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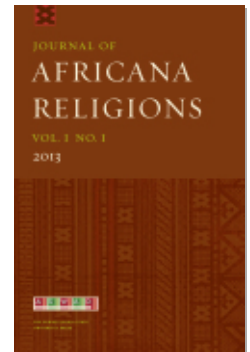
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Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary  
Agenda in an Emerging Field

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# Africana Religious Studies

## Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field

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### *Abstract*

Our position in this essay is provisional and dialogical as we hope to begin a conversation that will inspire productive exchange and innovative agendas for the future of Africana religious studies. We elaborate our vision for ARS as a field of study by emphasizing the accomplishments and limitations of major research lineages that intersect with its priorities. We find our voice in the emergent conversations on Africana religions by asking (1) How will the field of Africana religious studies enhance knowledge production on the religious cultures of African-descended peoples worldwide? And (2) how will the field of Africana religious studies address theoretical and methodological inadequacies of longer-standing fields and disciplinary arenas in which scholars have conducted research on African-descended peoples and their religious cultures?

In September 1940, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier arrived in Rio de Janeiro and traveled to Bahia later that year. In the midst of his six-week stay in the northeastern Brazilian state, he mailed a postcard with a cover image of eight Candomblé devotees (all women of African descent) to anthropologist Melville Herskovits.<sup>1</sup> Frazier's effort to convey his initial impressions of Bahia's African heritage was perhaps a foreseeable gesture, given Herskovits's role in recommending the Howard University professor for the Guggenheim Fellowship that supported his research in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> Frazier went on to publish the results of his investigations under the titles "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil" (1942) and "Some Aspects of Race Relations in Brazil" (1942). Frazier's study of mating patterns and kinship networks among the families he interviewed guided

Bahia 1/26/41

I would not write until I could find an "Africanism." Quite seriously the Mãe de Santo, in the center, surrounded by her Filhas de Santo represent a combination of African religious customs (fused with Portuguese elements of course). Moving on to Haiti next month.

Sincerely,  
Frazier

FIGURE 1 Bahia 1/26/41—I would not write until I could find an 'Africanism.' Quite seriously the Mãe de Santo in the center, surrounded by her Filhas de Santo represent a continuation of African religious customs (fused with Portuguese elements of course). Moving on to Haiti next month. Sincerely, Frazier." (Postcard from E. Franklin Frazier to Melville J. Herskovits.)<sup>3</sup>

his perception that "so far as family relationships are concerned, there are no rigid, consistent patterns of behavior that can be traced to African culture."<sup>4</sup> However, Frazier's face-to-face encounter with African Brazilians influenced his view that "many elements of African culture survived, especially religious practices that are perpetuated in the Candomblé, a religious cult, which embodies a fusion of African practices and Catholicism."<sup>5</sup>

Arriving in August 1941, nearly a year after Frazier, Melville and Frances Herskovits spent twelve months in Brazil conducting fieldwork, passing half of their term in Bahia alone.<sup>6</sup> Melville's resultant article, along with Frazier's rejoinder, might well be considered a classic summation of the theoretical and methodological debate that many have argued characterized their thirty-year relationship. Having the benefit of working in the same area of Bahia as Frazier and scrutinizing Frazier's article before publishing his own, Herskovits identified what he understood to be a major research flaw in Frazier's study "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil." He faulted Frazier for "import[ing] into Brazil the methodological blind-spot that marks Negro research in [the United States]" and found his conclusions about African influences on the Afro-Bahian family suspect because "no reference to any work describing African cultures is made in his paper, and only oblique references to the forms of African social structure are encountered."<sup>7</sup>

Examining how the Herskovits/Frazier debate unfolded around both scholars' research experiences in the diaspora region with the heaviest concentration of African descendants has symbolic purchase for our conception

of a new agenda for Africana religious studies (ARS).<sup>8</sup> Since we enter the field of ARS with research interests encompassing what Colin Palmer would characterize as the fourth and “most widely studied” African diaspora “stream” of the Caribbean and the Americas, we begin by emphasizing transatlantic studies as one of the major research branches in the field of ARS.<sup>9</sup> We also suggest that, in the twenty-first century, ARS must encourage scholarship that disrupts the quest for an “original Africa” where Africa and its diaspora exist in stasis and remain uncomplicated by the vicissitudes of time and history.<sup>10</sup> Most needed are serious studies of Africa as “originary space”<sup>11</sup> that interrogate the problem of immanent primordialism and the uncontested question of historical origins while revaluing (1) a continent and diaspora of diversity, encounter, and transition; (2) a proliferation of “Africas” that have emerged in global milieus;<sup>12</sup> and (3) a series of “unfinished migrations”<sup>13</sup> and continuous diasporas of African peoples and their religious traditions worldwide. In other words, reflections on Africana religions eschew a bounded and calcified Africa as a physical landmass. Instead, they scrutinize Africa as a “trope that encodes and evokes complex, historically sedimented, and contextually variable bodies of knowledge pertaining to the nature of human beings, social arrangements, and cultural forms that have variously entered into its semantic purview.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, one research division within the study of Africana religions will necessarily investigate how this labile Africa substantiates human value for some populations while providing restorative historical currency for others.

Our position in this essay is provisional and dialogical as we hope to begin a conversation that will inspire productive exchange and innovative agendas for the future of ARS. We elaborate our vision for ARS as a field of study by emphasizing the accomplishments and limitations of major research lineages that intersect with its priorities. We find our voice in the emergent conversations on Africana religions by asking (1) How will the field of ARS enhance knowledge production on the religious cultures of African-descended peoples worldwide? And (2) how will the field of ARS address theoretical and methodological inadequacies of longer-standing fields and disciplinary arenas in which scholars have conducted research on African-descended peoples and their religious cultures? The sections below address some of the most challenging issues that weigh upon these two guiding questions with emphasis on the advances and encumbrances

qualifying religious studies scholarship on African-descended peoples in the United States. As a point of departure, we root our discussion in our U.S. diaspora context by highlighting salient theoretical genealogies that have shaped a transgenerational discourse on Africana religions over the past century.

Although a wide array of disciplines contribute to ARS, we see merit in outlining a transdisciplinary agenda for this emerging field through, first, a careful interrogation of how scholars trained in religion and/or theology have inescapably engaged the discursive lineages stemming from conspicuous and underexplored dimensions of the Herskovits/Frazier debate. Subsequently, we examine the methodological strengths of secular historical scholarship in the area of Africana religions and place representative scholars in conversation with religious studies counterparts in other disciplines. Finally, shifting the reader's attention to continental Africa and the Caribbean, we offer a synopsis of additional research priorities and agendas in ARS. Through critical and generative proposals we aim to connect the branches of an emerging field of inquiry to one set of intellectual roots in U.S. scholarly production. Because the Herskovits/Frazier debate has been such a predominant placeholder within African diaspora studies, we allot space in this essay for rethinking its implications for the field of ARS in an effort to salvage its social-scientific merit while extricating future discourses from its theoretical and methodological stronghold.

## Rethinking the Herskovits/Frazier Debate in Africana Religious Studies

Having written definitive texts on slavery, family and race in the late 1930s and early 1940s, E. Franklin Frazier produced most of his influential scholarship in the years preceding the groundbreaking work of John Hope Franklin (1947), Kenneth Stampp (1956), Stanley Elkins (1959), and Phillip Curtin (1969). Trusting the conclusions of his teacher Robert Park's and Ulrich B. Phillips's studies of slavery in the plantation South, Frazier was convinced prematurely that "in contrast to the situation in the West Indies, African traditions and practices did not take root and survive in the United States."

Frazier cited Park's research directly in accounting for the specific historical and socio-economic factors impeding African "survivals" in U.S. African American culture:

There was less opportunity in the United States . . . than in the West Indies for a slave to meet one of his own people, because the plantations were considerably smaller, more widely scattered, and, especially, because as soon as they were landed in this country, slaves were immediately divided and shipped in small numbers, frequently, no more than one or two at a time, to different plantations. . . . It was found easier to deal with the slaves, if they were separated from their kinsmen. On the plantation, they were thrown together with slaves who had already forgotten or only dimly remembered their life in Africa. English was the only language of the plantation. The attitude of the slave plantation to each fresh arrival seems to have been much like that of the older immigrant towards the greenhorn. Everything that marked him as an alien was regarded as ridiculous and barbaric.<sup>15</sup>

With these factors in mind, Frazier firmly established his position on the question of African survivals among African Americans on the U.S. mainland within the first chapter of his 1939 text *The Negro Family in the United States*.<sup>16</sup> Committed to the project of exposing the social causes of "deviant" behaviors among African-descended people in the United States, Frazier challenged prevailing assumptions about the Negro's innate (biological and cultural) inferiority by identifying the conditions of the slave trade and slavery as the corruptive source of "the Negro problem." The Negro's Africanness could not be blamed for her deviancy because there was no influential African heritage left to blame.<sup>17</sup> Frazier interpreted stories of African-born parents/grandparents and their customs as insignificant "scraps of memories" conveying only a hint of the Negro's African past.<sup>18</sup>

Though some might be tempted to view Frazier's theories as a consequence of his personal contempt for his African past, Frazier denied such characterization.<sup>19</sup> Without full access to the range of ideological persuasions claiming Frazier's allegiance throughout his scholarly career, any attempt to assess the degree to which Frazier was proud or ashamed of his African heritage is mere speculation. In fact, Frazier's travels across Africa as a UNESCO consultant from 1951 to 1953, his membership in the Council on African

Affairs during the 1940s and '50s, and his pioneering role in launching the Department of African Studies at Howard University in 1954 challenge simplistic readings of his political and intellectual posture toward Africa.<sup>20</sup> Instead, we suggest that a more productive analytical location for rethinking Frazier's contribution to conceptualizing U.S. African religious cultures is his perduring concern that "if whites came to believe that the Negro's social behavior was rooted in African culture, they would lose whatever sense of guilt they had for keeping the Negro down. Negro crime, for example, could be explained away as an "Africanism" rather than as due to inadequate police and court protection."<sup>21</sup> Taking for granted that Frazier's disavowal of U.S. Africanisms rested in his fidelity to disciplined social-scientific inquiry, his position was no less a strategy aimed at invalidating unfounded assertions of black people's natural propensity for criminal and other antisocial behavior based on their inferior African heritage.

To be sure, Herskovits was not indifferent to the ubiquitous racist scripts animating Frazier's research priorities and staging the debate each scholar came to symbolize during his time and ours. It is hard to imagine that Herskovits did not have Frazier in mind when he wrote in the first chapter of *The Myth of the Negro Past*:

For those concerned with the best interests of the Negro, there was ample reason to conclude that strategy demanded a refutation of the claim that the Negro always has been, and always must be, the bearer of an inferior tradition, which, since he can never shake it off, must doom him to a perpetual status of inferiority. That they may have overshot the mark in looking to change of emphasis rather than the erasing of misconception is beside the point; the reasons why they took the position they did take are, granting them their point of view, unassailable.<sup>22</sup>

In his own scurry to refute the same magical thinking about white racial superiority and African or black racial inferiority that Frazier despised, Herskovits upheld black African cultural difference but attacked the very concept that African culture is inferior to white European culture. Difference did not equal inferiority, and Herskovits went to great lengths to document and defend examples of African cultural "difference" as complex cases of human civilization.<sup>23</sup>

Though often eclipsed in discussions of “the debate,” Frazier exhibited appreciation for Herskovits’s research plan. In his review of *The Myth of the Negro Past*, for example, Frazier coupled blunt criticism of the study with laudatory remarks about its distinguishing strengths. Three of his four points support our position that U.S. African American religious studies should emphasize the synergies rather than the dichotomies in the Herskovits/Frazier conversation. Most important, Frazier’s appraisal of Herskovits amounts to a seventy-year-old methodological argument demanding proficiency in African cultural studies as a criterion for research in African American studies. According to Frazier, *The Myth of the Negro Past*:

... is in a number of respects a distinct contribution to our knowledge of the American Negro and should certainly provide a corrective to facile generalizations concerning the survival of African culture in the United States. First, the author has shown that it is necessary to have a sound knowledge of the culture of the regions in Africa from which the slaves came before one can discuss intelligently the influence of African survivals on the behavior of American Negroes. Second, in the chapters dealing with the tribal origins of the American Negroes and their African cultural heritage he has presented the best succinct treatment available. . . . Fourth, in the sections dealing with Africanisms in the religious life, the language, and the arts of the Negro in the United States the author has provided on the whole the best critical analysis of the available data on the subject yet published. An appendix contains an excellent outline of directives for further study, comprising investigations to be carried on in areas of Africa from which Negroes were brought as well as in areas of Negro concentration in the New World.<sup>24</sup>

At this point, Frazier was, of course, speaking from fieldwork experience, having recently traveled to Brazil, where he and his wife were greeted by Lorenzo Dow Turner—“the only black scholar who seriously studied [African] ‘survivals’” among U.S. blacks at the time.<sup>25</sup> Frazier’s acknowledgement of Africanisms in the religious and folkloric customs of Afro-Brazilians, while simultaneously arguing against any African influences in kinship structure and mating patterns, is additional indication that he was not wedded categorically to an ideology of disproving Africanisms in the diaspora. He admitted to what



he found convincing; and he could not ignore a custom (Candomblé) that involved the retention of African languages; the veneration of deities, with African names, whose counterparts could be identified in West Africa; and ritual practices whose justification seemed to contravene Western Christian theologies. To his credit, Frazier qualified his findings as provisional with expectation that additional research could either overturn or deepen his analysis. “Our investigation of the family life of the blacks in Bahia leads us to some tentative conclusions,” he wrote, “which should be tested by further study in the same area and other sections of Brazil.”<sup>26</sup>

Fate would have it that, within the same year, the Herskovitses came to fulfill Frazier’s recommendation. Melville’s reaction to Frazier’s Bahia family study sought to do more than just dispute his findings; he framed a critique of the deficient methodology guiding most U.S. American scholarly approaches to the question of African survivals:

In this field, analysis of cultural survivals has been carried on with almost complete disregard of the aboriginal forms of behavior which are variously held to have survived, disappeared or changed form as a result of contact with majority patterns. . . . It is but rarely recognized that this procedure is unique to this country [the United States]. Elsewhere—in Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil, for example—every effort has been made by scholars working in this field to obtain as complete an account as possible of the African baseline of tradition from which their materials are known or are assumed to have been derived.<sup>27</sup>

Herskovits’s study of African retentions in diaspora cultures, however, has been recast reductively as a search for African cultural fossils. Though he at times erroneously expected to find pristine Africanisms in the most ‘isolated’ regions of the African diaspora,<sup>28</sup> Herskovits complicated his African retentions theory over time. Hence, by the 1940s, he had deepened his analysis of acculturation through theories of “reinterpretation” that attempted to account for the fundamental processes that some scholars would later introduce as creolization<sup>29</sup> in the formation of African diasporas across the Americas and the Caribbean.<sup>30</sup>

In the same article on his research in Brazil, Herskovits reminded audiences that “what we seek are Africanisms, without reference to their degree of purity; that we are concerned with accommodations to a new setting;

that our aim is neither prescription nor prediction, but the understanding of process under acculturation.”<sup>31</sup> This is why Herskovits would develop a scale of retentions to indicate that there was tremendous variation in how Africans adapted to their diverse New World environments.<sup>32</sup> Irrespective of how antiquated this typological stratification of “Africanisms” is today, its appearance in Herskovits’s theoretical framework conveys his nuanced appreciation for differences in African cultural influences across New World black communities. It also signals greater affinity with some of Frazier’s conclusions than is typically admitted by scholars today. What Frazier labeled “scraps of memories” is what Herskovits might have considered attenuated retentions. Herskovits continually emphasized in his scholarship that “one can set off the United States from the rest of the New World as a region where departure from African modes of life was greatest, and where such Africanisms as persisted were carried through in generalized form almost never directly referable to a specific tribe or a definite area.”<sup>33</sup>

### Implications of the “Debate” for the Field of U.S. African American Religious Studies

It is true, in the end, that Frazier would not acknowledge many of the attenuated retentions Herskovits identified in his studies of U.S. African American culture. Furthermore, the Africanisms he did acknowledge were adduced as exceptions to the rule.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the predilection toward reading these social scientists’ theoretical positions contentiously is acute in the field of religious studies<sup>35</sup> among scholars working on the United States and some Anglophone Caribbean contexts. Too much has been made of the most reductive and simplified presentations of each scholar’s position in their “debate.” We wonder, however, whether scholars of U.S. African American religions would have developed broader research agendas and more diversified theoretical frameworks had they paid more attention to the synergies between Frazier’s and Herskovits’s perspectives.

Any adequate response to this query must contend with Albert Raboteau’s paradigmatic text *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (1978). Groundbreaking in its impact, *Slave Religion* tackled what Raboteau named in later years the “vexed problem of ‘African survivals’”

and thereby situated the Herskovits/Frazier debate as a central polemic in the field of religion.<sup>36</sup> In so doing, Raboteau neglected Frazier's point that Herskovits "ha[d] shown that it is necessary to have a sound knowledge of the culture of the regions in Africa from which the slaves came before one can discuss intelligently the influence of African survivals on the behavior of American Negroes."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps persuaded by Frazier's more popularized stance on Africanisms, Raboteau concluded by the second chapter in his historical analysis of "slave religion" that "in the United States the gods of Africa died."<sup>38</sup>

Raboteau's argument for the death of African gods in the U.S. begins in the first chapter where he offers a sound summary of African retentions in the religious cultures of the wider African diaspora, noting the prevalence of Yoruba/Dahomean religious traditions in countries like Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, and Haiti. When Raboteau turns to the U.S. landscape in chapter 2, however, he situates the United States as a space of difference that demands an alternative conceptual framework. He thus examines the strengths and weaknesses of the Herskovits/Frazier debate without investigating demographic data connecting, for example, a significant percentage of the U.S. African American population to West Central Africa (Congo-Angola). Moreover, he deserts his method (deployed in chapter 1) of exploring religio-cultural data from the specific "ethnic" regions of Africa that constituted home or heritage for the slave and indentured populations bonded in the African diaspora.<sup>39</sup>

Raboteau also misses the opportunity to build upon his brief exploration of Kongo epistemology and minkisi technologies in chapter 1. Instead he inadvertently evaluates the North American data with Yoruba/Dahomean and Catholic religious templates in mind. This accounts for the innovative associations he makes between black "folk beliefs and customs" in New Orleans and Mississippi involving the use of an ax to chop up or arrest a storm and the Yoruba thunder deity Shango whose chief sacred emblem is the ax.<sup>40</sup> Raboteau liberally identifies the metonymic significance of the ax vis- -vis the West African deity because he was predisposed to see those connections, given the volume and accessibility of scholarship on Yoruba religion relative to that on other traditions. However, with no analysis of Igbo, Mende, Serer, Bambara and Kongo religious cultures, Raboteau collapses the remaining data (including Conjure and Hoodoo) under generic categories of "magic" and "folk religion" and analyzes them as phenomena that most likely emerged from a fusion of African, European and Native American beliefs and practices.<sup>41</sup>

This methodological slippage signals a clear departure from his treatment of these and other ethnic groups when theorizing religious cultures of South America and the Caribbean in chapter 1.

By the beginning of the third chapter, Raboteau has moved on to the study of the African American Christian heritage. The shift to Christianity follows a coda at the end of chapter 2, where Raboteau closes his “death of the gods” discussion with a definitive statement: “Here, perhaps, is a fitting place to end the search for Africanisms in black religion in the United States.” This declaration is followed by a reminder that “African theology and ritual did not survive” in the U.S., just two pages after readers will have (1) viewed two juxtaposed photos of a burial ground in Congo and an “Afro-American grave decoration” in South Carolina; and (2) absorbed Raboteau’s generic discussion of “African funerary customs [that] did remain” in places like Mississippi and the Sea Islands. Given that the practices Raboteau describes relate to a specific orientation toward life and death, beliefs about life after death, connectivity across invisible and visible world domains, the fluid relationship between material and spiritual entities, and ancestorhood, we would argue that they do offer evidence of ritual and theological continuity between African and African-descended communities in the United States.<sup>42</sup> Bearing in mind the overwhelming demographic data, pertaining to the concentrated presence of Central Africans in South Carolina throughout the slave period, we would underscore the theological and ritual resonances between Central African Kongo and South Carolinian burial practices.<sup>43</sup>

Symbolically, Raboteau’s chapter transitions convey a research agenda quite compatible with E. Franklin Frazier’s theoretical conclusions. He moves the reader from discussing Africanisms in religious traditions of the Caribbean and South American diasporas (chapter 1); to presenting the death of African gods and the survival of generic magical and folk practices in North America (chapter 2); and, finally, to narrating a history of African American Christian conversion via the Great Awakenings and the black independent church movement (chapters 3 and 4). This pattern of privileging Christian experience obtains throughout the remaining three chapters despite Raboteau’s repeated acknowledgement that African-descended people in the United States had negligible exposure to Christianity until the early nineteenth century. In one instance, he states that “the majority of slaves . . . remained only minimally touched by Christianity by the second decade of the nineteenth century.”<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, his portrait of slave religion, which we can assume began to

take shape in the seventeenth century, emerges as a Christian religious culture mildly peppered with African indigenous and Islamic styles of worship and synthetic magical folk practices across 246 years of enslaved African presence in the Anglo United States. When we consider the arrival of enslaved Africans in Winyah Bay (1526) and colonial Spanish Florida (1565), we have to acknowledge even earlier contexts for African religious formation. Raboteau's four-chapter emphasis on the post-Second Great Awakening period, even if too narrowly focused on Christian experience, accounts for only forty-five years of slave experience. And his theoretically circumscribed coverage of the previous 201 years of slave religion within the forty-eight pages that constitute chapter 2 is particularly insufficient for a 321-page book.

With this said, *Slave Religion's* unparalleled and substantial contribution to U.S. black religious studies, and the wider field of African American studies, provided an indispensable platform for innovative research of the past thirty-five years. Raboteau himself addresses some of the very limitations we point out here in the afterword he wrote for the 2004 edition of the book. Reflecting on how "newer work also challenged me to become more sophisticated in my understanding of specific African religions and their transmission to the Americas," Raboteau admitted that "the Kongo-Angola area would receive more emphasis were I writing today," and confesses, "I also realized that *Slave Religion* conveyed a static, ahistorical narrative of African religions under the vague rubric of 'African Heritage.'"<sup>45</sup> We emphasize some of *Slave Religion's* shortcomings at this juncture only to clarify the mission and goals of the field of ARS—a field that we envision will lead the way in preparing students to update and build upon the pathbreaking scholarship of pioneers like Raboteau by pursuing research agendas with transdisciplinary methodological finesse and theoretical sophistication.

We distinguish transdisciplinary from unidisciplinary research in several respects. The transdisciplinary scholar transgresses all relevant disciplinary boundaries to interlace varied tools, methods, frameworks, and datasets in pursuit of a research problem. She responds to the problem-based questions driving her research as opposed to unidisciplinary questions and predispositions that impose limits upon her conceptual options based upon her principal discipline's preferred methods, theories, and tools. Inter/multidisciplinary scholarship leans toward transdisciplinarity but does not necessarily proceed from problem-driven inquiries that demand consolidated research methods in the pursuit of comprehensive proposals.

Staying with Albert Raboteau's work, we can see, for example, how his conventional scholarly training actually discouraged him from venturing into the field of "comparative slavery," a research strategy demanded by the problems he set out to address.

Why the gods died, why African theology and ritual did not survive here as elsewhere in the New World are questions which impinge on the developing field of study known as comparative slavery, an area which involves ethnography, sociology, economics, demography, and history. A great deal of comparative study remains to be done from the perspectives of all these disciplines. Until such study is more advanced than it is at the present time, only tentative conclusions can be reached about the discrepancy between African retentions in Latin America and the United States.<sup>46</sup>

Much progress has been made in comparative slavery since *Slave Religion* first appeared in 1978. Still, had Raboteau received transdisciplinary training, he would have been compelled to consider the breath of relevant ethnographic, sociological, economic, demographic and historical research available to him at the time before prematurely concluding that African gods, theology, and ritual "did not survive" in the United States.

We recognize that not all ARS projects will issue from transdisciplinary frameworks. However, we imagine that, if ARS scholars become self-conscious about the possible utility of transdisciplinary approaches when conceiving new projects, they will (1) establish uncompromising research standards; (2) produce new knowledge that updates prior studies; and (3) underscore the rationale for conducting both localized and transcontextual research within the purview of ARS.

### Attentiveness to Geography and Coloniality in Africana Religious Studies

As we look to the future scholarly development of ARS, its intellectual bequest will rest in its meticulous attention to generative realities, including geography and coloniality; diaspora and continuous migrations; and materiality and meaning. Under this directive, we find ARS a unique context for

the discipline of religion to exhibit its methodological agility. Religionists will be able to contribute “constitutive and systematic questions” to the interpretive discourse; provide new language and modalities regarding distinct religious phenomena; and offer insight into the plethora of “meaning structures” created by Africana communities in multiple and at times intersecting geographies.<sup>47</sup>

Configuring new spatial dimensions that decalcify approaches to Africa allows for a more comprehensive study of Africana religions and the “empiricity of the new lands” where African populations converged.<sup>48</sup> In researching specific regional geographies, scholarly studies of Africana religions are intentionally placed in dialogue with concrete notions of “space and geo-political relations” as they are played out in national and historical borders. Scholars of Africana religions are able to engage the “geo-politics of knowledge” in these regional boundaries and subvert normative understandings of Africans represented in intellectual discourses of coloniality.<sup>49</sup>

Because many Africana religious cultures in Africa and in “diasporated”<sup>50</sup> contexts have been forced to navigate within “imperial spatial formations,” studies of Africana religions require interrogations of what Nelson Maldonado-Torres identifies as the “coloniality of power” or a “modern model of power that links together racial formation, the control of labor, the state, and knowledge production.”<sup>51</sup> He ultimately urges scholars to challenge what he understands as “epistemic racism.”<sup>52</sup> This concept identifies “Europe as a privileged epistemic site” that conceals the global nature of modernity and results in the suppression of the “epistemic potential of non-European epistemes.”<sup>53</sup> What is at stake for Maldonado-Torres, and useful for our purposes in defining ARS’s conceptual purview, is that “spatiality, coloniality, and the struggle for epistemic diversity” are intertwined with the “imperative for epistemic and ethical pluriversality in the world.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, African peoples and their religious legacies have been historically invisible in modern conceptions of *uni-* vs. *pluriversality* in the world and often as a direct result of how “coloniality makes reference to race, and thus to space and experience.”<sup>55</sup> Central to our task as scholars of Africana religions is developing ways to engage these configurations of race, space, and experience that position African peoples as knowledge producers, creators of meaning structures, multi-lingual communicators, and self-authorized specialists. Within this assemblage, space and geography are not just physical entities. They are hermeneutical indices for understanding the politics of positionality and power,

complex cultural relationality, “micro-conflictualities” among disparate populations, and the surplus of meanings and significances that necessarily constitute the nexus of Africana religions.<sup>56</sup>

The operationalization of coloniality both on the continent and in its dispersed national geographies has meant that African populations and their religious cultures, at various historical intervals, have had to (1) endure tangible encounters with Catholic and Protestant missiology; (2) withstand the demonization of African religious cosmologies; (3) contest the infantilization of African rituals; and (4) subvert the criminalization of African practices while protecting the integrity of their inner cosmologies and meanings. The challenge in cultivating ARS is how best to probe these constellations of ingredients in our scholarship without hastily seeking safe and conclusive refuge in metanarratives of Christian conquest, reactionary syncretisms, or premature pronouncements of Africana religions as dead upon arrival in certain geographic regions in the absence of circumspective examination. This is the deeper empirical, heuristic, and theoretical work that ARS demands.

For those of us across disciplines whose scholarly trajectories encompass Africa’s dispersed communities and modern geographies in the Caribbean and the Americas, ARS entails the investigation of an “Atlanticized” Africa that embodies strategies of resistance and rehumanization and a constant historicizing of identity politics.<sup>57</sup> Accessing this Atlanticized Africa requires analyzing what J. Lorand Matory calls “its modern political, economic, and ideological conditions” and what James A. Noel identifies as “the *conditions* within which the gods made their hierophany or appearance in Africa and the Americas.”<sup>58</sup> Both in their manifestations on the continent of Africa and in their transport beyond its boundaries, Africana religions have commonly had to assume postures that negotiate contexts of “radical alterity,” deracination, and “epistemic subordination.”<sup>59</sup>

Given wider discussions of an Atlanticized Africa and coloniality, ARS must account for the fact that religious meaning can never be divorced from materiality. Atlantic geographies produced “new modes of imagining materiality” through constructions of race, religion, and commodification. African peoples were designated “symbolic imaginative others,” made to function as a “negative structure of concreteness” and “*imagined* as objects through the discursive practices of their oppressors,”<sup>60</sup> all the while attempting to sustain human activities of cultural and religious production. The experience



and expression of this religious production was quite diverse given that multiple communities of Africans occupied and cohabited national spaces, creating a plethora of cross-fertilized traditions. Thus, the range of Africana populations must be portrayed in our collective scholarship, including groups of African recaptive indentured laborers who arrived in the Western Hemisphere in the mid-nineteenth century and who often resided in close knit linguistic, cultural, and religious settlements. By examining various populations of Africans, we inevitably broaden older approaches and historiographies, foster new ways of theorizing diaspora intersectionality and interculturality, and expand the corpus of ethno-comparative works. In this way, diaspora is allowed to speak multivocally as “process,” as “condition,” and as “unit of analysis.”<sup>61</sup>

Finally, a fundamental challenge, particularly for scholars in the study of religion, is to imagine Africana religions in discursive spaces within and beyond black church studies and Christological imperatives. This would necessarily involve investigating Africana religions in the sacred terrains of “extrachurch orientations,”<sup>62</sup> and exploring the pliability of Africana religious boundaries. It also requires examining Africana mystical technology and theurgical epistemologies as legitimate locales for generative religious reflection. Often these non-ecclesial spaces, the “*untouchables* in African diasporic theological discourse,” are where understudied Africana religions flourish and proliferate.<sup>63</sup> According to Dianne Stewart, “one reason for the lack of attention to the African heritage, especially as manifested in the African-derived religions, has to do with their status as subterranean traditions, which were forced into hiding and seclusion. Hence, their invisibility, relative to the visibility of Christianity, contributes to their marginal treatment in African diasporic theological reflection.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, scholars are invited to engage the multiple “manifestations of sacrality” that comprise Africana religiosity.<sup>65</sup> These include the traditions of religious experts such as seers, prophets, diviners and healers as well as their repertoires of practices that encompass divination, spirit mediumship, charm and talisman production, and mystical pharmacopeia for remedying social affliction and restoring personal wellness.

The above notwithstanding, ARS as a field is in no way restricted to studies of African heritage religious traditions in diasporas formed by enslaved and indentured populations in the Western Hemisphere. It is broad enough to support research on African populations in other regions of the globe that emerged and are still emerging under different historical conditions than those

that brought Africans to Western Europe and its colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. We have in mind, for example, studies of Africans who traversed the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean in earlier centuries, which should be placed alongside studies of Africans in the Atlantic world.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, we expect that contributors to the discussion will explore these and other research agendas beyond the scope of this essay.

### “Africana” Motifs and the U.S. African American Religious Studies Horizon

Since religious studies is an interdisciplinary field, scholars working on U.S. African American material have availed themselves of varied disciplinary lenses to pursue their research. Yet they have proceeded mainly with sociological and theological inquiries under the shadow of the Herskovits/Frazier debate. The case could be made that, as a guild, religionists have all but ignored the opportunity to take a critical methodological turn toward phenomenological approaches that guide historical comparisons of religious cultures. Over forty years ago, Charles Long intimated the futility of setting research agendas in U.S. African American religious studies within the parameters of the Herskovits/Frazier debate and the intellectual traditions scholars of their generation inherited. Long’s subtle admonition that his scholarly peers in religious studies neglected comprehensive historical and phenomenological methods still warrants a response today. Concerning “Americans of African descent,” he wrote:

We have not yet seen anything on the order of Pierre Verger’s study of African religion in South America or of Alfred Métraux’s study of the same phenomenon in the Atlantic islands. On the contemporary scene, a group of black scholars have been about the task of writing a distinctively “black theology. . . .” They are essentially apologetic theologians. What we have, in fact, are two kinds of studies: those arising from the social sciences, and an explicitly theological apologetic tradition. *This limitation of methodological perspectives has led to a narrowness of understanding and the failure to perceive certain creative possibilities in the black community in America.*<sup>67</sup>

As a historian of religions, Long was a lone voice arguing for a methodological shift that would have changed the course of U.S. black religious studies research if even a select group of students had seen the value in phenomenologically driven historical training. At a time when African American scholars came to dominate black religious studies, the majority of students sought training in doctrinal Christian theological studies under the direction of James Cone, or as committed exponents of the black liberation theological school he helped pioneer. Since Long's observation was published in 1971, the field has produced, nonetheless, some works on broader religious expressions of U.S. African Americans and other African diasporans. Among them are scholars and seminal theoretical texts that advance the transdisciplinary vision of ARS.

Exceptionally noteworthy publications in the discipline of religion include the works of Long, Josiah U. Young, Theophus H. Smith, and James A. Noel. Each demonstrates an integrative approach that unveils how Africana religions generate meaning through reflections on Africa, rehumanizing metaphors of self-designation, protective strategies against social and ontological alienation, and "curative transformations of reality."<sup>68</sup> Long's groundbreaking text *Significations* (1986) and his theoretical scholarship in the history of religions set a determining standard in the discipline of religion that has remained unsurpassed for decades. Demonstrating a fluency in both African indigenous traditions and diaspora religious cultures, Long fashioned an approach to Africana religions that established Africa and its diaspora as integral sites for understanding modern meanings of religion, globalism, mercantilism, materiality, and Western intellectualism.

For Long, the meaning of religion in the Atlantic world cannot be unfettered from an "incipient globalization that necessarily coincides with intercultural encounter and the Americas" nor from an understanding of the Enlightenment that "proceeds from intracultural European self-reflection."<sup>69</sup> Meaning for Long is not exclusively understood in terms of significance, value, or import but includes the "power of meaning" and its ability to name and structure discourses, to impart "cultural categories" and definitional codes of the meaning of humanity, and to create "synthetic" orientations and modalities that function as reality.<sup>70</sup> One of Long's most enduring intellectual legacies has been his theoretical reflections on Africa as symbol, historical reality, and religious image. Within this Africana theorization, Long brings texture and notional precision to the problems confronting Africana religions in terms of authentication, primordialism, diasporic landlessness, and

religious revalorization.<sup>71</sup> Among his many intellectual gifts to the discipline has been his ability to distinguish religious experience as a locative resource for “counter-creative signification” as well as a site for the “deployment of new meanings.”<sup>72</sup>

Josiah Young’s *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors* (1992) identifies the symbol of Africa and a “transcontextual symbol of the ancestors” as central components in black theological reflection.<sup>73</sup> He broadens the epistemic foundation of black religion to include not only African indigenous resources but also the creativity of black aesthetics and the expediency of black nationalist politics in its critique of the “virulence of white supremacy.”<sup>74</sup> Young’s affinity with Charles Long’s revaluing of the extrachurch is apparent in his decentering of Jesus Christ as the “norm” of Africana religions.<sup>75</sup> Instead, he privileges ancestors, elders, and a “hermeneutical center” he identifies along with Sterling Stuckey as “Africanness.” Insofar as his project is not interiorly diasporic but exogenously Pan-African, Young encourages scholars to “probe the meaning of ancestral legacies” for therein will be found “an appreciation of the heterodoxy of black religion” worldwide.<sup>76</sup>

Two years later, Theophus Smith’s, *Conjuring Culture* (1994) continued the project of distilling the features of black religion. In so doing he was able to posit novel theoretical interpretations of Africana religions. First, Smith engaged in a figurative use of the African American conjure tradition as a “new conceptual paradigm for understanding Western religious and cultural phenomena generally.”<sup>77</sup> Positioning conjure as “a heuristic concept in black studies” and as an “indigenous spirituality,” Smith theoretically maps conjure’s stratagems of intervention, efficacy, and potency onto concrete modes of enacting social resistance and transformation.<sup>78</sup> Second, conjure, with its African divinatory attributes to read and resist, to summon and suppress, to cure and to counter, becomes, for Smith, a gravid metaphor and method for understanding how African populations have engaged in diverse religious performances of “conjuring diaspora.”<sup>79</sup> Smith reveals how African populations have had to inhabit noxious social histories while utilizing the “pharmacoepic wisdom of their ancestral heritage” and conjuring resistant pharmacosms for “curing racism and racist violence.”<sup>80</sup> Third, and perhaps Smith’s most salient contribution to black religious studies is his insistence that many of the symbolic “christianisms”<sup>81</sup> within Africana spirituality function largely in roles of *surrogacy* for African populations displaced from their elemental cultures. According to Smith, the Christian Bible, in particular, “has come to serve as a surrogate sacred text for an ethnic

community lacking indigenous texts (or estranged from its ancestral oral and epic productions).<sup>82</sup> Smith’s work challenges Christian over-determinacy in Africana religious analysis and encourages more nuanced readings of figurative and associative Christian/biblical tropes.

Complementing the discourses of Smith, Young, and particularly Long in the twenty-first century is James Noel’s *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (2009). In this text, Noel employs transdisciplinary methods and frameworks for furthering Africana religious theory and interpretation. Noel’s work privileges the aesthetic resources of Young: the “creative employment of psychic and cultural strategies”<sup>83</sup> referenced in Smith’s description of conjurational spirituality;<sup>84</sup> and African symbolism, reflections on materiality, and the critique of canonical architects of Western intellectualism advanced by Charles Long. Through his reading of the encounters spawned by Western expansionism, Noel places in dialogue the specific questions of blackness, and black religion with that of whiteness, Western thought, history, and religious formation. Noel unveils the materialist impulse and structure characterizing much of the thoughts and exchanges pertaining to the West’s encounter with others—especially the African Other. His theoretical analysis of Africana people’s “religious constitution” takes into consideration its pragmatic openness, its associative capabilities, and its negotiations in new “geo-political spaces” of the Atlantic world.<sup>85</sup>

Peter Paris, Donald Matthews, Will Coleman, Yvonne Chireau, Tracey Hucks and Dianne Stewart Diakit  also deepen conversations in ARS. In 1995 Peter Paris joined Josiah Young in producing pan-Africanist ethical scholarship that included an extensive engagement of African scholars and philosophical ideas. *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse*, in its consideration of African scholarship and indigenous thought, models the kind of Atlantic exchanges between continental and diaspora scholars we imagine the field of ARS will inspire.<sup>86</sup> Paris’ conceptualization of “spirituality” is informed by a “broad consensus among African peoples that the three forms of life, namely, nature, history, and spirit are ontologically united and interdependent.”<sup>87</sup> This Africana spirituality configures an ethical orientation that resonates within the cultures of Africa and African North America. From his study, Paris distills an Africana social ethic informed by the moral virtues of beneficence, forbearance, practical wisdom, improvisation, forgiveness, justice, and public and private responsibilities.

Peter Paris's 1995 intervention on the heels of Josiah Young's 1992 *A Pan-African Theology*, however, was not enough to prevent Donald Matthews's declaration that "the black theology movement is suffering from a crisis in method."<sup>88</sup> This is the opening sentence of his 1998 book, *Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature*. What characterized this methodological crisis? Matthews identifies dualistic theorizing, guided by a politics of respectability, as a central problem constraining the methodological approaches of most black liberation theologians, as well as historians and sociologists of religion. He gives particular attention to Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion* and critiques its ambiguous analysis of the religious expressions considered therein. Matthews argues that Raboteau's interpretation of slave religion contradicts the data upon which he draws. "Even though Raboteau's evidence reveals both African and Christian cultural influences in African American religion," writes Matthews, "his methodological dualism, which separates structures from meaning, guides him to deny the African cultural influence at the level of meaning."<sup>89</sup>

Refusing to entangle himself within a protracted debate, Matthews proposes a new theoretical model for interpreting U.S. African American religiosity, with emphasis upon the spirituals and other religious traditions that date back to the slave period. Establishing the indivisibility of structure and meaning, Matthews develops an original theory grounded upon the form and content of the spirituals. He explains the theoretical outcome of his "cultural-structural dialectical methodological approach" as follows:

This research revealed a consensus about the main structural features of the spirituals: rhythmic structures that were improvisational, antiphonal and polyrhythmic; intense emotional states; themes of family and freedom; and an intimacy toward the human, divine, and natural communities. These features can be used as hermeneutic guides for interpreting African American narratives and texts. Using these features gives the advantage of using an interpretive framework that reflects African American religion and culture and avoids relying on categories derived from Western theological perspectives. This does not mean that African or African American religion is totally distinct from Western theological meanings, for, in large part due to the Great Awakenings, American Christianity shares many of the religious practices found in African and African American religion.

I am arguing that African American religion should be judged against its own set of standards and not against those of a Western, rationalistic literary theology.<sup>90</sup>

Matthews employs his framework to interpret other African American artistic genres in conversation with black literary theorists and writers. Apart from identifying “ethics of discretion” in the structures of the spirituals, he analyzes how indigenous African theological sensibilities and spiritual orientations can be misinterpreted by theorists who exclusively credit the Western Christian heritage for shaping African American Christianity.<sup>91</sup> He engages Yoruba scholar Wole Soyinka’s cultural-structural analysis of mythic narratives to refute Benjamin Mays’s “otherworldly” classification of a select group of spirituals. Matthews’s familiarity with Yoruba mythology allows him to conclude that

the style of the spirituals, which was supposed to reflect African Americans’ dependence upon an otherworldly Christian evangelism, may predate Christian evangelicalism through its relationship to this West African mythic style, a structural style that in its Yoruban context reflects a religious philosophy in which creation and destruction, much like that of the Christian passion narration are parts of a ritual drama first played out by divine actors.<sup>92</sup>

Matthews situates his methodological contributions within the scholarly lineage of W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Melville Herskovits.<sup>93</sup> His inclusion of African religious philosophy as a theoretical resource for interpreting African American theology addresses not only Herskovits’s wish that theorists of U.S. African American culture study Africa but also responds to Frazier’s conclusion that scholars cannot comment intelligently upon the presence or absence of Africanisms in U.S. African American culture without credible knowledge of the African cultural heritage.

Will Coleman’s theological treatment of enslaved African Americans and their semantic world makes use of WPA narratives to elucidate vernacular theological insights in the linguistic structures and symbolic thought of their narrators. In *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (2000), he argues for a new approach to African American religious thought and theological imagination that considers their

affinities with African mythic and philosophical traditions. Coleman pursues this agenda by first discussing the African foundations of African American vernacular theologies. Thus, he spends the entire first chapter analyzing important facets of Vodun's epistemological structures and religious philosophy "to emphasize some dimensions of a system of beliefs and practices that have been transmitted in one form or another across the Atlantic Ocean from West Africa to the Americas."<sup>94</sup> This structural and methodological move distinguishes Coleman's project from prior constructions of black theology because he refuses to identify his conceptual framework with the categories and epistemological assumptions of Western Christian systematic theology.

Together, Coleman and Matthews introduce the possibility that Western-trained scholars might not be in possession of the best conceptual tools to properly apprehend the knowledges and orientations embedded within the vernacular speech cultures (spoken, chanted or sung) of enslaved African Americans and their descendants. Indeed scholars—operating out of their own speech cultures—have a tendency to interpret the speech cultures of enslaved U.S. African Americans as Western, Christian, English vocabularies with which they are naturally familiar. Matthews and Coleman's scholarship suggests that this interpretive stance invites methodological errors of mistranslation at definitional, conceptual, semiotic and epistemological levels. They bring to our attention the necessity in black religious studies of acquiring greater translational competency before interpreting the oral traditions of African-descended peoples in the United States.

Yvonne Chireau's *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003) concludes where the challenge to scholars of Africana religions necessarily begins—with urging scholars to "pay careful attention to the ways that new worlds—and new meanings—can be created by religion in various contexts."<sup>95</sup> In studying the North American context, Chireau disrupts traditional claims that conjure spirituality and medicinal, pharmaco-peic traditions were disparate and marginalized phenomena throughout black communities. Her work provides sound evidentiary data to the contrary and situates conjure, hoodoo, and rootworking practices among a "vast territory of behaviors that human beings may invest with religious meaning."<sup>96</sup> Most of all, Chireau's book creates a discursive space for interrogating normative vocabulary and categories in the study of religion. She deepens our understanding of the historiography surrounding designations of magic versus religion, vernacular versus orthodox religion, and church versus "extrachurch orientations"



(à la Long). What becomes especially pronounced in Chireau's work is that "African American religion . . . not only embodies ecclesial formations of faith but also encompasses noninstitutionalized expressions and activities" that subvert "conventional spiritual authorities."<sup>97</sup>

Our own scholarship has sought to bridge disciplinary boundaries through studying the spirituality of African-descended peoples of North America and the Caribbean. Critical here are modern and postmodern Atlantic exchanges, from which derive the religious legacies of West and Central African heritage traditions in Jamaica, Trinidad, and the United States. These heritage traditions are in turn linked to the political dispositions that have influenced neo-African religions since the emergence of black religious nationalisms in the 1960s and '70s. We have found that varied approaches drawn from the humanities and the social sciences provide multiple interpretive venues for studying Africana religions. In the end, our scholarship encourages North American religionists to develop research parameters sensitive to the analytical necessity of conceptualizing the Atlantic and North America as dialogical spaces where "ethnic" continental African, pan-African and neo-African religious cultures, including Christianity, have appeared and continue to be improvised. With this concern in mind, Stewart Diakité, in particular, has combined archival and ethnographic research methods to access the ritual contexts and theological imagination of the custodians of Obeah, Myal, Pocol/Revival-Zion, Kumina and Rastafari—religious repertoires that draw from "ethnic" African and pan-Africanized spiritual grammars.<sup>98</sup>

A central finding from this work is that, during some historical periods of African Jamaican religious formation, it is more precise to examine how "christianisms" appear within African-derived religious cultures than to question how "Africanisms" have been retained in a Protestant slave society. Furthermore, it is evident that the construction of Africanness as a social identity constitutes, in many respects, a diaspora project spawned by the modern slave trade.<sup>99</sup> This means scholars should interrogate diaspora significations of Africa with the awareness that, when African-descended peoples in the Americas and the Caribbean were naming themselves and their institutions "African," the majority of peoples living in Africa had not yet come to identify themselves or their cultures as "African." In the end, diaspora and continental significations and embodiments of African identities should not be placed in a tug-of-war contest that everyone expects the continental side to win. Diaspora and continental African identities enrich, complement and challenge one

another across diverse, contradictory, and overlapping phenomena. These findings and research implications have affirmed our commitment to converse with liberation theologies of the African diaspora and social science discourses about African heritage traditions in the Caribbean and the Americas.

Hucks specifically has aimed to re-narrativize U.S. African American religious experience through the lens of *lived religion*. This approach intervenes in the reduction of U.S. African American religion to the black church and thereby resonates with the work of other historians of religion like Yvonne Chireau, Richard Brent Turner, Edward Curtis, and James Noel. Reshaping the historical narratives of black religion in the United States thus makes visible a variety of non-Christian traditions.

At another level, our research on Yoruba-based Ifá and Òrìṣà traditions in the United States and Trinidad also contributes to a growing scholarly corpus on Yoruba religious cultures in the African diaspora. While many studies of the Yoruba diaspora turn to the Nigerian Yoruba heritage as the established source of theological and ritual standards, we emphasize analyzing Yoruba spiritual diasporas as sites of local theologies and ritual practices that are no less 'authentic' than their Nigerian counterparts. This emphasis underscores the prominence of Africa as a religious symbol whose meanings cannot be eclipsed by theories of cultural discontinuity.<sup>100</sup>

Other trajectories define the contours of Africana religions in the United States and are thus definitive in the burgeoning field of Africana religious studies. Though E. Franklin Frazier did not make much of the data he compiled on enslaved Muslims in the United States,<sup>101</sup> in the past sixty years, we have seen several volumes devoted to unearthing narratives of African Muslims and their social networks across the United States and the wider African diaspora during and after the era of slavery.<sup>102</sup> Most have been authored by secular historians and social scientists; however, Albert Raboteau's student, Richard Brent Turner, did much to offer a sound historical overview of U.S. African American Muslims informed by phenomenological analysis of how some Muslims of African descent came to embody particular significations of the sacred.

Edward Curtis and Danielle Sigler's 2009 edited volume, *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*, revisits the wider study of Hebraic, Islamic and Christian "sects and cults," originally launched by Fauset, an anthropologist, in 1944<sup>103</sup> and only addressed comprehensively in the field of religion with the 1972 publication of Joseph Washington's *Black Sects and*

*Cults*.<sup>104</sup> In his contribution to the volume Sylvester Johnson retheorizes such religious movements as “ethnic” religions as opposed to black nationalist and race consciousness movements.<sup>105</sup> Johnson also emphasizes how Fauset’s exuberant focus on invalidating Melville Herskovits’s theory of the Negro’s innate religiosity caused him to deny prematurely any African cultural influences upon such movements. As was the practice of the day for a number of African American social scientists, Fauset refuted the possibility of African retentions in black sects and cults without adequate knowledge of and investigation into African religious and cultural studies. Johnson’s demand for a corrective to Fauset’s “anti-Africanisms” assumption in studies of emergent and marginal black religious movements is in no way a denial of the modern American social horizons that weighed heavily upon their rise and initial dissemination within under-resourced U.S. black communities. Rather he maintains that in Fauset’s “well-intentioned effort to map African American religion as authentically American . . . he wrongly ignored the veritable influences of African culture among not only black Americans but also white Americans.”<sup>106</sup>

Released in 2000, Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deustch’s edited volume, *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism*, is yet another much needed study that also positions black Hebraic traditions under the umbrella of Africana religions not solely because the subjects referenced throughout the volume’s essays are of African descent, but especially because the essays interrogate how any number of Black Hebrews/Jews remember, signify, and deploy Africa as a religious symbol.<sup>107</sup>

Most of the scholars discussed above comprise a movement away from an overwhelming yet narrow focus on Christian studies of slave religion, institutional Christianity, and black Christian thought toward the exploration of the religious as orientation and as diverse repertoires that flow from the extension of Africa into the Atlantic world and the Western Hemisphere.<sup>108</sup> Collectively they represent an important research legacy in the field of ARS. From one angle, these “Africana-ist” scholars have widened the boundaries of U.S. African American religious studies without interrupting the normative status of institutional Protestantism/Christianity as “religion proper” and “proper religion.”<sup>109</sup> From another angle, they have outlined a new agenda for the study of U.S. African American religiosity that represents one central aim of what we believe ARS must accomplish—the production of credible trans-disciplinary research on how religious cultures bind the African Diaspora to continental Africa. The urgency of erecting disciplinary structures, academic

programs, and scholarly venues that can operationalize this Africana agenda as a new field of inquiry cannot be overstated.

Current titles in religious studies, for instance, suggest that twenty-first-century scholarship is still grappling with twentieth-century problems. The introduction to Cornel West and Eddie Glaude Jr.'s anthology, *African American Religious Thought* (2003), illustrates this point. The editors compile the seminal 1,054-page volume with representative voices of twentieth-century black scholarly reflection. In establishing historical parameters for the study of U.S. African American religious experience, they offer a working definition of the widely used term "black religion" and describe the first of five historical stages of black religious formation:

The words "black religion" serve as a conceptual shortcut to manage a number of different practices, beliefs, choices, values, events, and institutions that compose black life in the United States. Such a view requires of scholars in the field—as it does in religious studies in general—a careful and systematic examination of the analytic value of the term "religion" in our analysis of black culture. . . . Historical periodization is important in this regard, and we maintain that five significant historical moments ought to inform our inquiry into African American religious life. The first stage can be viewed as "African American Religion as the Problem of Slavery." This period lasted roughly from the mid-eighteenth century to 1863, from the great Revivals to the Emancipation Proclamation. During this period, African Americans forged a distinctive Christian outlook in response to the institution of slavery. The first African American religious denominations were formed in the North. And we can begin to see the complex relationship between black religious expression and a developing national black politics.<sup>110</sup>

Several omissions are striking in this model of historical periodization: First, the inattention to 150 years of African-descended peoples and their religious experiences in colonial and slaveholding America is indefensible. Second, the marking of the first stage of African American religious history with the First Great Awakening reinforces the unstated assumption behind most religious studies research on U.S. Americans of African descent—that religion commences with Christianity. As the editors indicate, "during this

period, African Americans forged a distinctive Christian outlook . . . and [t]he first African American religious denominations were formed in the North.” Third, if, “a careful and systematic examination of the analytic value of the term religion in [their] analysis of black culture” remains guided by an exclusive focus on institutional Christianity beginning with the 1740s, how does this research imperative address Raboteau’s acknowledgement that “[t]he majority of slaves . . . remained only minimally touched by Christianity by the second decade of the nineteenth century?” These remarks might lead readers to conclude that early custodians of African Islamic traditions and indigenous African religions made no contribution to African American religious thought. West and Glaude’s assertions are puzzling when placed in dialogue with the religionists previously discussed. Moreover, when we factor in the evidence uncovered by an appreciable body of secular historical scholarship on African-descended people in the United States, the significance of African Islamic and indigenous orientations to African American religious thought is indisputable. In researching and making available the diversity of U.S. African American religious cultures and the range of encounters and exchanges that produced them, secular historians have much to offer religionists.

### The Contributions of Secular Historians to Africana Religious Studies

Secular historians who publish in the area of Africana religions bring distinct expertise to scholarship on the religious heritages of African-descended peoples in North America (and other regions of the Americas/Caribbean). Their collective contribution to what we now know about the religious cultures of enslaved Africans and U.S. African Americans finds rare parallel in the collective scholarship of religious studies scholars working on the United States. For most, this is due to their competency in both African and U.S. African American history and their exhaustive and innovative reliance on diverse primary and secondary sources. Following their leads, ARS has the potential to transform the conceptual landscape for theorizing and periodizing U.S. African American religious formation from slavery to the present. Seminal contributions of this group include (1) utilizing the most updated demographic data on the transatlantic slave trade to offer more precise analysis of where specific “ethnic” African populations settled or migrated in the African

diaspora, including the United States; (2) focusing on carefully periodized regional/subregional studies that allow them to present textured analyses of the religious heritages of specific enslaved communities and their descendants as opposed to generalized studies of “slave religion” or “African American religion;” (3) creative and comprehensive interrogation of a wide range of primary source documents to expand our historical knowledge of the religious worlds of African descendants in the United States; (4) establishing the historical fact that diverse African communities, enriched by ethnic and pan-African networks, existed in the United States (and in other diasporas) alongside African American communities; (5) complicating our understanding of U.S. African American Christian formation; (6) locating “ethnic” African antecedents for U.S. African American religious practices and beliefs previously conceptualized under generic classifications such as magic, superstition, fetishism or folk customs; and (7) analyzing “secular” manifestations of African religious cultures, involving, for example, medicine and health, weaponry and warfare, labor and food production, natural and built environments, aesthetics and adornment, kinship networks, and oral tradition.

Among the exemplary scholars of this cadre of secular historians are Janet Cornelius, Silvia Frey, Betty Wood, Mechal Sobel, Milton Sernett, and Wallace Best. Their work has deepened our understanding of the African foundations and transplanted cultures within U.S. American Christianity. Phillip Morgan, Peter Wood, William Pierson, and Douglas Chambers, furthermore, offer indispensable social histories of the colonial and antebellum settings in which African religious cultures emerged. Finally, John Thornton, Paul Lovejoy, Robin Law, Joseph Miller, Jane Landers, Lawrence Levine, Margaret Washington Creel, Sterling Stuckey, Sharla Fett, Michael Gomez, Jason Young, and Ras Michael Brown have produced new narratives of U.S. African American religious cultures that shatter long-held generalizations about the early and widespread acculturation of African populations in the United States. Their research corpus is especially instructive with regard to outlining the central role historical method will play in the work of ARS scholarship.<sup>111</sup>

The field of religious studies has produced little comparable to the findings of Margaret Washington Creel, whose study of the Gullah community compared Sierra Leonian Sande and Poro initiation rituals with the Gullah Seekin’ ritual or Michael Gomez’s examination of numerous advertisements listing the ethnic heritages of runaway slaves as well as his conceptual framing of their “polycultural” identities. The scholarship of Africanists like John

Thornton, Joseph Miller, Paul Lovejoy, and Robin Law, whose research agendas incorporate studies of “ethnic” African communities in the Atlantic world and crucial methodological recommendations for deepening African diaspora studies through historical interrogation of “extensive” if even “widely scattered” African studies sources, will also be essential to the training of ARS scholars.<sup>112</sup>

Another significant point to consider is how secular historians deconstruct religious studies scholarly inventions of African religious traditions as extraneous fossils. This, in turn, disrupts conventional portraits of African American religious formation as an ever-evolving Christian narrative with biblical foundations. One of the most recent texts to do so is Ras Michael Brown’s *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*. Brown’s scholarship has benefited from the foundational contributions of nearly all the other secular historians noted above. He examines demographic data on the slave trade, focusing on Kongolese/Central African settlements across the South Carolina Lowcountry beginning in the 1600s. The result renders unacceptable any claim that the first stage of African American religious history “lasted roughly from the mid-eighteenth century to 1863.”

Brown makes a compelling argument for the foundational role of Central African, especially Kongo religious cultures in African American religious formation in the South Carolina Lowcountry across four centuries. In so doing, he engages an extensive body of primary source material—from slave trade demographic data and agricultural records to blanket lists and probate inventories—to develop new approaches to the study and presentation of African American religious history. In the process, Brown refutes stereotypic portraits of African American Lowcountry communities as isolated, pristine repositories of the most conspicuous religious and cultural connections to continental Africa. Instead, he examines the mundane details of human existence and deduces a wealth of material pertaining to agricultural cultivation, hunting and fishing traditions, oral narratives, burial customs, built environments as well as lexical evidence of Kikongo/Bantu personal names, initiation titles, and other vocabulary, some of which was documented in the early twentieth century by Lorenzo Dow Turner. Brown skillfully and persuasively situates such material within a wider diachronic analysis of the Central African religio-cultural heritages whose grammar of symbols and cultural attitudes toward the invisible/spiritual world and the entire natural world, including animals, plants, forests, rivers, rocks and mountains, have paralleled those of African-descended Lowcountry residents.

Brown's meticulous study of Central African societies between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries and what is now the southeastern United States between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries allows him to identify and interpret the most obscure textures of human-animal, human-plant, human-landscape, human-spirit and human-human encounters as indispensable data for the study of African-descended peoples' lived religion. The encounters then include exchanges with native first-comers to the region and other native peoples transported to the Lowcountry as well as interviews with Works Progress Administration employees. His most shattering argument is that the Central African *Simbi* spirits/gods, the Kongo/Central African semantic world, and the initiation practices of *Lemba*, *Kimpasi*, *Nkimba* and *Ndembo* societies were integral to the religious culture of African-descendants in the South Carolina Lowcountry from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. Moreover, Christian evangelization of African-descended populations in no way dislodged their entrenched Central African religious practices and "world-sense."<sup>113</sup>

Instead, Kongo-based spirituality and socialized dispositions toward the natural world built the ritual stage for the African American Lowcountry "seeking" rite that terminated with professed Christian conversion. According to Brown, only when drastic reconstructions of the built environment, including the flooding of *Simbi*-inhabited springs and the submerging of sacred ancestral burial grounds, took place in the 1930s did *Simbi* traditions disappear. In his words, the *Simbi* "remained until a new force, fueled by a certain vision of Progress and Modernity, rapidly dislodged their accommodation of place, culture, and power forged over the course of two and a half centuries. Once the people were gone, the forests removed, and the graves abandoned, the simbi time, the *long simbi* time, had come to an end."<sup>114</sup>

From the beginning to the close of *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* Brown adduces various sources to portray the lived religion of African-descended peoples, taking scholarly inquiry in U.S. African American religious studies along a more productive path. When it comes to soliciting the most rigorous scholarly research on the history of U.S. African American religious formation, the studies produced by secular historians demonstrate the limitations of religionist scholarship, which tends to present narrow and overgeneralized studies of U.S. African American religiosity from the starting point of Protestant normativity. Instead, Brown's text examines how Americans of African descent have lived upon the land and "lived



with the land."<sup>115</sup> Moreover, his scholarship demonstrates that creolization is not the only or even inevitable outcome of cultural interaction. A hallmark of Brown's method is its departure from stubborn research practices and assumptive standpoints in U.S. African American religious history. As a result, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* expands our knowledge of U.S. African American religion before the mid-eighteenth century and prompts us to rethink some of the established frameworks for interpreting black religion since the mid-eighteenth century.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

Secular historians do not stand alone in supplying indispensable methodological frameworks for Africana religious studies. Anthropologists like Kamari Maxine Clarke and J. Lorand Matory have shown also the methodological value of multi-sited ethnographic research and the integration of ethnography and history in producing complicated ARS narratives. In fact, Matory's *Black Atlantic Religion* remains an exemplary study on a South American/Atlantic context that should be recognized as a quintessence of ARS scholarship.<sup>116</sup> Matory's methodological attentiveness to historical analysis of African continental and Atlantic (Brazilian) contexts, including archival research, protects him from some of the most pronounced blind spots noted by African historians. Paul Lovejoy and John Thornton, for example, identify tendencies toward fossilization, overgeneralization, unidimensionalism and anachronism in the scholarship of some anthropologists and religionists seeking to work with continental African materials. *Black Atlantic Religion* addresses these miscalculations through substantive transdisciplinary research.

Undoubtedly, scholarship on African South American, African Caribbean, and African Central American religious cultures will constitute a significant component of Africana religious studies.<sup>117</sup> Attention to African Canadian religious experience will also be crucial.<sup>118</sup> We chose to highlight the promise and problems in the scholarship of U.S. North Americans in an effort to uncover some fundamental challenges confronting the conception and establishment of ARS, as we have outlined it here. If unaddressed, these challenges will continue to surface in the very scholarly choices the majority of religionists are prone to make when teaching and researching the experiences of African-descended peoples in the United States.

Perhaps this is the moment to acknowledge that the weaknesses we identify in religious studies publications produced over the past fifty years signal more about parameters in the field of religious studies than about the authors who produced such scholarship. Moreover, when we juxtapose the collective works of religious studies scholars with those of secular historians who focus on U.S. Africana religious experience, we are confronted with a structural problem in the field of religion. This structural problem, however, rests in the scholarship of religionists working primarily with historical, theological, philosophical, and sociological methods. On the whole, phenomenological approaches to U.S. African American religious experience remain largely underexplored.<sup>119</sup> Phenomenological inquiries might best complement the themes that secular historians bring to the discussion, especially since more than a few of them overly rely on Robin Horton's competent though limited anthropological analysis of religion in Africa.<sup>120</sup> To be sure, we are aware of the discussion among religionists and anthropologists concerning problems with comparative/phenomenological religious studies approaches.<sup>121</sup> Still, we see that phenomenological description creates new options for analyzing Africana religious experience.

Phenomenological questions and methods can also address Curtis Evans's concern that black religious studies in the United States has shouldered a particular burden of overturning longstanding stereotypes about the Negro's innate and docile spirituality as well as the Negro's barbaric and irreligious African heritage. Responding to these mythic definitions of black religion in the white American imagination, U.S. black religious studies scholars, many of them of African descent, focused their research agendas on proving that African-descended people are human beings whose practice of Christianity (proper religion) equipped them with the agency to resist white supremacy and transmit humanist values transgenerationally. In essence, Evans worries that the field has been far too preoccupied with an agenda guided by racial overdetermination.<sup>122</sup>

Even with this insightful directive, we wonder whether "racialized" agency can be disentangled from how individuals and communities consciously and unconsciously exist and experience their humanity in the United States. All the same, we trust that phenomenological questions can serve to reorient our studies of black religious subjects (in the United States and elsewhere) to address aspects of their humanity, orientation, and imagination that register subtler dimensions of their condition as human beings who, like other human

beings, have to wrestle with what it means to exist, to procreate, and to secure conditions for human survival/thriving including food production; struggling against disease and unwellness; sustaining familial and kinship networks; engaging the bounty, tenuousness and inscrutability of the visible-invisible world; and dealing with death.

## Other Research Priorities in Africana Religious Studies

How does our discussion of research concerns and recommendations for ARS scholars working in the U.S. context relate to our wider understanding of the field's tasks and complementary research agendas? By now, readers should know that we have been arguing for a vision of ARS as a transdisciplinary field with the capacity to support new models of research. These models must account for the diverse specializations required to produce knowledge about African religious cultures in Africa and in African diasporas as disparate as St. Kitts, Belgium, Israel/Palestine, China, and Mexico. Collaborative research is an underexplored model in the humanities and some social sciences that ARS should champion. If collaborative research agendas are arranged to allow linguists, historians, anthropologists, biologists, archaeological oceanographers, geographers, and art historians, for example, to define and execute research projects on religious cultures of the African world across time, ARS will perform the necessary work to decentralize standard independent and hierarchical models by which academic prowess and success often are measured.

In the light of twentieth-century scholarly production in African, Afro-Latino/American, and Afro-Caribbean religious studies, the twenty-first century begs the question, what is the value of cementing research on the religions of African-descended peoples from disparate regions of the globe into a field of study—Africana religions? To recapitulate and expand our proposed arguments and working definitions, the umbrella designation “Africana” is intended to register two major aims concerning the religiosity of African-descended peoples (1) *comprehensiveness* and *inclusivity* with regard to coverage and documentation of any unit of human thought and behavior warranting religious studies analysis; and (2) *comparison* and *connections* involving studies of human encounters and exchanges with others (including other African-descended peoples) in time and space across cultural and geographic boundaries.

ARS will be conversant also with scholarly projects on the religious experiences of peoples who have maintained sustained contact with Africa under diverse conditions, bringing with them religio-cultural heritages from other global regions. Literature on settlers who are citizens of African countries or members of immigrant communities across the African continent will broaden the ARS scholar's competency in the intercultural exchanges and pluralistic ethos through which African-descended peoples configure and express some of their religious identities. While research agendas on the religiosity of such communities in Africa will not fall under the umbrella of ARS, they enhance accounts of African people's extensive exchanges with others and the religious implications of those encounters for Africana traditions.

In seeking to address the religiosity of Africana peoples and communities associated with the land mass Africa—whether early dwellers upon particular lands, internal migrants, repatriated and transnational African descendants, or diaspora-ed, and immigrant Africans within other regions of the world—ARS should develop transdisciplinary rationales for studying religious traditions and experiences that bind individuals together and provide orientation for navigating life within community. With reference to continental Africa, we have in mind here a proliferation of studies attentive to ethnic/cultural/linguistic/kinship/caste and other structures of identity that diversify what we know about the Ibibio, Mandingo, Kongo, Rund, Gikuyu, Xhosa, Tswana, Shona, and other continental peoples. In so doing, ARS will move beyond disparate reflections or intermittent roundtables on the scholarly mistakes of past studies of African religions; it will devise replicable as well as distinct research agendas that are no longer burdened by Western theoretical and disciplinary regimes or the devout translator's Euro-Christian template.<sup>123</sup>

Philosophers, phenomenologists, and cultural theorists have, no doubt, examined the shifting meanings of Africa as a place, symbol, and unit of identity.<sup>124</sup> The experiences, ideas, machinations, and inventions that produced multiple Africas over the centuries merit continual engagement and analysis. Moving forward, we have to acknowledge that some scholars understand Africa as a hermetically sealed geographic region with static religions when they overtly or inadvertently discredit postmodern diaspora assertions of African cultural and religious identities. Thus, we have to remain vigilantly conscious of African identities and experiences of diaspora-ed and immigrant groups in the West. Whatever Africa means today, it has always indexed diaspora identities of African-descended peoples in the West. ARS should treat such

identities as no less tangible or worthy of interrogation than those emerging from continental African experience. Thus, ARS will conduce scholarly exploration of experiences, traditions, movements, and phenomena that defy borders and discrete identities within and across regions and religious expressions of the African world. Jacob Olupona's *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination* emerges from these kinds of research sensibilities.<sup>125</sup> The study serves to inaugurate an ethnographic-phenomenological approach to African indigenous religion in a specified Yoruba context that is comprehensive in its treatment of history, collective memory, hermeneutics, epistemology, ritual life, interreligious translations and exchanges, and social organization.

Notwithstanding Olupona's seminal interventions, and the significance of ARS research on African Islamic and Christian religious cultures, the study of continental Africa's indigenous religious heritages and their global influence remains especially impoverished by disciplinary agendas nurtured in the Western academy.<sup>126</sup> To overcome this legacy, we imagine ARS as a critical and innovative space that must develop the authority and independence to generate credible scholarship on indigenous African religious traditions. To do so will require tabling and, where necessary, dispensing with abstract or unsuitable academic theories that misrepresent phenomena and contexts in question.

Additional concerns should remain central to the burgeoning field of ARS. Scholars have certainly spilled enough ink over the merits and demerits of, for example, outsider versus insider scholarly locations, generalist versus particularist perspectives, diachronic versus synchronic approaches, and indigenous religions' encounters with Islam and Christianity.<sup>127</sup> Our suspicion is that the lack of a disciplined structure for identifying the most pressing research projects and equipping students to pursue them retrospectively is the most troubling obstacle hindering sound scholarship that might address outstanding problems and debates.

With this said, we should not misread the project of cogently analyzing and presenting African epistemologies, philosophies, and 'theologies' as naïvely static treatments of African religious thought and cultural patterns. Some historians classify conceptual studies of indigenous ethics and ideals as unidimensional rhetorical exercises that (1) reify rather than clarify African thought systems; and (2) in the process, overlook concrete application as well as the historical, situated nature of particular African societies and communities. Even if some conceptual studies have erred along these lines, prematurely

dismissing all such projects assumes that Africans lack the capacity and cultural mechanisms to establish ideals and ethical norms that endure over time. Instead, ARS scholars should scrutinize the source of this and other suspicions driving overstated historicist and pragmatic critiques and investigate why they disappear when it comes to similar studies of Western societies. The human sciences have always taken for granted the import of reflections on grand Western (Christian) ideals such as love, justice, democracy and human rights, despite their imperfect application across governing apparatuses of the diverse nation-states constituting “the West.”

Adding to the above, ARS should recommend methods for exploring the continuities and variances among indigenous religious cultures in Africa. Only when investigations of African indigenous religions mobilize comparative studies across African continental traditions or African continental and diaspora (including immigrant diaspora) traditions, will we derive satisfying responses to Robin Horton’s call for ‘world language’ concepts that are simultaneously indigenous African concepts.<sup>128</sup> ARS could excavate, for instance, unexplored connections and ruptures in constellations of Africana sacred texts were it to sponsor comparative analyses of the histories, literatures, and techniques of Igbo *Afá*, Urhobo *Epha*, Yoruba *Ifá*, Fon *Fá*, Cuban *Ifá* and U.S. *Ifá* divination traditions. There is ample justification for developing a subfield of comparative sacred texts in ARS, and this is just one of any number of subfields that should emerge over time. With more profound and involved studies, the question will not be how to translate African indigenous concepts through the terms of our current world languages (meaning Western languages), but how to apprehend indigenous concepts and their purchase as religious studies categories. Bearing these issues in mind, scholars will be able to (1) identify patterns and their nuances that emerge from the indigenous contexts in question; (2) ground their theories in indigenous literacies,<sup>129</sup> epistemologies and world-senses; and (3) elicit methods of accessing indigenous knowledges that are bound to emerge from the pursuit of new research agendas.

## A Final Word and a Lesson from the Field

During the first summer of the new millennium, we were conducting research at the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica (ACIJ), a government agency whose chief mission is to document African heritage traditions across the

country. Funded by an American Academy of Religion Collaborative Research Grant, our archival work involved reading a number of conference papers and unpublished monographs of ACIJ-sponsored field investigations. We also viewed documentary films on African Jamaican religious and cultural traditions. One such documentary from the 1990s featured three ACIJ researchers and a Nigerian English professor who had recently arrived to assume a visiting faculty post at the University of the West Indies. The team had traveled to Hanover to collect oral data from a community of Yoruba descendants. These Yoruba-Jamaicans were custodians of a tradition known as Ettu. After discovering that Ettu involves much more than a shawl folk dance, the researchers visited an elder savant to gather additional information. Bedridden and frail, she did her best to lift her ninety-two-year-old tongue to the rhythms of their queries. At one point in the exchange, the Nigerian professor asked: “Do you know Òrìṣà?” To which the elder responded in her Jamaican Creole: “Òrìṣà nah Obeah.”<sup>130</sup> The entire room fell silent. Perhaps the researchers were waiting for their informant to say more. However, after a thirty-second moment of perplexed stillness, one of the ACIJ staff members shifted the conversation to another topic.

We could not believe what we had just witnessed and heard. How could four researchers miss the precious opportunity to interrogate the unprompted connection the elder had made between the words “Òrìṣà” and “Obeah?” Why did such a pregnant occasion for new knowledge about Yoruba-Òrìṣà studies in the Anglophone Caribbean pass without comment? The only possible explanation we could surmise for the scholarly pause was that the Nigerian scholar, having recently arrived in Jamaica, had not yet learned about Obeah, and the ACIJ staff did not know the meaning of Òrìṣà. Unfortunately, we will never know why the savant attempted to link or dissociate Òrìṣà and Obeah. Moreover, the lost opportunity to engage her further is particularly vexing since, to our knowledge, no scholarship exists that documents a sustained practice of Òrìṣà religion in Jamaica emerging from African settlements that were established between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries by enslaved and indentured laborers.<sup>131</sup> In the light of the elder’s comment, it is possible that scholars of African Jamaican religious cultures missed something along the way. ARS, as a new and relevant field of inquiry, helps us to imagine how the conversation might have unfolded very differently had a scholar of African Caribbean religions and a scholar of Yoruba religion been present.

We close with a moment during our research experience in Jamaica that locates the work of ARS within a concrete place and time among specific peoples, and depicts, through practical experience, a set of dilemmas that hinder conversations, collaboration, and inquiry-driven research on Africana religions. Such dilemmas, we argue, need disciplined attention through sponsored think tanks and shared research agendas among those whose aim it is to update, expand, and complicate the scholarship on the religious worlds of African-descended peoples across time, space, experience and memory. Our preoccupation with the relationship between method and theory in studies of Africana religions is not intended to foreclose conversations about thematic foci for ARS research. To the contrary, we assume that analytical approaches to how gender, class, social caste, occupation, lineage, sexuality, nationality, age, ability, and other markers of human experience qualify religious identity will figure prominently in ARS projects. And we anticipate that the *Journal of Africana Religions* will be one of the chief intellectual venues for igniting and sustaining such an immense and rewarding scholarly endeavor.

### Notes

1. In *Brazil's Living Museum: Race, Reform, and Tradition in Bahia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 124, Anadelia Romo indicates that Frazier's research in Salvador, Bahia, unfolded over five and a half months. According to Frazier, he conducted his research on fifty-five families "during four and a half months residence in the city of Bahia." Frazier's reference here is to Bahia's capital city São Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos, which is commonly called Salvador or Bahia. See "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil," *American Sociological Review* 7, no. 4 (1942): 465.
2. See Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Box 7, Folder 38, Series 35/6, Northwestern University Archives, Evanston, Ill.
3. E. Franklin Frazier to Melville J. Herskovits, January 1941, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, Box 7, Folder 38, Series 35/6, Northwestern University Archives, Evanston, Ill.
4. Frazier, "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil," 478.
5. *Ibid.*, 466.
6. For thorough discussions of U.S. scholars who conducted research in Brazil during the early twentieth century, see Romo, *Brazil's Living Museum*.
7. Melville J. Herskovits, "The Negro in Bahia, Brazil: A Problem in Method," *American Sociological Review* 8, no. 4 (1943): 395.
8. Our employment of the nomenclature "Africana" corresponds with Lewis Gordon's use of the term as a referent for "Africans' and their diaspora . . . includ[ing]



- the convergence of most Africans with the racial term 'black' and its many connotations." See Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–18.
9. Colin A. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *The Journal of Negro History* 85, nos. 1–2 (January 2000): 27–32.
  10. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 399.
  11. Hortense Spillers et al., "'Whatcha Gonna Do?': Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book': A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2007): 305.
  12. Stephan Palmié, *Africas of the Americas: Beyond the Search for Origins in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
  13. Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 1, 2000): 11–45.
  14. Stephan Palmié, *Africas of the Americas*, II.
  15. Robert E. Park, "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," *The Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 2 (April 1919): 117; cited by E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 6. Also see Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966). First published in 1918, Phillips's text would have been very familiar to Frazier and his teachers.
  16. Historical scholarship since the 1940s renders a much more complex analysis of the diversified contexts in which captured Africans were dispersed and settled across the United States and the wider African diaspora. One wonders how Frazier would respond today to the presentation of slave trade demographic data in Margaret Washington Creel's *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: NYU Press, 1988); or Michael Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); or the Voyages project. See David Eltis, "A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/essays-intro-01.faces>, accessed March 13, 2012.
  17. Curtis J. Evans offers an unparalleled intellectual and cultural history of the contexts in which U.S. white Americans constructed controlling images of black religion during the nineteenth century. Evans explores how this essentialist and Afrophobic project influenced the academic formation of black religious studies, including Frazier's intellectual landscape as a student and scholar and the intellectual context in which the Herskovits/Frazier debate unfolded during the twentieth century. See Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

18. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 15. Frazier spends the greater part of his first chapter exploring such narratives left by notable personalities, including Charles Ball, John Brown (a fugitive slave), Frederick Douglas, Martin Delany, and W. E. B. Du Bois. He also incorporates a number of unidentified college students' family narratives. See chapter 1 of Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*.
19. In his review of *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Frazier criticized Melville Herskovits for misrepresenting the research findings of "competent scholars" by discussing them alongside the views of "obviously prejudiced writers." He also indicated that "the fact that competent Negro scholars do not find African cultural survivals in every phase of Negro life is no evidence that, unlike the Jew, they are ashamed of their past." In our view, Frazier's response indicates some oversensitivity on his part perhaps because Herskovits cited a passage from Frazier's work when describing how Negroes can experience Africa as "a badge of shame." Herskovits, however, prefaced this section of his discussion with a lengthy quotation from Carter G. Woodson, who noted that "Negroes themselves accept as a compliment the theory of a complete break with Africa, for above all things they do not care to be known as resembling in any way these 'terrible Africans.'" E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro's 'Cultural Past,'" *Nation* 154, no. 7 (February 14, 1942): 195–96. For relevant passages in Melville Herskovits, see *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 27, 29, 31–32.
20. Frazier was chief of the Division of Applied Sciences in the Department of Social Sciences at UNESCO in Paris. Before that he served with UNESCO as chairman of the Committee of Social Scientists beginning in 1949. After cofounding the Department of African Studies at Howard, Frazier taught African studies courses at Howard and Johns Hopkins until his death in 1962. For Frazier's involvement with UNESCO, see Jerry Gershenhorn, "'Not an Academic Affair': African American Scholars and the Development of African Studies Programs in the United States, 1942–1960," *Journal of African American History* 94, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 54–55. For Frazier's role in African Studies at Howard and Johns Hopkins (beginning in 1957) and his activities with the Council on African Affairs, see Michael R. Winston, "Frazier's Role in African Studies" in *E. Franklin Frazier and Black Bourgeoisie*, ed. James E. Teele (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 137–52. Lawrence Jackson's *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011) also situates Frazier's intellectual and political commitments within a wider stream of black scholarly activism during the mid-twentieth century. See especially pp. 19–20, 258, 444–47, 464.
21. Cited by Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 179. Frazier delivered these remarks before the Harlem Council of Social Agencies on December 5, 1941. The timing is significant to our discussion given that Frazier had recently returned from his Brazil trip. Herskovits's *Myth of the Negro Past* was released earlier in 1941 and the Herskovitses had just traveled to Brazil in September to conduct

research in the same region where Frazier completed his study of Afro-Brazilian family structure.

22. Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, 27.
23. Andrew Apter's critique of Herskovits's data collection methods and theoretical tools for his research on African cultures is a point well taken. The overgeneralizations and limited analytical frameworks characterizing Herskovits's work in Africa, however, do not nullify his insistence that scholars of U.S. African American culture ought to engage African studies research before discounting African cultural influences upon U.S. black culture. See Andrew Apter, "Herskovits's Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora," in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, ed. Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jenson, 160–84 (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2004).
24. Frazier, "The Negro's 'Cultural Past,'" 196.
25. St. Clair Drake, "Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (July 1, 1978): 93. Drake does not give attention to Zora Neale Hurston here, perhaps because she never earned advanced degrees that would officially qualify her for the scholarly research and writing she completed after coursework with Franz Boas at Columbia University. The fascinating career of Dr. Irene Diggs should not be overlooked in this context. Diggs served as W. E. B. Du Bois's research assistant for some of his most influential publications during the 1930s and '40s. Diggs went on to conduct fieldwork on African culture in Cuba and earned her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Havana in 1944. Also important are symbiotic formations in the scholarly trajectories of Lorenzo Dow Turner and Melville Herskovits. Margaret Wade-Lewis draws our attention to how Turner's research theories and methods were as influential upon Herskovits as Herskovits's were upon Turner. "Contrary to earlier assumptions," she writes, "Herskovits did not lead Turner to the African retentions hypothesis. Rather, documented evidence illustrates that Herskovits was influenced by Turner's research." See her *Lorenzo Dow Turner: Father of Gullah Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 189–204. See p. 194 for the above citation. Also see Kevin Yelvington's chapter "The Invention of Africa in Latin America and the Caribbean: Political Discourse and Anthropological Praxis, 1920–1940" in his edited volume *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora* (Oxford: School of American Research Press, 2006), 35–82.
26. Frazier, "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil," 478.
27. Herskovits, "The Negro in Bahia, Brazil," 394–95.
28. Herskovits's approach to the study of Shango (Òriṣà) in Trinidad is a case in point. He confesses that after reading about the Yoruba-based cult in a newspaper article that complained about cult activities in Port of Spain, he chose the isolated region of Toco to conduct fieldwork because he expected to find the most pristine expressions of the cult in this remote northeastern Negro settlement. See especially Melville J. Herskovits, *Trinidad Village* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 3–5.
29. In other words, Herskovits's theorization of the varied acculturative processes included the reinterpretation of aboriginal African ways of life in New World

diaspora contexts. Creolization theorists would examine the same acculturative process as one that forged entirely new cultures out of old heritages among African diaspora populations. What Herskovits conceptualized as “reinterpreted” African cultural heritage creolization theorists conceptualize as new cultural expressions. Although often overlooked, in the end, there are clear antecedents in Herskovits’s scholarship for cultural theories of “creolization.” For the classic analysis of the nuances here described, see Sidney Wilfred Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Also see Paul E. Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion under Slavery,” *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* 2, no. 1 (1997): 4–6, <http://web.archive.org/web/20030808013352/http://www.h-net.org/~slavery/essays/esy9701love.html>, accessed March 17, 2012.

30. For some of Herskovits’s most developed ideas on the study of African heritage traditions in the Americas and the Caribbean, see Melville J. Herskovits, *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966). See especially his essay “The Ancestry of the American Negro,” 126–28. Herskovits’s essay “Problem, Method and Theory in Afroamerican Studies,” 43–61 of the same volume is also particularly relevant to the point made here. Anadelia Romo acknowledges these shifts in Herskovits’s publications. However, she maintains that “his research in Bahia [1941] represented a transitional period in his thought. Herskovits proposed acculturation theory as an ideal, but his own research still searched for untouched African practices.” See Romo’s analysis of his May 1942 lecture at the inauguration of “Bahia’s new Faculdade de Filosofia” in *Brazil’s Living Museum*, 126–29.
31. Herskovits, “The Negro in Bahia, Brazil,” 397.
32. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 15–17.
33. *Ibid.*, 122. Also see Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), ix–x. It is worth clarifying for the reader that we do not view this statement as encouraging the tendency among U.S. religionists to excise the United States from the African diaspora. Herskovits in no way suggests such a radical break but rather exhibits an attentiveness to facets of acculturation and the reinterpretation of Africanisms in the U.S. context, based upon available research at the time.
34. Frazier spends the entire first chapter of his book, *The Negro Family in the United States*, exploring African American kinship connections that reach back to Africa as well as testimonies about the African heritage of certain African Americans. He categorizes such data as “scraps of memory” that constitute an exception to the rule of African Americans’ complete disruption and alienation from Africa. See pages 3–16.
35. For the purposes of this discussion we invoke the most liberal application of the disciplinary designation “religious studies” to include Christian theological scholarship and wider studies of religious thought.

36. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 327.
37. See n24 above.
38. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 86.
39. African and African Atlantic historians have warned about the difficulty of translating African cultural group identities as static ethnicities, especially since the rise of the transatlantic slave trade when identities, kinship arrangements, group loyalties, and polities were often in flux and giving birth to new alliances and identities. See, for example, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Paul Lovejoy and David Trotman, eds., *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora*, (New York: Continuum, 2003); J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); and Joseph C. Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering: Restoring Identities through Enslavement in Africa and under Slavery in Brazil," in *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil During the Era of Slavery*, ed. José C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004), 81–121.
40. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 81.
41. According to Raboteau, "The magical lore of Africa, combined with European and Indian magical customs, figured prominently in the daily lives of the slaves and their descendants. Because magical beliefs tend to be similar worldwide, and because it is the nature of magical thinking to be eclectic, it is rarely possible to speak with certainty about the origins of particular magical practices." *Ibid.*, 33.
42. Contesting Raboteau's dualistic approach, which divorces cultural structures/forms and cultural contents/meanings in theorizing slave religion in the United States, Donald H. Matthews also forwards a similar criticism of Raboteau's interpretation of Negro spirituals and spirit possession rituals in *Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 11–14.
43. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 83–85.
44. *Ibid.*, 149. Raboteau makes a similar point on (66). He also examines testimonies from enslaved Africans who rejected Christianity (45–46) and other factors impeding the effective evangelization of enslaved Africans throughout chapter 3, "Catechesis and Conversion," 95–150.
45. *Ibid.*, 327–28.
46. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
47. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 11, 45.
48. *Ibid.*, 88.
49. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge," *City* 8, no. 1 (April 2004): 51.
50. Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

51. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge," 39.
52. *Ibid.*, 32–51.
53. *Ibid.*, 30.
54. *Ibid.*, 46.
55. *Ibid.*, 42.
56. *Ibid.*
57. [www.virginiafoundation.org/roots/background.html](http://www.virginiafoundation.org/roots/background.html), accessed July 14, 2009.
58. See J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 66; and James A Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7.
59. Jared Hickman, "Globalization and the Gods, or the Political Theology of 'Race,'" *Early American Literature* 45, no. 1 (2010): 150.
60. Long, *Significations*, 86, 91; Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*, ix–xi; and chapters 1–3.
61. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 13.
62. Long, *Significations*, 7; Theophus Harold Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 64.
63. Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 198.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Long, *Significations*, 32.
66. See, for example, William D. Phillips, *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985); Gwyn Campbell, *Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2003); *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Ronald Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).
67. Emphasis added. Long, *Significations*, 187. The quoted passage is abstracted from one of Long's collected essays that was published initially in 1971.
68. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 5.
69. Hickman, "Globalization and the Gods, or the Political Theology of 'Race,'" 145.
70. Long, *Significations*, 1, 8, 86.
71. *Ibid.*, 175–76.
72. *Ibid.*, 9.
73. Young, *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors* (Trenton: N.J.: Africa World Press, 1992), 104.
74. *Ibid.*, 88.
75. *Ibid.*, 108.
76. *Ibid.*, 109.
77. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 11.
78. *Ibid.*, 12.
79. *Ibid.*, 254.

80. *Ibid.*, 9, 76, 253.
81. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 120–37; 162; 211–25; Tracey E. Hucks and Dianne M. Stewart, “Authenticity and Authority in the Shaping of Trinidad Orisha Identity: Toward an African-Derived Religious Theory,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 3 (2003): 176–85. See especially p. 178.
82. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 250.
83. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*, 9.
84. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 249.
85. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*, x.
86. See also Jawanza Clark’s *Indigenous Black Theology: Towards an African-Centered Theology of the African-American Religious Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Another important volume that advances an Africana theological agenda in womanist religious and literary discourses is Monica Coleman’s *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
87. Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples* (Fortress Press, 1994), 22.
88. Matthews, *Honoring the Ancestors*, 3.
89. *Ibid.*, 13.
90. *Ibid.*, 21.
91. *Ibid.*, 124.
92. *Ibid.*, 22.
93. *Ibid.*, ix, 22.
94. Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 27.
95. Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 155.
96. *Ibid.*, 4.
97. *Ibid.*
98. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*.
99. *Ibid.*, 120–37, 162.
100. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*.
101. Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, 4, 6–7.
102. See, for example, Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Michael Angelo Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Exchanging Our Country Marks: African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 1997); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994 [1961]); E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: The Rise of the Black Muslims in the U.S.A.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966); Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); and Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

103. Edward E. Curtis and Danielle Brune Sigler, eds., *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). See Mark Miles Fisher's "Organized Religions and the Cults," *The Crisis* 44, no. 1 (1937): 8–10, 29–30, which preceded Fauset's book-length study.
104. Joseph R. Washington, *Black Sects and Cults* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1973). Also see his *Jews in Black Perspectives: A Dialogue* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984).
105. Sylvester A. Johnson, "Religion Proper and Proper Religion: Arthur Fauset and the Study of African American Religions," in *The New Black Gods*. Also see Sylvester A. Johnson, "The Rise of Black Ethnics: The Ethnic Turn in African American Religions, 1916–1945," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 20, no. 2 (July 2010): 125–63.
106. Johnson, "Religion Proper and Proper Religion," 160.
107. Yvonne Patricia Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
108. Studies of African American Buddhists and humanists also expand the parameters of ARS research. See, for example, Janice Dean Willis, *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001); William Hart, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation: As Taught by S. N. Goenka* (Maharashtra, India: Vipassana Research Institute, 1991); Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Anthony B. Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the Children of Nimrod* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002); and *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).
109. Johnson, "Religion Proper and Proper Religion," 145–70.
110. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), xiii.
111. In our current intellectual climate of increasing access to demographic data and other primary sources of relevance to comparative studies of Atlantic slavery, secular historians working on U.S. African American religious cultures continue to dispute the methodological validity of varied approaches. Nevertheless, their collective efforts beg for more detailed and diligently researched projects from religionists. For example, Paul Lovejoy critiques anachronisms in Sterling Stuckey's approach to African foundations of African American socio-cultural and political history. Lovejoy also raises questions about some of Albert Raboteau's claims. See Paul E. Lovejoy, "The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion Under Slavery," *Studies in World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* 2, no. 1 (1997): 9–11.
112. *Ibid.*, 9. Also see Lovejoy's recommendations on 16–17.
113. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1–5. See especially p. 3.



114. Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 286–87.
115. *Ibid.*, 10.
116. James Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).
117. Numerous scholars from a wide spectrum of disciplines have contributed to religious studies research in these regions of the diaspora, particularly from history, anthropology and sociology. It would be unproductive to highlight a select group as seminal. Some representative scholars include members of la Asociación de Teólogos del Tercer Mundo (ASET), Mervyn Alleyne, Leonard Barrett, Roger Bastide, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, George Brandon, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Lidia Cabrera, Barry Chevannes, Leslie Desmangles, Jualynne Dodson, Ennis Edmonds, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Stephen Glazier, Michelle Gonzales, Rachel Harding, Frances Henry, James Hoak, Jahn Janheinz, Paul Johnson, Ruth Landes, J. Lorand Matory, Albert Métraux, Claudine Michel, Margarite Fernández Olmos, Stephan Palmié, Richard Price, Arthur Ramos, Terry Rey, Nina Rodrigues, Monica Schuler, James Sweet, Pierre Verger, Maureen Warner-Lewis and of course Melville Herskovits and the students he trained, especially, William Bascom, Daniel Crowley, Katherine Dunham, Octávio da Costa Eduardo, and George Eaton Simpson. Given our extensive discussion of the Herskovits/Frazier debate's impact upon the development of U.S. African American religious studies, it is essential to note that Caribbean scholars such as Jean Price-Mars and Fernando Ortiz were pioneers in African retentions research before Herskovits ever undertook any serious research in the area. Their writings shaped Herskovits's field research and theoretical positions; and they, along with Brazilian scholars like Gilberto Freyre and Arthur Ramos, corresponded extensively with Herskovits, sharing works in progress and publications and collaborating on fieldwork arrangements and conferences. See Kevin Yelvington, "The Invention of Africa in Latin America and the Caribbean."
118. We have in mind here Carol Duncan's research on southern Caribbean migrants in Toronto and their Spiritual Baptist religious culture. Historical studies of religious formation among U.S. black loyalists, runaway/freed slaves, refugees, and Jamaican Maroons who relocated to Nova Scotia throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should also deepen our analysis of ARS in understudied regions of North America. See Carol B. Duncan, *This Spot of Ground: Spiritual Baptists in Toronto* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008); Sharon Robart-Johnson, *Africa's Children: A History of Blacks in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2009); James W. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); John N. Grant, *The Maroons in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Formac, 2002); Mavis C. Campbell, *Back to Africa: George Ross and the Maroons: From Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1993); Frances Henry, *Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks of Nova Scotia* (Don Mills, Ont.: Longman Canada, 1973); Bridglal Patchai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks, Volume II*

- 1800–1989 (Halifax: Black Educators Association of Nova Scotia, 1990); *Historic Black Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2006); and Paula C. Madden, *African Nova Scotian-Mi'kmaq Relations* (Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood Publishing Co., Ltd., 2010).
119. Peter Paris's article "The Genesis of African American Religious Scholarship," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2, no. 1 (January 2011): 1–18, for example, reinforces this point when the author turns from discussing seminal figures in African American studies such as Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper to mapping foundational religious studies scholars. Most of the thinkers he examines under the latter rubric are theologians.
120. See for example the works of Monica Schuler, *Alas, Alas, Kongo": A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Maureen Warner Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2003); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); and Ras Michael Brown, *African Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*.
121. ARS should remain abreast of the criticisms launched by scholars such as Russell McCutcheon, Benson Saler, and Timothy Fitzgerald, the latter of whom labels comparative religionists closeted theologians who have hidden behind the claim of methodological agnosticism. Readers should consult Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Studying Religion: An Introduction* (Oakville, Conn.: Equinox Pub, 2007); *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Benson Saler, *Understanding Religion: Selected Essays* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009); *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); and Steven Sutcliffe, ed., *Religion: Empirical Studies* (Hants, U.K.: Ashgate, 2004). Also see Ninian Smart, *The Science of Religion & the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 54, for his original elaboration of the concept of "methodological agnosticism."
122. Curtis J. Evans, *Burden of Black Religion*, 275–80.
123. Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 161–96.
124. See, for example, V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Charles H. Long, *Significations*; Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy: Existencia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Stephan Palmié, *Africas of the Americas*; Kevin Yelvington, ed., *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues*; William G. Martin and

- Michael O. West, eds., *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
125. Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Also see Jacob Olupona and Regina Gemignani, eds., *African Immigrant Religions in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
  126. See Olupona's essay "Local to Global: Rethinking Yoruba Religion for the Next Millennium" as well as others in Jacob Olupona and Terry Rey, eds., *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). Also see Jacob Olupona, ed., *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).
  127. See for example Jacob Olupona, ed., *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 1998) and *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
  128. Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, especially 162–63.
  129. Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
  130. Depending upon a speaker's inflection, the phrase "Òrìṣà nah Obeah" can be translated to indicate two contradictory statements: (1) "Òrìṣà is Obeah" or, better still, the interrogative: "Isn't Òrìṣà Obeah?" and (2) "Òrìṣà is not Obeah." The elder's response was ambiguous to us as viewers removed from the scene because it was difficult to hear the inflections in her soft utterances, especially under the circumstances in which she was interviewed.
  131. In her monumental study of African indentured laborers in Jamaica, Monica Schuler mentions songs from Abeokuta (in the parish of Westmoreland) and Logwood (which traverses the parishes of Westmoreland and Hanover) that suggest communal memory of, if not ritual veneration by, some Yoruba groups during the nineteenth century. She also notes a story from Jane Forrest of Fire Hole, Hanover, who "recall[ed] an invocation to Omolu" aka Shopona. See Monica Schuler, *"Alas, Alas, Kongo": A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841–1865*, 82, 97.