

# INTRODUCTION— P. STERLING STUCKEY: IN PRAISE OF AN INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

Robert A. Hill\*

*And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?*

W. E. B. Du Bois (February 1903)

On 21–22 May 2004, dozens of scholars, colleagues, and friends from across the United States gathered in Riverside, California, to honor the work and intellectual legacy of P. Sterling Stuckey. The immediate occasion of the conference was Stuckey's retirement from the Presidential Chair and Distinguished Professor of History at the University of California, Riverside. Entitled, "Africans, Culture, and Intellectuals in North America: P. Sterling Stuckey and the Folk," the conference celebrated the achievements of one of America's greatest historians. It is rare indeed that scholars from a variety of fields and disciplines meet in conference to honor the work of a single living colleague. In this case, the conference was treated to a veritable outpouring of papers from scholars, colleagues, and former students, all of them eager to salute and discuss Professor Stuckey's influence and achievements. As the participants themselves acknowledged, the conference was an event as rare as it was rich in intellectual content and camaraderie.

In all, thirty-five papers were presented, ranging widely over the forty years of Stuckey's extraordinary career. The essays making up this special issue of *The Journal of African American History* consist of a selection of papers presented at the conference. The focus of the essays center around the subject that is most frequently associated with Stuckey's innovative scholarship and legacy, namely, the theme of Afrogenesis in the formation of slave culture and the collective agency of the enslaved.<sup>1</sup>

Publication of this Special Issue appears almost forty years since the original appearance of Stuckey's path breaking essay "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery" in the Summer 1968 issue of *The Massachusetts Review* that struck the first startling note of what was instantly

---

\*Robert A. Hill is Professor of History in the Department of History at the University of California, Los Angeles.

recognized as a paradigm shift in reorienting contemporary understanding of slave culture. It is difficult from this distance in time to appreciate or get a sense of the extraordinary impact that the appearance of this single essay had on the scholarly profession at the time.

In fact, as we learned at the conference, an earlier version of the essay was actually written as a paper for a graduate research seminar at Northwestern University taught by Professor George Frederickson. In disclosing this bit of information at the Riverside conference, Frederickson underscored the achievement of the published essay: "It is arguably," he noted, "the most historiographically important journal article on slavery ever published. More than any other work of the 1960s it signaled [and] heralded the paradigm shift in the representation of the slave experience that came to fruition in the 1970s and 80s." After giving a careful review of the state of the historiography before and after the publication of "Through the Prism of Folklore" in 1968, Frederickson concluded:

It was the first piece of authoritative historical writing to advance a new paradigm based on the exposure of a semi-autonomous slave culture and community, a perspective that shifted the historiographical emphasis away from victimization and toward creativity and agency. Through the use of folklore—the songs and stories that have been collected and passed down—he was able to create a compelling and persuasive counter image to the submissive, pathetic, and ineffectual "Sambo." Instead of being stripped of cultural resources, the slaves were, [Stuckey] maintained, able to draw creatively on their African heritage and adapt it [to] their current circumstances. This stereotype of the hapless, helpless slave, first enshrined in the historical literature by U. B. Phillips and then modernized by Stanley Elkins, had been dealt a lethal blow.<sup>2</sup>

This was no mean achievement—in twenty pages of text, what had started out as a graduate student essay had gone on to challenge the historical profession's dominant interpretative narrative of slave cultural subordination and offer a whole new perspective.

Decades later, Professor Stuckey's 1968 essay has come to occupy the status of a modern classic, deservedly so. Reprinted at least nineteen times, it has lost nothing of its freshness in the frequency of its reappearance. And like other classics, it rewards rereading, as historian George Frederickson attests in discovering an important nuance in Stuckey's subtle interpretation of slavery: "In rereading Stuckey's essay," he states, "I am impressed with his acknowledgment of slavery's debilitating aspects and his refusal to replace an exclusively top-down model with one that is entirely bottom-up (as if there was no top pushing down.)" The continuing and growing relevance of the essay is underscored thusly:

Debates continue, and should continue, on how to strike the right balance between physical and psychological victimization and the agency of the slave community. But never again—thanks in large part to Sterling's paradigm breaking essay—will historians be able to overlook slave culture and agency or write it off as inconsequential.<sup>3</sup>

This Special Issue of *The Journal of African American History* also represents another important landmark. Its appearance marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of P. Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (1987). Twenty years after its publication, there still has been no serious rival of its argument, pioneering as it did, in its important first chapter's exploration of the culture of the Ring Shout, the study of African ethnicity in North American slavery—a work that even anthropologists Melville Herskovits and Roger Bastide had said could not be done.<sup>4</sup> But this was just a down-payment, as it were, for Professor Stuckey even now continues with his investigation of the Ring Shout and extends it down to the 20th century. His new book on slavery, *The Fires of Creation: The Ring Shout and the Formation of Culture*, will shortly be published by Oxford University Press.

As if this was not enough for a lifetime of work or scholarly career, several years ago Stuckey embarked on a study of novelist Herman Melville and the indebtedness of his work to African American culture. The fruits of this long-term research project will appear shortly in Stuckey's recently completed *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby Dick*. Andrew Delbanco, Julian Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, has written concerning Stuckey's essay "The Tambourine in Glory: African Culture in Melville's Art" that appeared in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*:

Performing the rare feat of reading the much-read *Moby-Dick* in a way both fresh and persuasive, Stuckey . . . captured in the process of their formation, music and dance that are emblematic of American culture . . . Stuckey goes on to show how the great novella *Benito Cereno* becomes a coded celebration of the genius of the mutinous slaves.<sup>5</sup>

The essays in this Special Issue of *The Journal of African American History* come from one end of the scholarly spectrum that stands as an alternative to the now standard picture of the institution of American slavery and the culture of enslaved Africans and African Americans. Progressive though this rendering may appear when it is compared with what went before it, the essays mount a serious critique, contesting its shortcomings as well as continuing blind spots in the historiography. The various essays all evoke the influence of Sterling Stuckey and have many valid things to tell us. In a sense, this Special Issue could be said to represent a sort of intellectual balance-sheet of the continuing debate surrounding the field that Stuckey has made his own and that his work has done so much to shape and encourage, namely, the Afrogenesis of slave culture. Given that perspective, Professor Stuckey's response in the present collection provides a critique of the contemporary scholarship that is all the more necessary and enlightening through its breadth and in his pointing out alternatives to what has emerged as current intellectual orthodoxy under the rubric of "creolization."

A high-school teacher at Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago and a civil rights organizer in the American South in the 1960s, P. Sterling Stuckey came to intellectual maturity during one of the most tumultuous eras in recent history. In the process he turned those experiences and his education to excellent account, as the essays in this Special Issue bear abundant witness.

The struggle for him is still far from over, however, as he continues to strive for a closer and closer approximation of the culture of the enslaved and its still only hazily understood impact on the larger American culture. This striving to make transparent is what imparts to all of his scholarly labors its remarkable prismatic quality. In this connection Professor Stuckey himself becomes a participant in the history that he is writing about ("bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil"), and not just a detached scholarly observer.

If the effect of his work can rightly be interpreted as a kind of translucent prism, it could only have been so by virtue of those prison walls of which W. E. B. Du Bois writes so poignantly in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.<sup>6</sup>

This, then, to paraphrase Du Bois, has been the object of his striving, wherein the metaphorical prison walls call into existence the counter-veiling metaphor of the metaphysical as well as phenomenological prism of culture. Indeed, it is here that we see the brilliant working out in Stuckey's life and scholarly work of the dual meaning that is at the heart of Du Bois's famous allegory of the Veil—the indispensable resource that endows the African American with the saving gift of "second sight in this American world," even as it contends with the struggle of "the two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>7</sup>

For Stuckey, the legacy of Africa stands as the true saving gift in the story, what alone allows one to make sense of what has been an epic cultural struggle, and from out of which the enslaved created and re-created what may yet redeem and save America.

For their advice and help, I would like to thank the two other co-chairs responsible for planning the conference, Michael Gomez and David Roediger. We owe a collective thanks to the Department of History, University of California, Riverside, for the actual organizing of the logistics of the conference. To the contributors to this Special Issue, we would like to express our deepest thanks for their illuminating essays as well as accommodating the editorial demands of this collaboration. Finally, for his extraordinary support and advice from the inception of the idea, and for his editorial expertise in

bringing to fruition this Special Issue, we extend our heartfelt thanks to the Editor of *The Journal of African American History*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Afrogenesis" denotes the cultural process wherein the African American group emerged within as well as resisted the larger American community with whatever resources were at its disposal, the tracing back of which, through to its earliest history in Africa and its diverse cultural manifestations in America, is taken as the basic inspiration of the essays making up the present collection. Cf., L. Singer, "Following Emancipation, the group-forming process moved with much greater speed and intensity than before. I propose that this formative process be referred to as 'ethnogenesis,' meaning by this term the process whereby a people, that is an ethnic group, comes into existence"; in "Ethnogenesis and Negro-Americans Today," *Social Research* 29 (Winter 1962): 423.

<sup>2</sup>George M. Frederickson, "The Contribution of P. Sterling Stuckey's 'Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery' to the Historiography of Slavery," Paper presented at the Conference, "Africans, Culture, and Intellectuals in North America: P. Sterling Stuckey and the Folk—A Celebration of the Work and Legacy of P. Sterling Stuckey on the Occasion of His Retirement," University of California, Riverside, May 21–22, 2004. Cf. Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor* (1918; reprinted Baton Rouge, LA, 1969), and Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959).

<sup>3</sup>For the debate generated by Stuckey's work, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980* (Urbana, IL, 1986), 256–58, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup>See, Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1958; reprinted Boston, MA, 1990); and *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afro-American Studies*, ed. Frances S. Herskovits (New York, 1966); Roger Bastide, *African Civilisations in the New World*, trans. from the French by Peter Green, with a foreword by Geoffrey Parrinder (New York, 1971).

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Delbanco, "Afterword," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York, 1998), referring to P. Sterling Stuckey's "The Tambourine in Glory: African Culture and Melville's Art"; *ibid.*, 37–64.

<sup>6</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Norton Critical Edition (1903; New York, 1999), 10.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 10–11.