

# **Acculturation and Resistance: The Origins of Pan-Africanism in the Black Atlantic World**

by

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## **Abstract**

This essay focuses on the critical role that social and cultural adaptations played within contexts in which intellectual leaders, though not always situated in the most powerful positions and situations, worked to articulate a course of action for the effective educational development of the modern African. Religious notions of racial ideology were a central dimension of the history that is uncovered in a study of the 1822 conspiracy to revolt against slavery by enslaved Black people in Charleston, South Carolina under the leadership of Denmark Vesey. Vesey’s life was one in which he travelled across a wide range of the Black Atlantic world. His personal experiences in white and Black churches and his acquisition of information about the international world played a central role in his contribution to the development of pan-Africanism.

## Introduction

Edward Wilmot Blyden<sup>1</sup> (1832-1912), one of the greatest intellectual architects of pan-Africanism and one of the greatest intellectuals of the modern era, was born outside of the African continent. He invented his own identity as an African in order to serve as a creative method of instruction — a *philosophy of education* — for others to build upon. Reading his published and unpublished writings<sup>2</sup> (like all other historical documents) is akin to traveling to a foreign land. The historical landscape is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. You feel like you have been to this or that place before, even though you know that the world that you encounter is one that you truly know not. You do not truly *know* this strange place except in your imagination, from your familiarity with its marketing, its publicity. You only know this place as a spectator in the audience. The narration of the story is only partially the result of your actions (readings). For instance, you (the reader) did not write the historical document that you are reading. Hence, you can only discern the most obvious details that are embedded in its construction. Thus, your resulting interpretation of it is not based on all of the facts. This partial understanding which you have, however, is the closest that you can come to an absolute truth, for you can only physically *live* in this world alone, as an individual. You are alive only in the present tense, and you cannot be someone else from the past. You can only imagine what their life must have been like inside of their body, and your assumptions are based on events subsequent to the original historical facts and creative imagination.

Like Blyden, the main character in this study, Denmark Vesey, was concerned with freedom for African people. Africa, for Edward Wilmot Blyden, was the Fatherland of the Negro race. His ultimate efforts were to *reconstruct* the image of Africans in their own eyes. He sought to transform negative perceptions of African peoples into positive ones. This was the only way that he saw as being an effective method of attack against the onslaught of negative portrayals of Negro capacity and history. If any group in history was on the verge of social death, it was the Negro race. Racial death was an uncontested possibility in the mind of Edward Blyden. He was born in the Danish Caribbean during the early nineteenth-century to free-Black parents. His upbringing was a youthful experience of cross-cultural exchanges with African-born and New World-born enslaved persons, as well as Jewish people and European colonial and missionary circles as a curious boy. This tradition of cultural hybridization remained a critical part of his life as a mature educator and defender of Africa. But the question remains as to why did he take an interest in being a racial patriot?

The question, “Why does one decide to become anything?” is a particular form of questioning that touches upon the relationship between subjectivity and environment. Blyden lived in a world that the historian Hollis S. Lynch referred to as the “most humiliating” century for the Negro race to date. The nineteenth-century changed the African world forever.

Throughout the African continent and its diaspora, systematic measures were gradually developed in Europe and North America that transformed Africa from a continent containing a series of dynamic medieval kingdoms and stateless societies into a continent subject to incarceration by agents of white supremacy. The result was a world in which African people learned to adjust to a social and political climate dominated by European and American rulers. Africans incorporated themselves into colonial administrations before challenging imperial regimes for independence. Postcolonial African people are recovering from victimization to foreign hegemony. Their human sacrifice to global capitalism, according to Blyden, was often overlooked in explanations of the overlapping history of civilization and barbarism.

The relationship between history and fiction is clear upon an assessment of African and African-American contributions to the modern social and literary imagination. Notions of “race”, it seems, are inseparable from any discussion of the majority of African people. The suggestion that the “idea of Africa”<sup>3</sup> is usually coded as “Negro/Black” is not a far-fetched one. Yet, scholars have informed us since the mid-twentieth-century that racial configurations have always been based on ideological positions and that ideologies are rooted in time and place. The space of racialization, then, is an imaginary one, a cognitive agreement on the legitimacy of certain forms of knowledge. Historically, modern African modes of self-writing<sup>4</sup> deal with biological notions of race. They deal with the negotiation of the fictions and realities of everyday life for the “African” figure. Most Africans did not have the option of pretending that the world did not see them as being representatives of the Negro group of the human family. It is arguable that contemporary Africans tend to think in a similar manner. No matter how much one is privy to the lies that guide our waking life, we are still unable to see past all of them. Analogous to Platonic allegory, it is like being in a cave, except, you do not know where the walls are. But you know that you are inside of something. The logic of being inside of a cave does not escape your conception of your own time and place. But the space is a weird, warped space, one wherein you know not its limits. It is like this inside of the African body. The African body was seen and treated in this manner during the nineteenth-century when Africans and Negroes were the same thing.

Blyden is not famous. He does not appear to be one of those characters whom the average person recognizes as an African today. I have come across many persons from St. Thomas, the United States, Liberia, and Sierra Leone who seem to recognize the ring of his name from time to time. Scholars vary in their responses to his name being invoked. Oddly enough, his ideas on racial distinctions seem to strike us as being something ancient. This, perhaps, stems more from his obsessions with the classics of European and world literatures — which were not infected with biological notions of racial determinism — more so than from my own idiosyncrasies. But even my own biases cannot determine every response to my invocation of him. He does not come across to African-Americans as being a reasonable man because he was too *critical* of them.

He chastised African-Americans as being unwilling to live up to the divine charge of Christianity: to give rest to the weary. How could Christian African-Americans, of all people, sit around and seek to become citizens of racist America when they and their extended family were suffering at the hands of white people? Did they have no conception of duty? Had everything African about them been stamped out during their massive enslavement in America? Were they no longer Africans?

The role of international and multicultural acculturation is of central importance in the making of African leaders. African leaders consciously conglomerate various ethnic groups into a family, called Africans. The distinction “African” is a foreign term for those whom inhabit the continent, created under the Roman Empire’s designation of its southern province, “Africa”, and what their intellectual strata referred to as “*tertia orbis terrarum pars*” or the continent as we continue to recognize it.<sup>5</sup> Negroes are said to be indigenous to the continent. Thus, they are Africans in the truest sense. Their Negro identity also indicates their status in the global human family.

Even anti-Africanism in America among African-Americans relies on this invention, this foreign term of identification. The radical implications that emerge after recognition of the falsehood of many of ingredients that are a part of human constructions of identity are a part of the praxis underlying this study, which can also lead to a greater understanding of the protean nature of theories of universality. The idea that all Negroes are African seems to be both true and false depending on the context in African and African-American histories. I argue that this is the number one rule to remember in an evaluation of pan-Africanism and Black power ideology. Together, pan-Africanism and Black power ideology reveal a tremendous flaw in the thinking of Africans and African-Americans: we continue to consider ourselves to be objects which we did not play a role in creating. Getting to the basics is what this study attempts to do. Our human taxonomy remains in dialogue with rhetoric which guarantees that historians must play against the rules of the status quo on questions of race. Upon coming to terms with our obsessions with race, we can lead the world in coming to a new understanding of African people.

The object of this study is to establish the relationship between configurations of “history” (truth) and “fiction” (falsehood) in the creative imagination of African and African-American leaders since the eighteenth-century. The question of the relationship between self and collective identification and audience response is of particular importance to my analysis. The central characteristic of African and African-American intellectual production was that it was infused with the idea of “race” and that these intellectuals were “Black”.

This modern human construction was a central element in the gradual manifestation of the racial imagination in the New World and West Africa. Negro leaders largely addressed “foreign” audiences. These audiences were foreign to the actual humans whom African and African-American thinkers constructed and/or created in their social and literary imaginations. These intellectual architects also simultaneously constructed and examined themselves as “Negroes”. This “self-reflexive” mode of what became pan-African writing was central to the ways that African and African-American intellectuals discursively manipulated contextual systems of knowledge and social networks and created specific and significant projects for the regeneration of African people.

My project focuses on the critical role that social and cultural adaptations played within contexts in which intellectual leaders, though not always situated in the most powerful positions and situations, worked to articulate a course of action for the effective educational development of the modern African.<sup>6</sup> I argue that when children, women, and men of African descent in the Atlantic world were exposed to opportunities for acculturation of western modalities, their assimilation of western modernity did not entail erasure of their indigenous and creative subjectivity. Assimilation here refers to their ability and capacity to adapt to, “resist”, and/or negotiate power dynamics in the early Atlantic sphere in their own interests. Exposure to, and domestication of, even racialized European and American norms and conventions, such as linguistic, social, and cultural phenomena, facilitated the cultivation of radical *and* conservative forms of resistance and adaptation to modern life and the politics of history.

A historical analysis of the international dimensions of African and African-American mobility in time, place, and space suggests that travel and practices of diaspora<sup>7</sup> led to the generation of a dynamic world of traveling diasporaticians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and thereafter. Moving between imperial spaces of sovereignty necessitated the creation of an imaginary that could facilitate adaptations (and success or failure) of intellectuals whom were forced to operate within and against a raciologically framed universe. The vexing social position and symbolic figure of “the African” was central to the dilemmas facing the racialized literary imagination.

This study makes a case for the rebirth of a pan-African sensibility that takes *all* of Africa and the African diaspora into account in the contemporary context, wherein racial essentialism was deconstructed as a code of ethics and cognitions: raciology is defunct logic. The irony of the continued significance of these ideas, however, on the subject of subjectivity and universalism during the long nineteenth-century suggests that there is still a relationship between truth and falsehood<sup>8</sup> in the African world and among intellectual leaders.

ac-cul-tur-a-tion *n.* 1. The modification of the culture of a group or an individual as a result of contact with a different culture. 2. The process by which the culture of a particular society is instilled in a human being from infancy onward. — ac-cul'tur-a-'tion-al *adj.* — ac-cul'tur-a'tive *adj.*<sup>9</sup>

Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits engaged in an intellectual conversation during the early mid-twentieth-century that continues to provide a preliminary basis for the study of persons of African descent in North America, Central America, the Greater Caribbean, South America, West Africa, and Western Europe. Many scholars regard the vitality of this ongoing academic discussion of Africanisms to be a remarkable feat for two social scientists to generate. In many respects, this explosive debate remains unresolved among students of the western African diaspora. As defined by the British social theorist Paul Gilroy, the Black Atlantic world is a creative, dynamic space wherein constant “intercultural and transnational formation” of social identifications and political interrelationships have been imagined and practiced since the initial stages of the Columbian exchange<sup>10</sup> in 1492. Further considerations of the fragmented history of the Black African presence and historical legacy in the Atlantic World reveal a long history of amalgam.<sup>11</sup>

The central importance of scholarly investigations of African, African-European, and African-American<sup>12</sup> populations is that these studies led to a re-consideration of just what was/is African, European, or American about persons of “Black” racial descent in the western hemisphere. Both Frazier's and Herskovits's ideas on this ever-changing and awkward subject were frequently considered to be oppositional viewpoints in social science literature, with the latter summarized as arguing positively for the recognition of “Africanisms” – or the prevalence of Black cultural traditions that can be directly traced to West Africa – and the former interpreted as providing a sharp counter-argument to cultural Afrocentrism through his identification of the “Americanness” of African-American subjects in North America. Yet, the findings of both of these scholars were much more in agreement in their respective reasoning than we have been led to believe, especially in regards to the present lack of a consensus on the continued significance of their analyses of the intercultural transformation and international acculturation of Black Atlantic cultures. We found that Herskovits's and Frazier's findings on cultural mixture were essentially reflections of the same logic when we considered the epistemological framework, or “intellectual climate”<sup>13</sup>, of these two scholars' contextual studies and modes of analyses of identity and subjectivity. Frazier's studies centered on the Americanness of the Negro in the United States, and Herskovits's findings within this (and similar) contexts were in many respects strikingly similar to those produced by Frazier.<sup>14</sup>

This conversation sparked the present investigation of a key moment in the intellectual history of pan-Africanism and the relationship between the continental African and the African in America prior to the rise of Garveyism. But even upon identification of Africanisms in America, one is prompted to inquire about their relative significance in everyday life. Fleshing out the cognitive relationship between the international acculturation of African people and their modes of adaptation and/or resistance to captivity and political domination in Africa and America is the primary object of this study.

Through an examination of the key elements that constituted the ideological and discursive foundations of individual and organizational actions, this essay specifically assesses the role of international acculturation and the character of radical and conservative forms of adaptation and/or resistance<sup>15</sup> during a specific episode of confrontation and negotiation with the interests of the ruling elite within an institutional apparatus that supported industrial slavery and racial capitalism in the Atlantic world. Ironically, revolts and conspiracies were noted as the “most spectacular” examples of Black resistance to white domination. But as the cases of Denmark Vesey and other originators of Black-led movements demonstrate, the cosmopolitan leader of the foiled slave insurrection in Charleston, South Carolina (1822) was an important example of the dynamic relationship between internationalism and political imagination. Vesey was the subject of various scholarly and popular pens. He was also a fascinating case of the heroic futility of fighting with the master's tools instead of creating his own.

### **The Case of Denmark Vesey**

What thrust Denmark Vesey to our attention for an historical examination of the relationship between acculturation and resistance? Surely Vesey's mere leadership and participation in the Charleston conspiracy was not the primary cause of his prominence in the historical record. Perhaps the main reason that Vesey was not ignored in the history of African-American resistance was that his unsuccessful plot was regarded as one of the most extensive and culturally inclusive plans of rebellion among the enslaved in United States history. Who, then, was this careful conspirator named Denmark Vesey? What role did his personal identity play in his responses to interconnected systems of governance that principally rested upon the exploitation of enslaved laborers?<sup>16</sup> An understanding of the personal characteristics of this historical figure is vitally important in order to adequately grasp the full measure of the larger implications of the 1822 incident, especially in regards to past scholars' concentrated attention to the significance of acculturation and resistance among Black Atlantic cultures. I examine the manner in which various scholars have indirectly and directly analyzed the role of social, political, and cultural transformation in one particular instance of cosmopolitanism and radical activism. The origins of pan-Africanism can be traced to the catalysts for cultural mixing that still takes place in the Black Atlantic world that was identified by Gilroy. In particular, Black men like Denmark Vesey were the central facilitators of the flowering of pan-Africanism in the Black Atlantic theater. A reconsideration of past scholars' analysis of the 1822 incident leads us to a much clearer understanding of the significance of international acculturation between and among persons of African descent during this early stage in the “transformation of African [and African-American] identities”.<sup>17</sup> Understanding the dynamic salience of the diverse ethnic and cultural identities of those who were reported to have been involved in the Vesey plot, and the investigation of acculturation in past scholarly treatments of conspirators' vocations within urban, rural, coastal, and plantation – cosmopolitan settings – are both essential interpretative and methodological approaches to this particular accounting for this evolving mixture of social adaptability.

Charleston, South Carolina, the fourth largest city in North America by 1770, was one of the major hubs of the Atlantic world during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Did acclimation to this coastal enclave play any significant role in the Vesey conspiracy? By paying closer attention to past scholars' analyses of acculturation and resistance in South Carolina and within the Vesey plot, a new and clearer picture emerges – one in which future scholars are forced to adequately deal with the complexity and dynamics of pan-Africanism in the Atlantic world.

Several scholars have commented upon the roles of acculturation and resistance within the Vesey conspiracy. The works of historians who offer the most groundbreaking insights on this subject were primarily utilized by the present author; contained within these representative works was a utilization and criticism of other scholars' studies that were not directly consulted by the original authors. A few studies that were not directly related to the Vesey plot, but proved to be relevant to our discussion of acculturation and resistance, are occasionally cited in this account. As will be demonstrated below, the scope of the commentary regarding this plot ranged from contemporaneous and sensational accounts to rigorous and imaginative studies conducted during the late twentieth-century and the early twenty-first century. These sources allow us to gauge subjective aspects of the lived experiences of conspirators and how acculturation more or less played a critical role in their opting to engage in a plan that, according to most historians of the 1822 conspiracy, was destined to fail.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, no revolt of enslaved people in the long history of Black "rebellion" in North America was "successful." The simple fact is that this and all other attempts by African-Americans to violently and decisively break the yoke of white supremacy in North America failed. Of course, the non-success of any given revolt did not mitigate the historical significance of these foiled occurrences; there is much to discern from them. Thus begins our journey into the world of Denmark Vesey.<sup>19</sup>

## **The World of Denmark Vesey**

Denmark Vesey is believed to have been born in 1767. He was also referred to in some instances as Telemaque<sup>20</sup>, which may have been his name during an early period of his life. Historians have not reached a consensus regarding the specific nature and designation of Vesey's early name. It was generally conceded that Vesey was originally named Telemaque by his enslaver, Captain Joseph Vesey, and his crew and that the name eventually evolved into Telmak and Denmark. Very little is known about Vesey's life prior to 1781. Scholars have speculated that he was either born in West Africa and was later shipped to the Danish colony of St. Thomas (West Indies) during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, or that he was born to enslaved parents on the island. If Vesey was born in Africa, his birth most likely occurred close to the Gulf of Guinea (Gold Coast) or "elsewhere in Atlantic Africa". Moreover, the most recent study on Vesey maintains that he was "most likely" born on St. Thomas while the same author considers other scholars' claims that Vesey was born in Africa as "certainly ... possible".<sup>21</sup>

St. Thomas at the time was a slave-trading and sugar and cotton producing colony. The colony experienced relatively great prosperity in part because of Danish neutrality during European wars and subsequent imperial contests for power in the Caribbean. There was also a large gap in the number of Black and white residents on St. Thomas. By 1775 over ninety-percent of the total population of the island was Black. Many Blacks remained on the slave-trading island for only brief periods.<sup>22</sup>

The historian Doug Egerton provides an interesting analysis of what could have likely characterized Vesey's time on St. Thomas. He contends that the young boy's exposure to various African social and cultural practices should be seriously considered as a part of understanding Vesey's early life. Considered along with John Lofton's observation that enslaved persons who were not traded away from St. Thomas were forced to work in the sugar and cotton fields and to produce their own sustenance on small land allotments, Egerton's suggestive argument that Vesey was exposed to dynamic and creative Africanized ways of life, modes of being that were constantly (re)created and viable on St. Thomas, is well argued. According to Egerton:

The boy lived with either his parents or his fictive kinsmen in a "village" of fifty to sixty huts. Just as the slave families on St. Thomas reflected an African heritage, the living arrangements were a rough recreation of a West African compound ... In most cases, a family of four slaves lived in each hut.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that most of the enslaved people held at St. Thomas (permanently or to be transported to another Atlantic locale) were directly from Africa, in addition to the "highly creative" abilities of early Black Atlantic creoles, lends considerable weight to Egerton's suggestion that an Africanized field of acculturation had a significant, under-girding impact on Vesey's personal development. Egerton's (and Lofton's) observations contributed greatly to our scant knowledge of the specific clues of Vesey's life on St. Thomas.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, the brutal conditions on sugar-producing colonies afforded very little opportunities for the cultivation of purely autochthonous "African" communities. Scholars such as Melville Herskovits, Sterling Stuckey, and John K. Thornton have all pointed out the fact that even within systems of seemingly total domination, the fragments of African antecedents within early African and African-American Atlantic communities were identifiable and operative. These studies also revealed how African antecedents played critical roles in the lives of early African people in the Americas.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is probable that when Captain John Vesey, a Bermuda islander slave-trader, acquired 390 enslaved people in 1781 from St. Thomas for shipment to the French island of St. Domingue (Cape Francais) aboard the *Rebecca* – the shipment that included a young slave boy, soon to become permanently known as Denmark – many of these enslaved peoples, including Vesey, were literally "Africa[ns] in America."<sup>26</sup>

During the voyage from St. Thomas to St. Dominigue, the captain and his officers were reportedly impressed with the fourteen-year-old boy's appearance and intelligence. They took a peculiar liking to young Denmark and dressed him up as their "pet". Although the duration of Denmark Vesey's time on St. Dominigue was only three or less months, one historian suggested that Vesey "may have been introduced to voodoo ... [and] recognized the importance of supernatural forces and ritual for forging a sense of collectivity, enjoining people to silence" as a means of resistance. In addition, he may have at least been cognizant of the island's maroon communities. These suggestions were asserted in light of an absence of evidence supportive of claims of Vesey's exposure to voodoo ceremonies or maroons. Yet, it is clear that life on St. Dominigue was very different from life on St. Thomas, perhaps far less "Africanized" on the former island in terms of "creative familial reconstructions" in comparison to the latter island, as was suggested by Egerton.<sup>27</sup> After a brief time on the island, the young boy was returned to Captain John Vesey as "unsound and subject to epileptic fits." Interestingly, there is a possibility that Vesey's alleged illness may very well have been feigned in an effort to subvert local law. As stated by Egerton:

... [T]he unusually bright boy found ... [a] way to escape Saint Dominigue. Due perhaps to his growing facility with the French language, he somehow managed to understand that local law required all newly-imported slaves to be free of affliction or disease. Should the human product prove defective, local buyers had the right to return their purchase to the seller.<sup>28</sup>

During the fall season that preceded Joseph Vesey's return to the island with a fresh load of enslaved people on April 23, 1782, Vesey, presumably for the first time, began to exhibit "fits." Consider, however hesitantly, Lofton's assertion that Vesey's time on St. Domingue, under the harsh treatment of labor that was typically attributed to the sugar plantation, contributed to his heightened awareness of the stunningly holistic brutality of enslavement, which, in effect, sowed "the seeds of revolution" in him.<sup>29</sup> Upon Vesey's return to Joseph Vesey, "the epileptic fits ceased as quickly as they had begun," and, thereupon, young Denmark served as Captain Vesey's personal servant and accompanied him on several slaving voyages across the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most interesting and important aspects of Vesey's life occurred during his time at sea aboard the slaver, *Prospect*. It was at sea that Vesey is presumed to have acquired additional linguistic capacities (English and possibly Spanish) and the ability to read, which he coupled with his apparent knowledge of French (from St. Domingue) and "black Dutch" (from St. Thomas).<sup>31</sup> Atlantic historians, including W. Jeffrey Bolster, Julius S. Scott, and Ira Berlin, provided valuable information regarding seamen, international political consciousness, and "Atlantic creoles".

While most scholars agree that Vesey accompanied Captain Joseph Vesey on Caribbean slaving voyages, Vesey may have even crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean. Pearson states that as late as 1789 Vesey “possibly accompanied his master ... on the captain’s last Atlantic voyages,” which included trips to “London, Ostend, Rotterdam, and Hamburg.” There was a possibility that Vesey traveled to the African coast aboard the *Prospect*, witnessing (perhaps again) the horrors of the Middle Passage.<sup>32</sup>

The Middle Passage was a birth canal, launching a prolonged struggle between slaveholder and enslaved over rights of definition ... But the Middle Passage was also a death canal, baptismal waters of a different kind ... The experience would leave an indelible impression upon the African’s soul, long remembered by sons and daughters. It is the memory of ultimate rupture, a classic expulsion from the garden.<sup>33</sup>

If uncertainty remains about Vesey’s travel across the Atlantic, there is a consensus that he witnessed the transport of other Africans across parts of the Greater Caribbean and possibly to North America, affording him the opportunity to reflect on his own former position as a captive African in transport to a new land. Vesey’s position as an enslaved person aboard the *Prospect*, without a doubt, presented him with a major psychological contradiction. Yet, as Bolster, Scott, and Berlin inform us about the dynamic social, cultural, and political mobility that was afforded by the Atlantic network for Black seamen, it is very likely that Vesey acquired an enhanced understanding of how the Atlantic world economy actually worked. More importantly, Vesey capitalized on these opportunities to interact with other Black seamen and to learn tactics to negotiate individual freedom, not only through an acquisition of manual skill but also through a gathering of vital political information. According to Bolster,

Sailors thus became for black people in the Atlantic world what newspapers and the royal mail were for white elites: a mode of communications integrating local communities into the larger community of color, even as they revealed regional and local differences ... Other sailors appropriated ships as conduits for political dissent ...<sup>34</sup>

In 1783 the Captain resettled in Charleston, South Carolina, as a "land-based" slave-trader and, eventually, as a ship merchandiser. Vesey’s association with the sea remained, then, a constant element in his life even upon his permanent relocation to Charleston: his contact with seamen presumably did not cease in North America, and his world was not confined to African-American populations in the United States of America. Due to the Captain’s new vocation, Vesey’s exposure to sales of enslaved people also continued while he lived in Charleston.

In an insightful study of a New Orleans slave-market and its significance in the world known as the antebellum South, the historian Walter Johnson explains that the art of “making slaves” out of Black bodies was indeed a brutal psychological practice. Vesey’s enslaved position was in obvious contradistinction to that of his slave-trading enslaver, and this proximity to slaveholding classes necessarily presented him with increased opportunities to personally witness the daily activities of the slave-market and, perhaps yet again, the “soul murder” of more than a few Black people.<sup>35</sup>

Denmark Vesey remained Captain John Vesey's property in post-Revolutionary War era Charleston (formerly Charles Towne) until 1800. Charleston at this time was one of the five largest cities in the United States, and she was the center of the South Carolinian slavocracy. As one of the major maritime hubs of commercial trafficking in enslaved people and other products in the South, the cosmopolitan city regularly received large and diverse shipments of enslaved persons of African descent.<sup>36</sup> Both Charleston and her surrounding indigo and rice plantations were home to Africans from various regions of western and western-central Africa and from the Greater Caribbean. The historian Michael A. Gomez argued that many of the enslaved people whom were located in South Carolina were, at the very least, nominally practicing Muslims whom hailed from Senegambia and Sierra Leone; both of these West African regions were noted and demanded for their inhabitants’ acquaintance with agricultural skills that were valued by planters. About thirty-percent of the Africans imported to North America came from these regions of considerable Muslim populations and Islamic influence.<sup>37</sup> Independent historian David M. Robertson’s analysis and complication of Islam in North America as it relates to Vesey is worth noting. According to Robertson:

... Denmark Vesey almost certainly knew or observed fellow blacks who continued to practice Islam in their bondage ... [W]hether he confessed Islam ... was carried to the grave ... [I]t is chronologically and geographically possible that ... Vesey met and talked with the most extraordinary Muslim slave in South Carolina history ... known as Omar Ibn Said.<sup>38</sup>

While the above quote is certainly speculative, Robertson went on to assert that the planned date of Vesey’s revolt coincided with “Islamic numerology.” Robertson argued that the number that was played by Vesey, 1884, for the winning lottery ticket that he purchased in early October 1799 numerically coincided with “the word *(h)ad-d(i)th*, one of the sayings of the Prophet [Muhammad] repeated after performing obedience to Allah.”<sup>39</sup>

By January 1800 Denmark had purchased his freedom for \$600 from a \$1,500 prize in the East Bay Lottery and had become a carpenter. Joining a community of about 1,000 free Blacks that was located in an area with a much larger slaveholding population, Denmark Vesey's quasi-free experience of everyday life in Charleston was presumably similar to that of other so-called free Blacks.

Described as “occupying a sort of limbo between slavery and real freedom,” Charleston’s free Blacks negotiated a racialized world in which they were allowed to capitalize on certain measures of social and economic mobility, such as owning property and forming social organizations. Disenfranchisement, subjection to taxes, the burden of frequently proving their status to practically any white person, and other restrictions, however, inhibited the proliferation of practices of freedom that could equal those freedoms that were enjoyed by white Charlestonians.<sup>40</sup>

It is possible that Vesey may have chosen his former enslaver’s surname after his emancipation in similar fashion to other freed Blacks, not so much out of personal affinity for Joseph Vesey, but as a maneuver to garnish white customers' loyalties that were based on the well-respected business name of Joseph Vesey. This was an especially plausible mode of social and cultural negotiation when we consider that small free Black populations across the South could not serve as viable self-supporting markets for southern free Black entrepreneurs, as opposed to the case of free Blacks in northern urban centers. Vesey may have also purchased an “apprenticeship with an established craftsman” and gained the necessary skill to become a carpenter, which Charleston newspaper advertisements for “Negro Carpenters” displayed a high demand for. There is no evidence that Vesey was a carpenter before his freedom or that he was hired out as one while he was enslaved. “Carpentry was simply the most common expertise for unskilled young men to enter,” according to Egerton.<sup>41</sup>

Vesey was reported to have had several<sup>42</sup> wives during his life, some, if not all, of whom were enslaved women. It is believed that he never fathered free children due to the inherited enslaved status of children through their mothers in accordance to South Carolina law.<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy that Vesey's most recent biographer questioned his possible practice of polygamy. Egerton noted that while there is no substantial evidence that proves that Vesey practiced polygamy, he (Vesey) was likely to have been familiar with such forms of marital relationships from the time of his experience in either western Africa or on St. Thomas (or both) and have practiced accordingly in Charleston. However, due to his long life, a life that “far exceeded the average life expectancy for black males in antebellum America,” Vesey had “more than enough time to sequentially marry two or three women.” Egerton brings to light information alluding to the possibility that Vesey’s several wives may have been, in fact, only reflections of contemporaneous demonization of Vesey as a “haughty and capricious ... Eastern Bashaw” by biased Charleston officials as recorded in extant sources.<sup>44</sup> What is clear is that his wives were enslaved, and Denmark was, in effect, tied to the enslaved community not solely based on his race and name. His emotional sentiment and imagination were also interlaced factors.

Several critical events in Atlantic history occurred during the period immediately prior to Vesey's freedom and subsequent commencement of recruiting co-conspirators around the winter of 1821-1822 which were directly or indirectly related to Denmark Vesey and the 1822 incident.

The French Revolution (1789-1799) had an enormous impact on Western political and social life, particularly in South Carolina where the republican currents sparked by the movement resulted in a proliferation of several pro-French societies. In 1791 the inhabitants of St. Domingue initiated efforts to overthrow the white power structure, which resulted in an independent Haiti in 1804. An influx of white colonists from the island into the United States, some 500 in Charleston, followed the momentous event. The sentiment caused by the French and Haitian Revolutions was reflective of a larger liberalization trend in western civilization, or support for the "rights of man" on the one hand, and the potential of Black resistance to enslavement, on the other. Both were dangerous currents when they fell upon free Black or enslaved ears. It is certainly likely that this sentiment was known and felt by many Black inhabitants of Charleston. It is also very probable that much of this information was acquired from news that was disseminated by Black seamen and by Charleston's traditional newspapers and among white citizens. News from abroad was very much a part of the talk of this cosmopolitan space. With the presence of pro-French societies in Charleston, not to mention Denmark Vesey's possible involvement in these radical organizations, it is equally plausible that radicalism also either served as an impetus for the creation of dreams of freedom among Denmark and other Blacks or further revealed the inconsistency of white Charlestonians' proclamations of universal liberty. Clearly, the Haitian Revolution is thought to have served as an inspiration to Denmark Vesey and his plan to organize a revolt in Charleston some twenty-one years later. Other key radical events that occurred during this generative interval of Vesey's social life included conspiracies in 1800 (Gabriel Prosser in Virginia) and 1816 (Camden, South Carolina). Charleston's four-year interval of reopened trans-Atlantic commercial trade in enslaved people (January 1804 – January 1808) directly from Africa was also another important instance of international acculturation prior to 1822, with nearly forty-thousand Africans being imported into the state during this period.<sup>45</sup>

In early 1817, over 4,000 Black Methodists in Charleston were led by Reverend Morris Brown and others in a disaffection from Bethel Methodist Church in response to the announced plans of white church officials of their intention of constructing a hearse house on the site of a Black cemetery. They formed an independent African Church in Charleston in 1818 as part of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) confederation that was formed by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones on April 9, 1816, in Philadelphia. Denmark Vesey, formerly a member of the predominantly white Second Presbyterian Church, became a member of the Hempstead branch of the church that was located in a predominantly Black neighborhood and which operated as one of two AME church branches in the city of Charleston. The impetus for Vesey's affiliation with Second Presbyterian Church is unclear, but it is highly likely that his choice stemmed from a combination of his contempt for, and non-acceptance by, Charleston's "Brown Fellowship Society," a mulatto caste whose members attended Episcopal churches; he may have been reluctant to attend Methodist services. His opting to join the city's AME church more than likely resulted from his attraction to the congregation's Black leadership and, perhaps, to its all-Black membership.

What is clear is that the church “drew its leadership from free artisans like Vesey.”<sup>46</sup> Because Second Presbyterian, a fairly new congregation, admitted Vesey and two other Blacks “to Communion for the first time,” Egerton contended that Vesey was probably introduced to the church (Second Episcopal) by his former enslaver, Joseph Vesey.

Vesey was not baptized like the other two Blacks who received communion, which “indicated that the April morning was not Vesey’s initial contact with a Christian church.” According to Pearson, Vesey may have also acquired some knowledge of Christianity on St. Thomas as well as during three other periods of his life: from the island’s Moravian missionaries; on Haiti through exposure to voodoo; or while at sea.<sup>47</sup> Michael Mullin asserted that “religion [was not] a dominant feature of Vesey’s teaching and outlook ... [but religion was] a tool[,] and its place of worship [was] convenient for conducting his style of what is now termed consciousness-raising,” which Egerton found to be “curiously suggest[ed].” Vincent Harding’s commentary on Denmark Vesey and the relationship between religious acculturation and resistance greatly contributes to any discussion of Vesey and the African Church.<sup>48</sup> Before a discussion of Vesey’s significant relationship with the AME Church and a larger investigation of some of the intricacies of the plot, one other historical occurrence should be noted in the historical record.

The Congressional debate over the admission of Missouri to the Union as a free state or a slave state, and the ultimate issue of whether slavery would spread to western territory, provoked a national debate that resulted in the Missouri Compromise of 1820. A major stipulation of the Missouri Compromise was that Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state, and Maine joined the Union as a free state. This political compromise kept the national balance of power between slave and free states equal. In addition, the compromise resulted in a stalling of the question of the future of slavery, which was to be decided by settlers in the western territory. Senator Rufus King's (NY) arguments against the institution of slavery in 1819 and 1820 were reportedly influential to, or at least manipulated by, Denmark Vesey in his effort to garnish support for a uprising by enslaved people in Charleston. Scholars have speculated that Denmark Vesey acquired wind of King's arguments either from Charleston’s widely circulating press and from pamphlet coverage of King.

It is generally accepted that by the winter of 1821-1822, Denmark Vesey actually commenced his personal selections of "lieutenants" or fellow co-conspirators for a Black uprising in Charleston. By this time Vesey had resided in South Carolina for nearly forty years and enjoyed a little over twenty of these years as a relatively free man. Having possibly hailed from western Africa, Vesey had also witnessed life on the Danish colony of St. Thomas; toil in the sugar fields of the French territory of St. Domingue; sail across the Atlantic aboard a slaver; and work in the service of a slave-broker in South Carolina. He is noted as having acquired a reputation of respectability among Black Charlestonians and even among some whites. Moreover, this respect may have entailed a combination of admiration, fear, or contempt.

Robertson contended that these perceptions of Vesey stemmed from his “autocracy—his sense of his own powerful gift of leadership” or from a possible “Muslim superiority” complex.<sup>49</sup> Lofton noted Vesey’s “domineering personality” and alleged impatience with Blacks who presumably lacked a liberationist social consciousness. Vesey exhibited an ability to “sway Negroes of lesser stature.” The historian Robert Starobin recognized Vesey’s “leadership ... of black protest,” and Sterling Stuckey characterized Vesey as “[n]o ordinary man ... [and] a man possessing charismatic authority.” Egerton suggested that Vesey acquired the “awe and respect” reported by the contemporary chronicler James Hamilton from his “disciples” due to his being “a benevolent tyrant.”<sup>50</sup>

As can be discerned from the above information, the relatively small amount that is known about Vesey’s social and subjective world provides a wealth of knowledge about his persona and life. His acculturation cannot be relegated to Charleston. Vesey’s exposure to a large portion of the Atlantic world historically contextualizes his life, even before his relocation to South Carolina, as an embodiment of the dynamic complex of the Black Atlantic network. In addition, Charleston’s urban, coastal setting also proved to be a significant element in the story of Denmark Vesey. The study of Vesey’s life prior to 1821 sheds light on a number of the specific characteristics of early “African America” (if there was really such an entity). More important is the suggestion that an interpretation of Vesey’s earlier life, coupled with a close investigation of the context of the conspiracy, enables one to more fully grasp the significance of the international acculturation of Vesey and that of his co-conspirators and this collective seasoning’s relationship to resistance. A discussion of some of the specific characteristics of the 1822 conspiracy and the identities of other major radical participants is essential to our investigation of the significance of acculturation and resistance in the Atlantic world and the development of pan-Africanism in the modern world.

Scholars generally agree that Vesey’s disdain for slavery, certainly like that of countless others in the Atlantic world, stemmed from his *feelings* about his own experience in bondage. As mentioned earlier, Vesey participated in the transport of enslaved people, and he possibly experienced and witnessed the initial reactions to captivity that signified the traumatic experience of newly captured continental Africans. Again, he may have personally experienced these adjustments as a child. Vesey’s children whom were born into slavery also served as a daily reminder of his precarious “half-free” status, not to mention his cognizance of Charleston’s regulation of her small free Black community. Charleston was indeed the jewel of a “slave society.”<sup>51</sup> Scholars such as Michael Mullin have even gone so far as to suggest that skilled urban Blacks, especially free Black men, were less inclined to partake in violent revolts. Rather, these persons opted for safer and individualistic tactics to ameliorate their positions within white-dominated settings.<sup>52</sup> The Denmark Vesey conspiracy is decidedly an antithetical example to this provocative and suggestive view.

As students of Vesey have all suggested, his position as a teacher and class leader in the African Church facilitated his calls for Black self-determination and resistance to white supremacy. There were slight disagreements, however, within this collective argument. Sterling Stuckey described Vesey's pronouncements in the church as "radical Christianity," and Vincent Harding considered Vesey's use of "religion ... in a movement that went beyond the defense of the church-oriented prerogatives to new and likely bolder concerns" as critical ingredients to his constant focus on rebellion. Both Lofton and Robertson viewed Vesey's position in the church as one in which he could express his radical Christian thoughts against white injustice under the veil of "religious meetings ... that ... provide[d] protective coloration for unapproved talk."<sup>53</sup> While Vesey did manage to utilize his position as a church leader to spread potentially dangerous information in order to persuade Black members of the necessity of fighting for the overthrow of racial slavery, Egerton pointed out that past scholars' observations of Vesey's pronouncements as a class leader usually overlooked his specific usage of Christian ideology. In fact, Egerton suggestively noted:

Vesey turned his back on the New Testament and what he regarded as its false promise of universal brotherhood ... Vesey seceded ... from Christianity itself. In his numerous religious pronouncements, Vesey never once mentioned Jesus or a God that would have him forgive his enemies. He simply knew that the instinct of freedom was the righteous voice of *his* God.<sup>54</sup>

Whether Vesey rejected or ever accepted Christianity remains unclear.<sup>55</sup> It is certain that he utilized Old Testament doctrine during religious meetings, as Egerton stated. Harding also identified Vesey's use of the Exodus narrative of deliverance in his (Vesey's) addresses to, and recruitment of, Black church members.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, Vesey's ability to manipulate religious doctrine within a racialized institutional setting for the intended purposes of his plan to violently confront systematic slavery stemmed from his knowledge and diligent reading of the Bible and, as Robertson noted, the Qur'an.<sup>57</sup>

Vesey's recruitment efforts were not limited to the AME church setting, however. Due to the mobility that was afforded to him by Charleston's urban setting and especially because of his status as a free man, Vesey was able to travel throughout the city and the surrounding areas. His occupation as a carpenter also enabled him to establish regular contact with other skilled Blacks – whom were to serve as critical mediums of information about, and suppliers of, the necessities of revolt, as we can discern from Vesey's careful selection of fellow leaders and followers. Indeed, Vesey's apparent knowledge of the goings and comings of key Black figures in and around Charleston is striking to perceptive readers of the testimonies recorded from the trial manuscripts; presumably, much of this knowledge was acquired over an extended period of time.

Pearson commented that Vesey “fashioned a ‘hidden transcript’—a term used by anthropologist James Scott to describe the backstage discourse and subversive practices formulated by subordinate groups.” This observation concisely summarized the complex manner in which Vesey actually gained the support of his principal sub-leaders. As one scholar rather simply stated, Vesey chose well.<sup>58</sup> He selected a nearly airtight band of conspirators in and around the city of Charleston.

Vesey is believed to have gained several conspirators around December 1821. Two of the principal leaders were enslaved persons who were the property of the recently elected South Carolina Governor, Thomas Bennett. Ned and Rolla Bennett were both members of the African Church, and Ned, like Vesey, served as a class leader. These men resided about two blocks from Vesey’s home. They were both noted as being “trusted slaves.” Monday Gell, an African-born harness maker who arrived in South Carolina during the state’s reopening to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, was allowed to hire himself out by his enslaver. Gell also resided in his own rented residence. He is known to have even “run a business on Market Street in the heart of Charleston.”<sup>59</sup> A literate member of the AME Church, the trusted enslaved man used his Market Street shop as a meeting locale for Vesey and other conspirators and was to lead an Igbo band in the revolt. Egerton observed that Gell remained in contact with these African men whom ventured from the nearby plantations to barter goods during Charleston’s market Sundays.<sup>60</sup> Gell’s shop was also to serve as a repository for weapons.

Mingo Harth, an African-born domestic enslaved man and member of the AME Church, is reported to have been a principal recruiter of Methodists and other Blacks whom were employed “at the lumberyard owned by his master.” One scholar suggested that Harth, a “Mandingo,” was to organize an ethnic company for the revolt.<sup>61</sup> Peter Poyas, a literate class leader at the African Church, was a ship carpenter and has been regarded by scholars as an instrumental planner in the securing of weapons and the revolt’s execution. Poyas’s contact with other skilled Blacks along the docks at South Bay Street allowed him to gain waterfront followers as well as pertinent information from seamen. “Gullah” Jack Prichard, an African-born ship caulker and recognized “conjurer” among Blacks in and around Charleston, rounds out the list of Vesey’s principal co-conspirators. Gullah Jack’s pivotal role was to garnish the support of the “Gullah contingent[,]... the Congolese-Angolan and/or Gola members of the slave community in the Charleston area and their descendants.”<sup>62</sup>

Upon recruiting these sub-leaders, Vesey held several meetings at his home and other safe locales and then began to plan an actual revolt. As stated in the trial manuscripts, his plans included gathering and selecting followers; securing and producing weaponry; and setting a date for the revolt. In May 1822, July 14<sup>th</sup> was chosen as the date of the revolt, reportedly the darkest night of the month. Due to the date's being the second Sunday of the month, Vesey perceived it to be a strategic time since many whites would likely be on vacation outside of Charleston.

In addition, a large number of Blacks would be in the city as part of the regularly occurring market Sunday.<sup>63</sup> Both of these regularities would be effective in the arousal of little or no suspicion of additional Black numbers in the city. Some scholars suggest that Vesey may have selected the July 14<sup>th</sup> date because of additional reasons. This date is also the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, a momentous event in the French Revolution; this is also the day that was celebrated in Massachusetts by freed Blacks commemorating emancipation. Vesey, reportedly aware of these national and international events, may have been aware of the symbolic significance of this historical information. Considering his probable practice and knowledge of Islam, Vesey's selection of the specific date for the revolt may have been a mystical part his plan to deliver Blacks from physical and spiritual bondage. According to Robertson:

[T]he number fourteen [is] representative of the Prophet's [Muhammad's] name ... [,and] the date of July 14, 1822, reckoned by the Islamic lunar calendar, marked the last two months of that Islamic year, Dhu al-Qa'dah and Dhu al-Hijah ... The latter month, Dhu al-Hijah, takes its name from the *Hijrah* in the Koran [sic], meaning "to migrate, withdraw, or to make an exodus."<sup>64</sup>

As most scholars identified flight to Haiti as the most desperate option that may have been a part of Vesey's original plan, Egerton argued that an exodus was central to the planning of Charleston's "African Moses" who would lead his people to "the promised land of Haiti." He also contended that Vesey "sought to escape it" by sea, in similar fashion to those at Stono who attempted flight to Spanish Florida in 1739 rather than fight a futile battle to destroy the antebellum South.<sup>65</sup> Other scholars continue to hold ironic views similar to the suggestion that the Vesey conspiracy was an "attempt to destroy the very foundations of the American slaveocracy."<sup>66</sup>

Historians agree that the plot entailed a plan designed for the successful seizure of a Charleston arsenal and guardhouse, as well as the taking of a United States arsenal; the killing of the governor; and utilization of rural enslaved people to assist in the burning of Charleston as part of a general slaughter of all whites and non-supportive Blacks. Vesey and his followers hoped that the revolutionary spark that was to be initiated at Charleston would incite enslaved people in the surrounding areas to join and, according to Lofton, "converge on the city" and create an "impregnable stronghold." Vesey's plan to sail to Haiti is viewed by most scholars as a desperate option. He was reported to have forwarded correspondence to Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer through the recruitment of a Black seaman en-route to the island. In addition, Vesey's knowledge of Boyer's advertisements in North American newspapers for the emigration of skilled free Blacks to Haiti apparently contributed to the projected anchoring role of the former French island within the plot.

Haiti held a sacred place in the hearts of many Blacks due to its being an independent nation that emerged from a violent overthrow of colonial slavery. Interestingly, Vesey and his followers – aware of the lax security of Charleston’s arsenals and banks, in addition to the added security of a significantly large number of skilled Black support along the city’s waterfront – may have planned to partake in urban warfare only long enough to depart to Haiti.<sup>67</sup>

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, the attempt of one of Vesey's followers to recruit another conspirator resulted in the reporting of the planned revolt to Charleston authorities on May 30<sup>th</sup> by an enslaved person whom was unwilling to revolt and keep quiet. Denmark Vesey, upon learning of the plot's betrayal, desperately changed the date of the revolt to June 16<sup>th</sup>, about a month before the initial date. Vesey appeared to have been hell-bent on destroying the city's slave-holding apparatus. This date was also discovered on June 14<sup>th</sup> after an enslaved-spy allegedly implicated the African Church as being a vital center of organization for the plot and June 16<sup>th</sup> as the revised planned date of revolt. By June 15<sup>th</sup> Charleston officials had deployed military units to suppress the revolt, followed by the arrests of Vesey's followers, "slave trials," Vesey's own capture on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, and a series of vicious executions of the would-be participants in the revolt, executions that continued until August 9<sup>th</sup>. Vesey was executed July 2, 1822. A total of thirty-five Blacks were executed following the foiled revolt. Thirty-seven Blacks were ordered to leave the United States; two Blacks died while in custody; three Blacks were whipped but found not guilty and released; and four whites were convicted, imprisoned and fined. Some 135 individuals were arrested in relation to the plot, which has been estimated to include as many as 9,000 participants. The Vesey conspiracy resulted in more court ordered executions than any other conspiracy by enslaved people in the history of the antebellum South.<sup>68</sup>

A closer look at those implicated in, or executed because of, the 1822 conspiracy reveals an impressive number of skilled Blacks and members of the African Church. Nineteen of the accused were reportedly both skilled laborers and members of the church, and only one was acquitted. Eleven of these men were hanged; one was exiled to Liberia; and the remaining men were transported to locations outside of Charleston. Thirty-five of the persons summoned by the court were recorded as being members of the African Church. According to Gomez, the Vesey conspiracy can be viewed as an effort, however unsuccessful, to reconcile ethnic and spiritual differences between persons of African descent for collective purposes.<sup>69</sup> It is likely, then, that several of the non-reported AME church members involved in the plot were adherents of various cultural and religious practices that were the result of acculturation: or what scholars have referred to as retentions, or the synthesis of African traditions in the New World. Indeed, the individuals whom we are sure were not largely African Church members, the Gullah group located outside of Charleston, were not highly representative in the list of Blacks who fell victim to the city’s vicious reprisals.<sup>70</sup>

The world of Denmark Vesey was a complex one and yielded an abundant amount of information for various investigators.<sup>71</sup> For example, a consideration of his intersections with advocates of Black nationalism (for instance, his possible contact with David Walker) and pan-Africanism (his association with Morris Brown's church in Charleston) provides a window of opportunity for new studies of the role of acculturation and resistance.

The suggestion that Vesey was a “man of the Black Atlantic” rings especially true. Vesey was an “Atlantic creole” – as well as many of his followers – and his life serves as a strong counter-argument to scholarly characterizations of skilled, highly acculturated Blacks who peacefully negotiated their positions within white-dominated environments. Vesey and his principal sub-leaders were all very familiar with the intricacies of urban Charleston from their experiences of interacting with whites and locating and creating spaces for their own respective and collective agendas. Michael Mullin’s observation that skilled Blacks, with varying degrees of mobility, regarded “flight” away from enslavers as the most viable way of enjoying freedom, ironically, informs and supports the present author’s analysis of the case of Denmark Vesey. That is, Vesey’s mobility resulted from his ability to adapt and negotiate in a non-suspicious manner to the Atlantic world that he lived in. The acculturation of Denmark Vesey and his principal co-conspirators – their evolving familiarity with the intricacies of the ways of life in the Americas – brought them closer to European-Americans, and, more importantly, enhanced their abilities and willingness to confront this “New” World. This was clearly exhibited in the case of Vesey and in other characters throughout the Black Atlantic world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Collyer, C., “Edward Wilmot Blyden—A Correspondent of William Ewart Gladstone,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (January, 1950), 75-78; July, Robert William, “Nineteenth-Century Negritude: Edward W. Blyden,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1964), 73-86; Lynch, Hollis R., “Edward W. Blyden: Pioneer West African Nationalist,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1965), 373-388; Lynch, Hollis R. *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan Negro Patriot, 1832-1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); Frenkel, M. Yu., “Edward Blyden and the Concept of African Personality,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 292 (July 1974), 277-289; Livingston, Thomas W. *Education and Race: A Biography of Edward Wilmot Blyden* (San Francisco: Glendessary Press, 1975).

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<sup>2</sup> Blyden, Edward Wilmot, Letters to William Edwin Gladstone, *Gladstone Papers*, The British Library, Manuscripts Collection (London: United Kingdom, 1860-1876); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, Colonial and Foreign Office Papers, The National Archives (Kew: United Kingdom); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, *Liberia's Offering: Being Addresses, Sermons, Etc.* (New York: John A. Gray, 1862); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, *On Mixed Races in Liberia* (Smithsonian Institution: Annual Report, 1870. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Annual Report, 1871, reprint); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, *From West Africa to Palestine* (Freetown, Sierra Leone: T.J. Sawyer, 1873); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (London: W.B. Whittingham & Company, 1888. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1994, reprint); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, *African Life and Customs* (Sierra Leone: *The Sierra Leone Weekly News*, 1908. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1994, reprint); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, Edited and With an Introduction by Hollis R. Lynch. Foreword by Leopold Sedar Senghor (Millwood, New York: KTO Press, 1978); Blyden, Edward Wilmot, *Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, Edited by Hollis R. Lynch (London: Cass, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Mudimbe, V.Y., *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Mbembe, Achille, "African Modes of Self-Writing", *Public Culture*, Volume 14, Number 1 (Winter 2002): 239-273.

<sup>5</sup> Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, xi.

<sup>6</sup> Haraway, Donna J., "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, Brent Hayes, *The Practice Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> The origins of "History" as a concept can be traced to narrative efforts to capture the truth and/or falsehood of a given phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup> *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, Third Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Roark, James L., Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan H. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume I: To 1877* Third Edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2005), 44 and G-1.

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<sup>11</sup> Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Sidney, Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley, Editors, *Imagining Home: Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> My use of “African-American” employs a transnational imagination of black Atlantic cultures in the western Atlantic world, encompassing North American, Central American, Greater Caribbean, and South American geographical spaces.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus: and Other Tales*, Justin O’Brien, Translator. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955; 1942).

<sup>14</sup> Edward Wilmot Blyden held that the Americaness of Negroes in the United States of America was in remarkable contradistinction to the prevalence of Africanity found in other regions of the Black Atlantic world. See Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939) and Herskovit’s *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941). Various scholars have commented upon this and the numerous subsequent debates following this generative conversation regarding the sociology and anthropology of persons of African descent in the Atlantic World. Sidney Mintz and Richard Price’s *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976; 1992) offers a great overview of this debate, as well a respected analysis of the Black presence in the New World. For an interesting, but by no means definitive, assessment of Frazier’s and Herkovit’s similar, as well as divergent, interpretations regarding the prevalence, manifestation, and expression of Africanisms in North America, and how Africanisms relate to African-American religiosity, see Moses, Wilson Jeremiah, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. Revised Edition (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, Second Printing; 1993 Revised Edition copyright; 1982) especially chapter 2, 23-29.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Julius S. Scott for initially introducing the idea of examining the relationship between acculturation and resistance during discussions that occurred in his graduate course, “Origins of the Black Atlantic,” at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, during the Fall 2000 academic term. See Mullin, Gerald W., *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Mullin, Michael, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831*, Blacks in the New World Series, August Meier and John H. Bracey, Editors (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

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<sup>16</sup> For a wonderful synthesis of the history of various slaveholding “societies” within North America, see Berlin, Ira, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Landers, Jane, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, Blacks in the New World series, August Meier, Editor (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1999) serves as an excellent addition to historical understandings of North American slavery and the construction of racial identities.

<sup>17</sup> Gomez, Michael A., *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> The historian Doug Egerton contends differently, as we will see below.

<sup>19</sup> All information contributing to this study’s biographical sketch/synthesis of Vesey and the 1822 plot is derived from the work of past biographers. Citations denoting differing scholarly opinions will be cited accordingly. All other information on which scholars appear to agree regarding aspects of Vesey’s and others’ lives and historical evidence is not denoted by respective citations in the text or footnotes. The most authoritative studies of Vesey and the 1822 plot are: Hamilton, James, *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks in This City* (Charleston, 1822); Kennedy, Lionel and Thomas Parker, *An Official Report of the Trials of the Sundry Negroes Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1822); Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, *Travelers and Outlaws: Episodes in American History* (Lee and Shepard: Boston, 1889) Reprinted for Vanguard Society of America by The John Henry and Mary Louisa Dunn Bryant Foundation (Los Angeles, 1962); Lofton, John M., *Insurrection in South Carolina: The Turbulent World of Denmark Vesey* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: The Antioch Press, 1964), Republished (with relatively no changes) as *Denmark Vesey: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1983); Stuckey, Sterling, “Remembering Denmark Vesey—Agitator or Insurrectionist?” *Negro Digest* 15 (February 1966), 28-41; Starobin, Robert S., *Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1970); Robertson, David, *Denmark Vesey* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999); *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822*, Edited with an introduction by Edward A. Pearson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Egerton, Doug. *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, American Profiles Series, Norman K. Risjord, Editor (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House Publishers, 1999).

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<sup>20</sup> Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 23-24; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 21. Pearson asserts that a crew of sailors began to refer to the young boy (or “pet”) by this nomenclature during shipment to St. Domingue, whereas Egerton contends that he was named Telemaque upon his return to the Captain for “epileptic fits.” See both authors’ discussions of the character Telemachus from Homer’s *Iliad* as a possible inspiration for the crew’s naming of the boy. Pearson also cites the eighteenth-century novel, *The Adventures of Telemachus, the Son of Ulysses*, by Tobias Smollett as a possible source. Further discussion of Vesey’s name will take place below.

<sup>21</sup> Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 10-11, n.1, 241; Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 20-21. Lofton and Egerton point out that Herbert Aptheker’s assertion that Vesey was born in Africa was unsupported by the evidence that he (Aptheker) used to support his claim. See Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 3-4. For two interesting discussions of the intricacies of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade within West Africa, see Barry, Boubacar, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, translated by Ayi Kwei Armah (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Thornton, John K., *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* Second Edition, Studies in Comparative World History Series, Michael Adas et al, Editors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> See Williams, Eric. *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1944; 1994) 39-40 and especially chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>23</sup> Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 7-11; Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Mintz’s and Price’s discussion of the transformation of Africans into African-Americans is especially informative. See *Birth of African-American Culture*, 52-60.

<sup>25</sup> Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*; Stuckey, Sterling, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Thornton, *Africa and Africans*.

<sup>26</sup> Mullin, *Africa in America*.

<sup>27</sup> Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 25-26; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 18. See also Dayan, Joan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Price, Richard, Editor, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*. Third Edition. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

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<sup>28</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 54-74. The present author suggests that a hesitant consideration of Lofton's argument be made regarding Vesey's experience in St. Domingue as "sowing the seeds of revolution" in light of other scholars' analyses of the Vesey plot in 1822 as a "revolutionary", "insurrectionist", and/or "agitator."

<sup>30</sup> Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 20. See also King, Wilma, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) and Hartman, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 31-32; Egerton, *Ibid.*, 6. Historians of Vesey frequently refer to his alleged knowledge of several languages. Pearson also adds Gullah, and suggests that the "creole spoken on Saint Thomas" was similar to the language that Egerton claimed that Vesey probably spoke, "black Dutch," as opposed to "pure Dutch."

<sup>32</sup> Bolster, W. Jeffrey, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Scott, Julius S., "Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, Sailors, and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, Robert L. Paquette and Stanley Engerman, Editors (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); Berlin, Ira, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, Vol. LIII, No. 2, April 1966, 251-89; Person, *Ibid.*, 37; Egerton, *Ibid.*, 21-25; Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 19-25. If Vesey was born along the western African coast, he would have already experienced the Middle Passage (to St. Thomas) as a child.

<sup>33</sup> Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 39-40.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, Walter, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside of the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), especially chapter 4; see also Painter, Nell Irvin, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a More-Fully Loaded Cost Accounting" in Linda K. Kerber et al, Editors, *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). Painter's provocative discussion focuses on the disproportionate number of enslaved people who succumbed in mind, body, and spirit to the brutal horrors of enslavement.

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<sup>36</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, chapter 6.

<sup>37</sup> Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 66-69.

<sup>38</sup> Robertson, David, *Denmark Vesey*, 37-40. Omar Ibn Said escaped from South Carolina in 1810. Robertson speculates that Vesey may have “met surreptitiously” with Said during his (Vesey’s) possible engagement of working “both as a slave and as a free carpenter” in an area that was under development near the plantation Said was located on.

<sup>39</sup> Robertson, *Ibid.*, 40; Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 62. Robertson also explored the Islamic significance of the number fourteen and Vesey’s planned date of revolt. He also linked Vesey’s abstinence from alcohol, his possible practice of polygamy, and his efforts to emancipate enslaved people from bondage as possibly stemming from his adherence to Islamic tenets. Pearson contended that Islam had no effect on Vesey’s thought. Egerton suggested that Vesey may not have been simultaneously married to multiple wives. Vesey’s planned date of revolt also coincided with other notable events, which will be addressed below.

<sup>40</sup> Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 86-95.

<sup>41</sup> Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 76-77, 83-87.

<sup>42</sup> Egerton points out that Lofton’s assertion that Vesey had as many as “seven” wives was the result of a misprinting in the *Official Report*. Egerton, *Ibid.*, n.7, 79; Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> Hornsby, Jr., Alton, *Chronology of African-American History: From 1492 to the Present* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 79-82; Hamilton, *An Account* (Charleston, 1822), 17, as quoted by Egerton.

<sup>45</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 96. Lofton also pointed out the large number of enslaved people imported into Charleston during the interstate trade with Northern states (as many as 30,000 estimated in 1816). Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 110.

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<sup>47</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 103-09; Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 94-95; Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 80. For an unrelated but extremely informative (if usual) treatment of the relationship between Moravian missionaries and persons of African descent in the Atlantic world, see Price, Richard, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990); See Dayan, Joan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, for an analysis of the interwoven aspects of Catholicism within practices of voodoo. *Pagan Spain*, a travel narrative by Richard Nathaniel Wright, covers similar ground in non-fiction terms. See Wright, *Pagan Spain* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957).

<sup>48</sup> Mullin, *Africa in America*, 229; Egerton, *Ibid.*, n.2, 102; Harding, Vincent, "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes, 1800-1860," in Meier, August and Elliot Rudwick, Editors, *The Making of Black America: Essays in Negro Life and History, Volume I, The Origins of Black Americans*, Studies in American Negro Life Series, Meier, August, General Editor (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 179-97.

<sup>49</sup> Robertson, *Denmark Vesey*, 136-38.

<sup>50</sup> Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 134; Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 3; Stuckey, "Remembering Denmark Vesey," 37; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 87,147; Hamilton, *An Account*, 17, as quoted by Egerton.

<sup>51</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 7-10.

<sup>52</sup> Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, chapter 3. The evidence surrounding the Denmark Vesey conspiracy serves as a counter-argument to Mullin's analysis. It is noted by the present author that an analysis of acculturation and resistance in an Atlantic-based context/framework lends itself to more theoretical opportunities for cognitive creation and understanding of reality.

<sup>53</sup> Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 48-49, as quoted in Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 113; Harding, "Religion and Resistance," 185; Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 132-33; Robertson, *Denmark Vesey*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 113-14 (original emphasis). It is clear that both radical and conservative variants of Christianity and Islam reflect practices of Black power ideology that predate the 1960s and 1970s modern Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

<sup>55</sup> The religious foundation of Edward Wilmot Blyden also remains a mystery.

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<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of the significance of the story of Exodus within nineteenth-century African-American religious leadership, see Glaude, Eddie, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> Robertson, *Denmark Vesey*, 37-38, 47.

<sup>58</sup> Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 11; Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 134. See also Scott, James, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990) and *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>59</sup> Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> Robertson, *Denmark Vesey*, 159; Egerton, *Ibid*, 133, 230.

<sup>62</sup> Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> Robertson, *Denmark Vesey*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Egerton, *Ibid.*, 126-53.

<sup>66</sup> Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 1; Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 127, see especially chapter 6. Egerton viewed this aspect of Vesey's plot as "all the more unusual" when considering Eugene Genovese's observation that "slaves increasingly aimed not at secession from the dominant society but at joining it on equal terms" during the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts and the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), xix-xx, as quoted by Egerton.

<sup>67</sup> Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina*, 142; Egerton, *Ibid.*, 130, 136-53.

<sup>68</sup> See Egerton, *Ibid.*, 200, 239-32; Pearson provides an exhaustive biography of conspirators and witnesses involved in the trials following the conspiracy's discovery. See, Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 297-313; Robertson also provides biographical sketches of those executed in 1822. See Robertson, *Denmark Vesey*, 155-65.

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<sup>69</sup> Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 1-4. Gomez's discussion of Vesey's partial recognition of the necessity of the "deemphasis of African ethnic ties" in organizing a revolt is especially illuminating.

<sup>70</sup> A discussion of the events immediately following the 1822 conspiracy's discovery and trials is not included within the present author's investigation of the significance of acculturation and resistance in the Vesey conspiracy. The Negro Seamen Act of 1822; further persecution of the African Church; and increased restrictions on Charleston's free Black and skilled communities occurred after 1822. For in-depth treatments of these events, see the works of Vesey's several biographers listed in footnote 17 of this study. Peason's *Designs against Charleston* is by far the most exhaustive compilation of documents related to Vesey and the 1822 plot. Egerton's *He Shall Go Out Free* is arguably the most comprehensive treatment of this subject to date.

<sup>71</sup> For example, Richard C. Wade argued that the Vesey conspiracy was blown out of proportion by contemporaries as a show of Southern force, and by subsequent historians who attempted to relate the 1822 plot to larger portrayals of Black resistance. See Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Southern History*, XXX (May, 1964), 148-61. Sterling Stuckey made an interesting observation regarding Wade's analysis of the critical absence of physical evidence (i.e., weaponry, lists of followers, etc.). Stuckey argued that the sheer fact that no physical evidence was found, in addition to the relative silence of Vesey and his principal sub-leaders, was demonstration of extensive planning. The present author suggests that the extent of this planning was due to Vesey's and others' acculturation.