture toward the possibility of African origins, noting that “Even if African work in clay did not influence Edgefield face vessels, African work in wood, as carved ceremonial dance masks, may have. Such a shift in media could have been triggered in Edgefield District by a fresh infusion of 170 Africans from an illegal cargo on the slave ship *Wanderer* in 1858. One of them, named Romeo, evidently worked at Thomas Davies’ Palmetto Fire Brick Works in 1863. See Burrison, 2012
- 22 Young 2007, pp. 3-4; Scott 1999, p. 108.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, 107.

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