

## AFRO-CATHOLIC FESTIVALS IN THE AMERICAS

*Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas: Performance, Representation, and the Making of Black Atlantic Tradition.*

Edited by Cécile Fromont.

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Scholars of slavery have long debated the role that Christianity played in the slave communities of the plantation Americas. While some have seen in the mandate of religious conversion of enslaved peoples merely a religious justification for slavery and racial oppression, others have suggested that enslaved peoples adopted and adapted Christianity into a deft arena for cultural syncretism and resistance. In *Afro-Catholic Festivals*, the contributors intervene in this debate by disputing the idea that Christianity was simply a tool of European domination, while also rejecting the notion that enslaved men and women necessarily transformed Christianity into a syncretic tool of stealth slave resistance. Instead, they contend that Afro-Catholicism constituted an autonomous realm of cultural expression, social organization, and political empowerment.

This volume grew out of a similarly titled symposium, ‘Afro-Christian Festivals of the Americas’, convened in 2015 under the auspices of Yale University’s Institute of Sacred Music. It represents an ongoing effort to bring together various strands of scholarly activity that are typically separated by convention, language, and geography. In this way, the contributors hope to encourage a crossing of ‘historiographic fault lines that have kept scholarship on British, Iberian, and French imperial projects but also on Protestantism and Catholicism too often at odds’ (11).

In focusing on cultural practices that derive from West-Central Africa, *Afro-Catholic Festivals* serves as an important counterpoint to the predominance of West Africa in studies of African diasporic religions. That historiographical bias is due, at least in part, to certain essentialist conceptions of Christianity as always already European and of authentic African religion as necessarily non-Christian. These presumptions have made it difficult to identify West-Central African influences in the religious cultures of enslaved communities throughout the Americas. Christianity came to West-Central Africa in the late fifteenth century and quickly became part of the established religious culture of the region. When West-Central Africans found themselves displaced and enslaved in the Americas, they often maintained connections to their ancestral homelands by referring to some of the Catholic rituals that predominated in the Kingdom of Kongo and within its neighbouring and vassal states. As Michael Iyanaga notes in the concluding chapter of the volume, ‘many Catholic traditions of the Americas are themselves “African”, or least Afro-Diasporic’ (167).

One of the many strengths of *Afro-Catholic Festivals* is its novel treatment of the hemispheric connections between African-descended populations around the Atlantic rim. Jeroen Dewulf, Kevin Dawson, and Miguel A. Valerio demonstrate how enslaved people in New Orleans, Brazil, and Mexico seized upon ritualized, mock battles in an effort to

(re)create once familiar cultural practices while simultaneously offering biting critiques of slavery. Lisa Voigt and Juan Ferreira Furtado demonstrate that even from their liminal position in slave societies, African-descended people in Brazil and elsewhere continued to invest political power in independent African King elections. Cécile Fromont and Dianne Stewart raise key questions about the archive of black religiosity by reading both visual and textual sources against the grain of their initial intent. And Iyanaga concludes the volume by investigating aural resonances between ritual practices in Venezuela, Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic. Taken together, these essays reveal what Stewart calls the ‘religiocultural collaboration and cooperation that prevailed among diverse African-descended populations’ throughout the Americas (153). In this view, African-descended people looked not (or at least not exclusively) to European models in the formation of their own religious cultures and identities. Instead, they looked across ethnic and linguistic lines to locate in other African-descended peoples models for the development of broad-based cultures that connected enslaved men and women across the political and religious boundaries that separated them.

Perhaps because of the wide scope of the volume, some of its omissions are felt a bit more keenly. *Afro-Catholic Festivals* pays only scant attention to relevant developments in British North America. For example, the election of African Kings as part of Pinkster Day parades in nineteenth-century New York, as well as the John Canoe celebrations in North Carolina and in the larger Caribbean, receive only cursory attention. Given the volume’s focus on martial parading and mock battles, one might expect to see more references to the 1739 Stono rebellion in South Carolina, which has been described by some as an attempt by enslaved Catholics to seek religious refuge with their Spanish co-religionists in colonial Florida. Although we may have to wait for a fuller consideration of the relationships between Christian festivals in British North America with those under consideration here, the contributors have provided a provocative framework with which to move forward.

Fromont maintains that ‘this is not a book about performance’ (12). That is, the contributors do not, in the main, grapple with performance theories or interrogate the performative aspects at play in the production and reproduction of Afro-Catholic festivals in the Americas. Still, much of the material on offer here would benefit greatly from a reading of its performative aspects along the lines initiated by Joseph Roach and others.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, *Afro-Catholic Festivals* will be of keen interest to scholars of performance and cultural studies. In addition, the book is a valuable resource for scholars of the African diaspora, slavery, and religion. The essays in *Afro-Catholic Festivals* are concisely and clearly written, making them suitable for both graduate and undergraduate instruction. Indeed, scholars interested in the religions of the African Diaspora will find some familiar material here, but much more that is novel and provocative in a wide-ranging book that covers multiple continents across a broad expanse of time.

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1 See J. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996).