

## The Crossroads Project: Black Religious Histories, Communities, and Cultures

### "Albert J. Raboteau: A Legacy of Intellectual Offerings"

March 19, 2022

Speakers: Tracey E. Hucks, Judith Weisenfeld, Anthea Butler, Lerone Martin

**Judith Weisenfeld** [00:00:05] Welcome, everyone. I'm Judith Weisenfeld, and I teach in the Department of Religion at Princeton University, and along with Anthea Butler of the University of Pennsylvania, and Lerone Martin of Stanford University, I direct the Crossroads Project, a four year project aimed at fostering a robust understanding of the complexity of Black religious life in the United States and connections to broader geographic regions and devoted to supporting new, creative and scholarly works that explore Black religious histories, communities and cultures past and present. The Crossroads project is supported by a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation and located in Princeton University's Center for Culture, Society and Religion. And we are grateful to. About the project on our Web site at Crossroads dot Princeton dot edu. We're also grateful to Dr. Alfonso Saville, IV, associate research scholar in the Crossroads Project and CCSR for conceiving and organizing today's event, A Meeting at the Crossroads: Transitions and Transformations in the Study of Black Religion and for providing the occasion. This event provides the occasion to honor several founders of the field who we have lost in recent years and gives us the opportunity to look ahead to new directions for future work. And you'll hear from Dr. Saville in the second session that he will moderate, and that begins at 1 p.m. Eastern time. I'm delighted today to welcome Dr. Tracey Hucks, our keynote speaker, to begin this conversation. Dr. Hucks is the Provost and Dean of the Faculty and the James A. Storing professor of Religion and Africana and Latin American Studies at Colgate University. Previously, she was the James D Vail, III Professor and chair of the Department of Africana Studies at Davidson College, as well as chair and professor of religion at Haverford College. Her first book, Yoruba Traditions and African-American Religious Nationalism, published in 2012, complicates classical questions regarding origins, race and nationalism, and her forthcoming book, Obeah, Orisha and Religious Identity in Trinidad, Volume 1, Obeah: Africans in the White Colonial Imagination, is the first of a two volume work with Dianne M. Stuart of Emory University, and these volumes are currently in production with Duke University Press and interrogate salient, theoretical and methodological questions in the study of African religions in the Diaspora, as well as engage historical, literary and theological accounts of Africana religious identity in colonial and postcolonial Trinidad. Hucks is the author of numerous articles on theory and method in Africana Religious Studies, Religion and Nationalism, Religion and Healing in African Diaspora Religions, and has traveled extensively throughout Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and the Americas for her archival and ethnographic research on Africana religious traditions. Her talk today is titled Albert J. Raboteau: A Legacy of Intellectual Offerings. And following her remarks, Crossroads project directors Anthea Butler and Lerone Martin will join me and Dr. Hucks in conversation. So please feel free to send questions using the Q&A function as they come up. So please join me in welcoming Dr. Tracey Hucks today.

**Tracey Hucks** [00:04:15] Thank you. I want to thank the directors of the Crossroads Project. I want to thank the conveners of this event, and particularly Alfonso Saville, IV, for extending me an invitation to give the keynote address for today's conference. A Conversation at the Crossroads: Transition and Transformation and the Study of Black Religions and for providing me with an opportunity to honor the late Dr. Albert J. Raboteau, his monumental text Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the American South, and to give testimony to the transformational impact

on the study of religion. Alfonso, it is heartfelt to see another generation of scholars give space in honor and remembrance to an intellectual elder and intellectual ancestor that forged a path for us in this field and in this discipline. My lecture this morning is entitled Dr. Albert J. Raboteau: A Legacy of Intellectual Offerings. I am a scholar and historian of Africana religions, and it is befitting to talk about Raboteau's contributions within a conversation located at the crossroads in the traditions I study. The crossroads is a potent symbol, a spatial dimension, and a place that is generative and nascent with future possibilities. It is a place where ultimate decisions of identity and meaning are made, a space that is both centripetal and centrifugal, a place of negotiations, a place where you can find your soul or lose it. Where Robert Johnson, in his 1936 Crossroads Blues, stated, "I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees. I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees. Asked the Lord above, Have mercy on me. Now Save poor Bob, if you please." More precisely, in the Africana religious tradition that I study, Yoruba, the crossroads is a space of Ebo and propitiation, where you leave the offerings and sacrifices and await a powerful life and death intervention. Metaphorically, it is in the neat intersection of intellectual crossroads, where Albert Raboteau laid and offered Slave Religion in the Yoruba sacred literature of Ifa, governed by the Orisha deity Ifarunmila, whose domain is divination and destiny, one is encouraged to live one's life as to aspire to become and appreciate a deity, some of whom are divinities ancestors. Verses in one of its Odu attests to this when it reads Orunmila said it is persons that become Orisha. I also say it is persons that become Orisha. They said, that Ogun that you see was a person who was wise and very powerful. That is why Ogun is propitiated. That oshoala that you are looking at was a person who was wise and very powerful. That is why Oshoala is propitiated. Albert Raboteau, like Ogun and Oshoala was a person who was wise and very powerful. Even in the quiet sould force many of us experienced and experienced as teacher and mentor and scholar. It is hard to believe that in six years we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of Albert Raboteau's Slave Religion and the transformative impact it would have made on the field of Black religious studies over the course of a half a century. Beyond Slave Religion Raboteau went on to author A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History, African-American Religion: Interpretive Essay in History, edited with Tim Fulop, A Sorrowful Joy, an updated 25th anniversary edition of Slave Religion, co-edited with Richard Alba and Josh De Wind, Immigration and Religion in America. Comparative and Historical Perspectives and his final published book in 2016. American Prophets: even Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice. Yet, Slave Religion is the reason I am a historian of religion today. As an undergraduate, i, along with Diane Stewart, Teresa Delgado and Adam Clarke, was a student of Josiah Young, a theologian who trained under the esteemed James Cone, who pioneered the study of Black theology. In Professor Young's courses, his syllabi consisted of every one of James Cone's books, preparing a foundation for students to go on to become theologians in the field, like I, Diane, Teresa and Adam. We were all destined for this theological path when something unexpected happened. I read Albert Raboteau's Slave Religion. Exceptionally transformational for me was reading Slave Religion's preface, where Raboteau stated, quote, I tried to investigate slave narratives, Black autobiographies and Black folklore in order to gather, literally out of the mouths of former slaves, the story of their religious experiences during slavery, supplementing the source as he goes on with the more traditional ones of travel accounts, missionary reports and journals of white observers. I have attempted to picture the religion of American slaves in all of its complexity, end quote. It is this complexity and the diversity of African-American religious expression that Slave Religion best modeled for those of us seeking to engage religious histories in the realm, in the realms Dr. Long identified as the extra-church lying beyond Black Church studies, historiographies and archetypes. Raboteau, who argued that, quote, Taking the religion of African-American slaves seriously, meant traveling imaginatively across the Atlantic to Africa and back by way of Caribbean and Latin America to understand what developed in the relatively marginal 13 British North American colonies that

eventually became the United States. Through Raboteau's *Slave Religion*, and the time I spent with Raboteau while completing my doctoral coursework at Princeton, I was able to imagine a wider spiritual geography of Africana religious cultures and African heritage traditions. Albert Raboteau exemplified for me the love of religious history and a sheer love of the archives, while at the same time Charles Long's work modeled for me, the spiritual power of the Atlantic as a window to the terror and beauty of the religious image of Africa in our diasporic religious history. The magnitude of Raboteau's 's contributions must always be understood and situated within and along a larger historical perspective, historiographical perspective and and spectrum. It is crucial to locate Raboteau within a historical lineage of book length studies that sought to make sense of Black religion and or slavery, beginning with, and this historiography is by no means exhaustive: Daniel Alexander Payne's 1891 *The History of African Methodist Episcopal Church*; W.E.B. Dubois' 1903 *Of the Faith of our Fathers in the Souls of Black Folk*; Carter G. Woodson 1921 *The History of the Negro Church*; Benjamin Elijah Mays, 1933 *The Negro Church*; Melville Herskovitz in 1941 *The Myth of the Negro Past*; Stanley Elkins' 1959 *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*; E. Franklin Frazier's 1963 posthumously published *The Negro Church*; Ulrich B. Phillips 1966 *American Negro Slavery*; John Blassingame, 1972 *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*; Gayraud Wilmore 1972 *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*; Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's 1972 *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*; C Eric Lincoln's 1974 *The Black Church Since Frazier*; Eugene Genovese's 1974 *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*; Lawrence Levine's 1977 *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*; C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya 1978 *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, and Albert Raboteau's 1978 *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the American South*. Why is this sample historical historiographical lineage important? Because Raboteau was a necessary trailblazer in disrupting social science discourse on slavery while forging and creating an important analytical, interpretive space for religious studies. Raboteau made astute interventions into social scientific studies of slavery and slave religion that refused to focus on enslaved persons as vassal reactors to the external conditions and circumstances of slavery. Raboteau added. Raboteau added needed complexity and paved the way for a body of scholarly study on slavery, which moved away from meta debates about enslaved persons that focused on uncomplicated binaries of the docile, childlike Sambo, the brute, the uncomplicated rebellions, or enslaved as mere victims of paternalism in a master slave structure or pure victim or reactionary agents. What Albert Raboteau demonstrated was that the historical study of religion and slavery could make valuable contributions to social science discourses in offering diachronic approaches to religious phenomena and traditions, complex, complex dimensions of religious meaning and textured perspectives on lived religiosity and practice. He was a this. He offered a distinct set of intellectual questions posed in 1978 in *Slave Religion*. His questions were What were the origins of Black religion in America? What aspects of African-American or African religion were retained by the slaves? How did the evangelization and conversion of African slaves to Christianity take place? What, if anything, was distinctive about religion in the slave quarters? And with these questions? Like his teacher and mentor at Yale, African-American historian John Blassingame in his *Slave Community*, Raboteau sought to examine, quote, the slave's inner life, his thoughts, actions, self-concept or personality. Hence, the "invisible institution." Book reviews published short, published shortly after the publication of *Slave Religion*, speak to the immediate influence and impact that the book had at that time. For example, one review, two years after publication indicated, quote, For the first time since Carter G. Woodson's *The History of the Negro Church*, Raboteau has retold across denominational lines the story of the birth of the first Black congregations in the South and their struggle within Dixie Slaveocracy. With this book, no American church historian can any longer neglect the Christian,

neglect the Black Christian story. It also evokes new questions about the great repressed legacy of Black contributions to American culture and religion, what whites have received from Blacks and about the normative significance of Black religion. Another review published one year into publication in 1979, stated, "not too long ago, white Americans believed that Black culture in America was largely a sorry effort to imitate white culture. Some scholars and teachers who should have known better even argued that enslaved Africans in America had no religion until Europeans provided one for them. Such nonsense no longer holds, thankfully, as recent studies of Black history have shown Afro-Americans to be anything but passive recipients of white European culture and religion. This vision of Blacks creating their own work to the exclusion of whites has been the consensus of the 1970s. Albert Raboteau's book reflects this agreement." And one final review from *Slave Religion*'s very first year publication while recognizing its insights, concludes by downplaying its overall contribution. Quote, "Raboteau two acknowledges that African and African religious retentions in the United States were not as extensive as in the Caribbean or South America. But he convincingly argues that Blacks did not simply accept wholesale their religion, that their white masters handed down to them certain attitudes, folk beliefs and patterns of motor behavior survived the transatlantic crossing, and the slaves incorporated them into what they found here to establish their own variety of Christianity. Beyond, and perhaps more important than the issue of docility versus rebelliousness, the author compellingly depicts the ways in which the slaves, through the media of Black preachers, autonomous churches and secret religious meetings used Christianity to create their own community of fellowship that gave them a sustaining sense of group and individual dignity in the midst of oppression." The review then takes a turn and says "the work's major problem is that although Raboteau uses primary sources that are published, familiar sources, and many of his central conclusions have been articulated, or at least suggested by Eugene Genovese in *Roll, Jordan Roll* and other historians. Then, while valuable for his comprehensiveness, lucidity and fleshing out of important issues. The text is not substantially innovative." How wrong this review was. And finally, on the 30th anniversary of *Slave Religion*, one American Academy of Religion panelist remarked "Raboteau had not only shaped but also anticipated the state of the field then and to come. Raboteau's book surveys the field in a way that is still unexcelled and still sets the standard for all of the work in the field." End quote. From the time of publication, we can track the intervening impact on the related scholarly texts that are immediately published in the decade following *Slave Religion*, namely Randall Miller, *The Afro-American Slaves: Community or Chaos*, 1981. Deborah Gray White's *Ain't I a Woman: Female Slave in the Plantation South*, 1985. Milton Sernet, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 1985. Sterling Stucky, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, 1987. Michal Sobel, *The World They Meet Together*, 1987. Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullah*, 1989. What these 1980's texts have in common, and almost all future texts on religion and slavery that follow into the next century is that they all cite and draw upon the foundational work of Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion* in advancing their individual studies. Thus *Slave Religion* had both a timeliness, as it now still possess and possesses a timelessness in the field. On the occasion of the updated edition of *Slave Religion*, commemorating 25 years, Raboteau addressed the criticisms the book has received over the years and openly reflected on how he might engage them, as well as areas that were received more emphasis were he writing *Slave Religion* 25 years later. First, he stated, quote, New work challenged me to become more sophisticated in my understanding of African religions and their transmissions to America, to the Americas, the Kongo Angola area would receive more emphasis were I writing today. In retrospect, he acknowledged that he would have made his rep his representation of African religions less static. Likewise, although his study highlighted Christianity, he, quote, recognized the presence of Muslim slaves in the Americas. He goes on to say he would

rethink how to interpret quote the complex processes of religious change and innovation rather than rely on what he later called the rather empty category of syncretism. Moreover, Raboteau readily admitted, quote, The newer literature on slavery correctly insisted on an Atlantic world perspective. Quite pointedly, he said he would have avoided privileging the familiar the European Christian side of the encounter, as well as restricting the religious life of slaves to a Christian paradigm. Most regrettably, he acknowledged his, quote, failure to deal explicitly with the religious lives of slave women and in revisiting the sources he would have described more fully, quote, slave women as midwives, as healers, as conjurer, and as spiritual mothers. The starkest critique levied against Raboteau, was for his chapter, Death of the Gods. And in concluding his discussion of religion in North America, and including that concluding that chapters with "in the United States, the Gods of Africa died." To this, he responded, quote, Perhaps I could I could make it clearer to those who have misinterpreted me as simply saying African religions disappeared in United States, that what I was attempting to say is that the distinctiveness of the slave religious culture lay not in their preservation of Africanisms, but in the African perspectives, habits, preferences, aesthetics, and styles with which Africans and their American descendants shaped their religious choices in the very diverse situations and circumstances of slavery. Giving these crucial, self-reflective and self interrogative considerations, what I admire most about Albert Raboteau was his intellectual courage to listen and to grow over time as a reflective thinker, an ever expanding scholar. I want to close by saying it has been a difficult road these most recent past few years. Those of us in the study of Black religion have lost giants in the field: Charles Long, Katie Cannon, Henry Mitchell, James Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, and now Albert Raboteau. Collectively, they are irreplaceable giants and elders of an intellectual generation born into a segregated America, lived through Civil Rights, Black power, Black assassinations, and survived the white Academy. They took their scholarships seriously and their scholarship had a Black community of accountability that was always at its center. But those of us who are still in the land of the living, who is your community of count of accountability? Who is your community of accountability? Albert Raboteau's scholarship paid homage to the community and the visible institution, to Black, Catholic and Orthodox communities that navigate a dominant Protestantism, to a community of students across generations to whom he sought to model the official definitional meaning of teacher as a personified concept. Albert Raboteau was indeed a personified concept of intellectual, scholarly and human excellence. The words of one of Raboteau's late colleagues and contemporaries of religion, James Hal Cone, bring me to remembrance of Al Raboteau's scholarly commitment and fortitude when Cone, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of his groundbreaking Black Theology and Black Power, disclosed the following at the Society for the Study of Black Religion, SSBR meeting. Cone said, in the last 40 years, that is all I've been trying to do. Work out my intellectual, my theological salvation, so that when I come to the end of my life journey, I can say that I did the best possible theological work for my community that I could. My advice to you is to do the same. Don't let it be said that you did not do your best intellectual work. In honor of Albert J. Raboteau, let's start planning the event that will mark the 50th anniversary of his landmark Slave Religion. In the meantime, let's support Vaughn Booker, who was the co-chair of the Afro American Religious History Unit, who had this year's American Academy of Religion meeting in November. In November, will be partnering with the African Diaspora Religions Group, the North American Religions Group, and the Eastern Orthodox Studies Unit to celebrate the work and life of the esteemed Dr. Albert Jordy Raboteau, to remember the force of impact of the corpus of Albert Raboteau's work, and especially Slave Religion. In his own words on the 25th anniversary of the publication of Slave Religion, Raboteau reflected quote. It is the power of the enslaved voices that find it that finally explains the impact of Slave Religion and why it has endured through its pages, people who have been through fire and refined like gold, reveal that the capability of the human spirit not only to endure their bitter suffering, but also to resist and even transcend the

persistent attempt of evil to strike it down. Raboteau concludes, over the last 25 years -- and now it's 44 years -- the fields of American slave history and American religious history have undergone a sea change. I am gratified, Raboteau says, that Slave Religion, despite its shortcomings, has played a part in that transformation. Thank you. Honor to a great ancestor. Ashe.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [00:30:24] Thank you so much for that beautiful, beautiful talk that gives us so much to think about in terms of history and legacies and so much to move forward with. I am going to start off with just a very, very short reflection on what it is, one of the things I took away from studying with with Al in graduate school and a question for all of you and maybe for you in particular, Dr. Hucks, you mentioned sources. You talked about how the what he had to do to access the the inner world of enslaved Africans and their inner religious lives. And that's something that that's the thing that I take away most powerfully about how to to listen. And he begins he begins slave religion with the Diop poem, you know listen more of - I have the Sweet Honey in the Rock version in my head," listen more often to things than to beings." But it's about kind of tuning your ear to a different kind of source. And I remember sitting with him and reading *The Souls of Black Folk* and and he spent more time on on the Sorrow Songs, on the the quotations from the Negro spirituals that that introduced this. that DuBois used to, right paired with his text than on DuBois's text itself. That's not to say he wasn't interested in DuBois, but he was interested in looking to other kinds of sources. And so I'm interested. That's the thing I take away as a as a practice, and I'm interested in hearing everyone else's reflections, But I'm going to turn it over to as well, to my colleagues, Anthea and Lerone, to enter this conversation as well.

**Anthea Butler** [00:32:16] Yeah. I just want to really thank you, Tracey, first of all, for this beautiful reflection, because in part, I was thinking about something we don't often talk about with Al, and that's Al spirituality. And I think that for me personally, that has always been a thing that has. Before I met him, I didn't really know, but when I met him, because I was never one of his students, that always struck me that his words in the way that he held himself also came together in a certain kind of way. And I think we don't talk about that a lot for scholarship. But I think since you brought up the ancestors, I think one of the things that's important is that, you know, for those of us who think about our work being a chorus of people and of chorus of people who still speak to us in certain kinds of ways, that Al's work really did that for me the first time I read *Slave Religion*. It was, though, that the people came off the page for me, even if I didn't know them. And there was this kind of wall between us, the sense that while he knew how to break down, so that was the first thing that really came to me. I think the second thing is also sources for me, best sources in a different way. The archives, you know, there's silences in archives, but there's archives that speak because we haven't gone through them. And I think what Al's work shows is how you can mine those kinds of archives to bring forth a tremendous story about the role of of African religions within not just Africa or America, but around the world. And so and I think about this a lot. I think about the ways in which, you know, training of people is different. Now, we don't train people the same way because we don't have time in these programs that really push people through. And you don't have time to read everything. But what Al's work did for me, and I think for countless others, is introduce you to places and sources that you need to think about and terms of the work that you do, no matter where you do that work in time. And I think that's that's very important in terms of that. And then the third piece is, is also the piece that we don't consider, but we also need to really think about it. I've always been struck about Al story about his father and the story of the lynching and how they moved and how this changed their lives. And, you know, as scholars, we don't often consider or even talk about these really painful things that have happened and in the way that if you do Africana religions, you are dealing with pain all the time. And I think that this is for me is huge because I want people understand I'm not trying to put one

thing over the other, but pain and suffering and and all of these things are part of this work. You cannot come to the history of Africans in diaspora without dealing with tremendous pain and suffering and violence and evil. And you have to think about how you going to how are you going to deal with these people? How do you deal with them in ways that are righteous, that gives their stories breadth and depth and at the same time not want to just chop down the perpetrators? And this is something I wrestle with all the time. And I'm being really honest here because I think people need to hear this because it's it's tough doing the work that we do. Once you do work in this, you have to realize that you are going to be mad all the time. I used to tell students I'd have them read part of Slave Religion in class. It's a you know, for the first five, six weeks a semester, I'm going to be mad. And you're going to be mad because of the things that have happened. And so how do we reckon with that? And I think that Al was it was a person that really helped me to think about how do you work through that and be not just a good scholar, but a person who can be a good teacher as well. So all of those things I just want to kind of put out on the table and again, thank you for this, you know, wonderful reflection on his life and how we can all continue to see parts of him and all of our work.

**Lerone Martin** [00:36:26] I'll be really brief. I see we have a question coming in, so I'll be really brief. But Tracey, thank you so much. You brought back some memories for me that was really moving. And I just share two things. The first is that it's similar to Tracey. Raboteau really is the reason I think I pursued the field. I pursued I was an undergraduate, a majority white institution and read Canaan Land. And I was like, I want to do this like this, this, this is it. It was the first text I'd ever read about African-American religious history from beginning to end. And that really got me excited and moving forward. And I was so thankful that I got a chance to take a class without. It was the course that turned into the book American Prophets. So it was in. I remember thinking I was an MDiv student. Who is this man having us read Thomas Merton and what is you know, why am I reading these sorts of things? And then I had the opportunity to study with Dianne Stewart, as you know, Tracey. And so Albert Raboteau so has directly and indirectly through his work and taking classes with him and then with his students and folks who have been trained for them and down the line have been so influential in my life. So I'm so thankful for that. I appreciate you sharing that Tracey. And on the on the personal side, I agree with Anthea tha, I came into, I think, into our profession, thinking that if you're going to be, you know, this kind of Eurocentric notion of of being objective, and that if I was going to study religion, that I couldn't really have my own spiritual commitments or else I wouldn't be objective and watching Al just completely obliterated all that for me. And it was so moving because I thought as a student, this is an individual who does elite, top notch, top notch research and yet is very clear about his commitments and shares them with me. I went to his office and asked him like, how to how are you sort of very open to your with your faith commitments and still do this really, really, really amazing work. And so just on that level with the professional personal level, I'm just so grateful for Al's model that he provided.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [00:39:01] I don't know if you want to respond to this, these questions about sources or spirituality. I mean, I have a similar story that as an undergraduate I read Slave Religion and Arthur Huff Fauset's, Black Gods of the Metropolis in the same course, and the two of them just that. That's why I do what I do. And when I was looking around for graduate programs, of which there were quite few at the time, I just I turned over Slave Religion and it said, Al Raboteau is a professor of religion at Princeton. And I thought, okay, that's my goal to get to to him. So, yeah, I don't know if you want to pick up on on some of this. We also have a couple of questions that we can move to.

**Tracey Hucks** [00:39:42] If if one of the things I was thinking about when Anthea, when you were talking is when I talk at the end about what this generation endured through segregation, through the academy. I was thinking about Albert Raboteau's journey with the issue with his father. If any of you, let me say this. If you have not, please go on YouTube and there is a small interview with with Al Raboteau, "How Not to Hate White People." And I think anyone doing this work and Africana religions needs to watch that piece. "How Not to Hate White People." Because he begins to talk about what it means for him to be in utero and and three months by the time he's born, three months later, his father is already shot and killed. And how his family tried to protect that story from him so that he would not hate white people. And what it meant for him as an adult to go back and greet the son of the man who killed his father to get that perspective, how powerful and what it meant. And just that kind of transformative moment, how he could still come out of that moment and not hate white people. Tremendous. Because even if he didn't know that story going into the archives, he still would have needed that lesson to go in and how not to hate white people. When you do this work in the archives. One of the things I love about Albert Raboteau is that he dignified who we were in our embodiment as an archive, and so was Zora Neale Hurston, that we came with our our shinbone and our hambone in us. He took that and said, that is an archive that, no, you didn't come with your written documents the way traditionally archives are being seen. You didn't have your records, your colonial books, your correspondence, but what you had were your spirituals. You had your folk lores. You had your folk tales. You had your, you had those things that your epistemology, your cosmology, your understanding of the world. And that will be a valid archive that I will put in my Oxford University text when I publish it in *Slave Religion*. And I thank him for expanding for us how we understand notion of archives so that no one can ever say to us there's no sources out there. There's always been sources, even sources from the time we disembarked that our very embodiment was a source, and he taught us how to mine those particular sources in order to do our work.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [00:42:35] Do you have thoughts before we go to the questions in the Q&A and the chat on, as we think about that, the significance of his spirituality to his his work as a historian, to his life and his being as a person, to questions about authenticity and Black religion, because his spiritual worlds were never in the majority world of African-American religious history. As a as a Black Catholic, as someone in the Orthodox Church. And yet, you know, he had the resources to to tune his ear. Right. To to recognize the archives that you were just talking about. Do any of you have thoughts on on maybe discourses of authenticity within the field and what thinking about him and his approaches might lend?

**Anthea Butler** [00:43:32] Yeah. You know, I have a lot to say. You know, the thing for me was that Al helped me to see myself in the story and my family in the story. I mean, that's that's being personal. But, you know, growing up Catholic. Yeah. You know, both of us, you know, you just don't, you know, Black Catholics are invisible. You know, there's 3 million of us in the United States and we are completely invisible to people. And don't say that you're Black Orthodox because there's even more invisibility. Right? So I think, you know, for me, there's authenticity of Black people being quiet. And I hate to say it like that, too, to contrast it with Protestantism, but there's always a sense in which, you know, we've all had to wrestle with this one way or other in some part of our career where somebody imagined this to be something that we're not. And I think that what Al did was give a voice to other religious traditions and placing us in a longer tradition. And I will relate that by relating a story that he and I had. He took me to the Dinky of those of you who don't know, that's the little train in Princeton, when I was there and I was sitting in a car talking to him and he had of course an icon on the his rearview mirror. And we were talking and I was telling him about how much, you know, I would love to do like a kind of a documentary on Africans and



and orthodoxy and the early church. And so we had this really vibrant conversation about this. And so for me, one of those days was like I could think about, you know, Black religion is not just being, you know, the story about the gods or a story about slavery, but I also think about this longer history of Christianity. And for those of you who don't know, I've been involved a lot in global Christianity stories. And this is where I think, you know, Al had a lot to do with that, even though he didn't write a lot about it because he talked about the Saints. He talked about this longer tradition of Africans being involved in in the Christian history story. And I think that for many of us, we just you know, there's this kind of two dimensional version about what Black religion is. And that I think that was one of the gifts of Al was that even through his spirituality, he could give us a bigger vision of what that spirituality could be in all dimensions, and not just, you know, through a lens of Africana religions or just, you know, slave religion, but a broader dimension of Black people can be involved in all kinds of religious traditions that we need to really talk about that you take that seriously.

**Tracey Hucks** [00:46:09] I would say also that he was symbolic. His his his own spirituality was symbolic of the very work that some of us would do, spirituality from the margins. And he lived that. And that model and that symbol became powerful, particularly for those of us who weren't going into doing Black church study, that we were going to be doing spirituality from the margins. And so he embodied and embraced that in his own personal life. But he also pushed us to do that work, also open up. He opened up the aperture of what it meant to do Black religion, so much so and so impactful, so that my first dissertation topic was the history of Black Catholics in the United States. I had done like half the research for that, looking at the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family. That's how impactful it was. But then I must say, you know, the Yoruba gods got me and they called me in that way. But that's how impactful his what it meant to to to to go into those unknown domains of Black spirituality. And so it wonderfully and powerfully symbolic of spirituality from the margins.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [00:47:35] That's a beautiful a response. And I you remind me that I had tried to do some Oblate Sisters of Providence, too. And I'm very glad that Diane Batts Morrow did that work because that's that's a great book. I want to go to a couple other questions. Um. One. The first one that came in is from Seth Gaiters in the Q&A that asks Dr. Hucks to say more about or anyone who has thoughts about this Raboteau's critique of the empty terminology of syncretism. He says you lifted this in light of the 25th anniversary edition of of Slave Religion. So maybe what was his critique of Syncretism? What do we, what else do we have?

**Tracey Hucks** [00:48:31] He uses the term in in the 1978 edition of Slave Religion. And I think what he 25 years later thought was it was a static term. It was a term that did not allow for a kind of interpretive set of processes that are going on that syncretism could not contain. And I think that on the one hand, he really just really realized it was a real easy, facile, uncomplicated term, an analytical and theoretical container that could not contain all of what was going on within Black religious life. And I think the other thing is he taught us in in that sense of not to easily digest and consume inheritable terms about the work that we do and to really disrupt these terms, to really interrogate these terms. And as he realized to really realize how empty they might be and applying them to the kind of Africana traditions and works that we do. So it pushed us, I think, and it was a bold move because, you know, syncretism is still a very powerful, you know, term. And to be able to discard that, to say we need to come up with new categories, new concepts, new theorizations in order to analyze this. That is very, very freeing, I would say, for those of us that do the work. The other thing I would say is that it syncretism stifled the genius of African nations. By saying that, you know, they were they came here or they saw a Catholic saint. Yes, that's my God. And

yes, that's going to be my this. And and we'll be forever melded and folded, infused, going forward. And I think that he realized that our ancestors deserve better than that, that the innovation, creativity and brilliance and how they were able to really enter into a second creation, as Charles Long would say, against the negative signification that they were encountering. That is creative genius to have survived religiously here, that syncretism could not, cannot and will not for those generations to come contain the spirit of Africana religions. Yeah.

**Anthea Butler** [00:51:19] Can I say something to just follow up with what you're saying. Tracey I think it's also that word sort of makes you think that there's not there's not some kind of thought and process that goes into your religious tradition. In other words, is it just like something glommed onto something else? Right? And so the way in which, you know, basically, you know, people look at Catholic Saints and decided, well, you know, Saint Barbara's this or that. Basically what that means is, is that if you use the word syncretism, you're just saying, oh, this is simple, right? But I like to think about this as much of a bigger process of revelation, of discovery of of thinking about a very clear way of how we're going to get past what we need to get past in this new environment that we find ourselves in. And so I think what that word does is puts everybody in a box, in a sense, and it makes it easier to sort of pooh pooh the religious traditions that originated like, you know, Vodou or anything else that happens in the in the Americas, like Candomble, because you simply see that as syncretic rather than a, you know, or, you know, origin of a different kind of religious tradition that brings together so many different things that actually has thought and purpose and and meaning. And, you know, I'd hate to use this word, but theology to it, right? That it has it has something else going on rather than just the simplicity of what you say syncretism is.

**Tracey Hucks** [00:52:45] And I would also add it's a white hegemonic category that is reserved for a certain group of people, as though others who were creating religious meaning in the world globally were not engaging in this. Yeah, yeah. I think 25 years later, you realize that. You realize that? Mm hmm. Yeah.

**Anthea Butler** [00:53:05] I mean, it's also to, to his credit, to be able to say, yeah, I, you know, I wish I had done something different. I mean, I think that's always hard for scholars to do, too, is to say, Yeah, I would have thought about this very differently now, now that I've had some years to really consider it, to be able to say that I think is a really important lesson for all of us, actually.

**Lerone Martin** [00:53:28] I'm going to move on to the next question. We have a question. I think it's from Larissa. Apologize if I've said that name wrong. Larissa Stone on the question was, can we touch on the removal of African traditions/root work from the Black church or the study of the Black church? What comes to mind, she says, is that excuse me, what comes to my mind, they say, is the the COGIC church, the Church of God in Christ. So.

**Tracey Hucks** [00:53:56] You know.

**Lerone Martin** [00:53:58] I was gonna say, all eyes are now on you, doctor Butler.

**Anthea Butler** [00:54:01] Yeah, I know. You know, this is this is one of those things where I'm gonna say there's a couple of things happening, and and you may have to ask me that question because there's a very famous picture of Bishop Mason with all his roots and wonders, quote, unquote. And while I was working on my first book, I actually found a series of articles that were in papers around the country about 1914 where they're talking about him preaching with these roots

and saying like, it's the heart and, you know, devising all of his sorts of sermons around these wonders of nature. Right. I mean, I'm thoroughly convinced he's a root worker. And for every COGIC person out here that's upset, I'm too bad. You know, too bad. So sad because he is a root worker and and he knew all this stuff. And you don't have healing and all of these things that are happening in Pentecostal traditions unless you have people who are attuned to what's going on and hoodoo and all the rest of this stuff. Okay, So let's just put that out there right from the very beginning. You cannot talk about spirits. You cannot talk about the things that he talked about without realizing that's part of this tradition and what he's going through. Now, your question is, is how does this disappear? Well, it disappears because of two things. One is the imposition of white Protestantism on top of everybody else. So you have white Pentecostals who see this as demonic, who are talking about things that are like evil. And when you start to inculcate this and you have all this stream of teaching coming in from other kinds of scholars and people are picking this up. This becomes a very big thing. So on the one hand, you have people right now at funerals saying, you know, I want to honor my ancestors. But at the same time, when they talk about the ancestors and somebody pours out a libation and somehow they just turned into something demonic. And so this kind of double speak that, you know, people in COGIC and other places go into is about the imposition of these kinds of Pentecostal evangelical ideas that have come into the traditions that make people think that this is evil. And I and there's a whole nother hour and a half long conversation I can have about the amount of people who write about this now, who make this part and parcel of their preaching, especially in Black churches. And I think this is why we see right now the turn back for a lot of young African-American men and women to these traditions because they tired of people in the church telling them that this is they should not honor their ancestors, that they should not pour libations, that they should not do all of these things that have been part of what people have been doing for generations. So I would say to you that, you know, in these traditions, you know, the other part of this, and I'm going to just be honest here, is that they find themselves falling apart because it doesn't have life in them. It doesn't have the kind of life that keeps A, sustaining people. And, B, you know, for all of this, you know how I say critique of these practices, you know, you got to go back and look at scripture where people are using divination and all kinds of things within the context of Christian scripture. And so I just say to them, like, if you can't put these two things together and this doesn't work for you, then you need to think about being someplace else. That's all I can say is because I think what what churches like COGIC and others have done is by buying into all of this, they have stunted the growth of what could possibly happen with them in the future and also have chased away a lot of people.

**Tracey Hucks** [00:57:20] And I am so saddened by what you just said. I mean, how do we get our churches COGIC and beyond, to understand that Jesus was not the only blood shed for me. Jesus was not the only blood shed for me, that we have come over a way that, with tears have been watered, we have come treading a path through the blood of the slaughtered. Yes, we get that message to be part and parcel because our very existence and survival here is because of that blood.

**Anthea Butler** [00:57:50] Yeah, no, exactly. And I think, you know, to me, I always say, you know, there's a phrase that Christians always say that, you know, Jesus's blood speaks of life, but the blood of the ancestors to speak. That blood speaks and that blood tells us a lot about what has happened, how things happen and how things are going. And and also not to be ashamed of that. You know, I think about my own mother who never told me stories, but I had to find out the stories about the root work that was happening in my family from my aunts, because that was a thing that you just didn't talk about. But they talked about it and said, Oh, you know, this is what's

happened. This is what people did, you know. And that gave me a new insight on on how to be, you know, first of all, respectful. And then secondarily, to see that this is part of my religious heritage and we have to start to think about that is not being something that's shameful, but something that is you know, that is life giving and vibrant. And, you know, I'm probably going to scare a lot of people here, but I'm gon go head on and say this is the reason why that whole new project about, you know, protecting African religions in the diaspora at Duke has come about because, you know, people who sacrifice, people who do rituals and all these things, they have been made to feel as though they are devils. And like just because you kill a chicken or a goat or something else that you make an offering does not mean that you are a bad person. There are people who do things all the time. I think about, you know, within the Catholic tradition, how many kids got molested. I mean, how do we see this up against, you know, somebody cutting the neck of a goat? I know how I see it. But I think that there are these ways in which people have set up systems in order to keep out religions that they see to be competitive. And that's the kind of sociological piece that we have to also deal with, too, when we're talking about, you know, African traditional religions, is that anything that seems to be competitive to Protestantism or straight line Catholicism or something else that is more mainstream is always going to be vilified.

**Lerone Martin** [00:59:56] We have to. We're going to. I'm going to read two more questions. This will be our final two questions. So I'll read them both at the same time. Dr. Hucks, Dr. Stewart has asked, she thanks you for your stimulating keynote address and she appreciated the responses from the panelists as well. But she wanted to know, Dr. Hucks, if you could say a little more about why you ended your Ph.D. coursework at Princeton with Al Raboteau? You were studying at Harvard with a number of noted scholars. Why did you go all the way down to Princeton, New Jersey? And how are you a different historian of religion as a result of that experience? That's the first question. The second question comes from Dr. Jamil Drake. And the question is how did Dr. Raboteau's work and African American religious history contribute to discussions of lived religions?

**Tracey Hucks** [01:00:49] Thank you for that question, Dr. Stewart. I got to Harvard and Princeton had an exchange scholars program for doctoral students where you can do part of your coursework within those schools that were in that consortium. And at the time, I was training with David Hall, renowned Puritan scholar. And when he looked at the work that I was doing in African-American religion and religions, he had the integrity as a white person to say, you need to go and work with Albert Raboteau to do some of this work because this is not the work I do. And I can only train you so far in that. And at his suggestion, at his urging and encouragement, I then went to Princeton to do part of my coursework. And it is one of the most memorable moments in my coursework to be able to go there, to be able to work with Albert Raboteau, to to be able to and take courses with him, to take courses with Nell Painter and to be a part of the very first African American Studies graduate course at Princeton, taught by Cornel West and Nell Painter. Now, that was that's a moment and still have moments in that class to be in there with Eddie Glaude and Obery Hendricks and Bill Hart and many of us in that in that powerful class at night, that really didn't end until one in the morning. One of the when I was there, both Al and Nell especially urged me to stay and just say continue my work there. But one of the wonderful things was happening at Harvard at the time, which is one of the reasons why I went back, is that Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham came and and also Randy Matory was there. And so I had these another kind of wonderful constellation of scholars to deepen the historical and the Africana work that I was doing. And so I went back to that, knowing that I'm bringing with me all that I had taken from Al Raboteau, from Nell Painter and from Cornel West back with me. So I feel like I got a wonderful kind of, a wonderful kind of and I'm sure what I would call it, a gift, an offering to be able in my

coursework to be to have studied with such great and wonderful minds during my doctoral work. I hope that answers your question. Dr. Stewart. It was a it was a hard decision. Now that I will say that was a crossroads decision, whether whether to stay or whether to go. But I knew having, you know, Al Raboteau, Nell Painter, Cornel West, on the one hand and having David Hall, Randy Matory, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, William Jeremiah Moses and others who that at Harvard at the time on the other hand that it was always a win win situation. That's a wonderful crossroads to have been at.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [01:03:55] The final question was, was Jamil Drake's about lived religion and I just maybe want to connect it to my thoughts about the account you just gave of your teachers and some of the influences on you of of people in philosophy and ethics, in history, in religious studies, and anthropology in I guess maybe literature is part of that too. So lived religion was Jamil's question about, you know, how does Raboteau work speak to that, and maybe if you have some broader thoughts again about the, the legacy and future of the, the kind of the disciplinary worlds of Black religious studies that we might think forward?

**Tracey Hucks** [01:04:44] What's that for? All of us.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [01:04:47] Uh, mostly for you.

**Tracey Hucks** [01:04:48] Oh

**Judith Weisenfeld** [01:04:50] In part because our time is short. But I know my colleagues have thoughts.

**Tracey Hucks** [01:04:53] What I would say. One of the wonderful things about lived religions is it shift from looking at. doctrines, looking at the elite and the heads of religions and shifting that to the practitioners and shifting that to to modes of practice. Moving it out of traditional kind of ecclesial spaces and institutions. So one didn't need a church or other kind of edifice to do this work when the religion was moving into the places where communities have and create religious meaning. What Al Raboteau does and I and I, I even talk about it in one one of the questions is he said at the time that he's looking at in Slave Religion, he didn't need to go into a church. He said he's going to look at the religion of the slave quarters. He sacralized the spaces where enslaved Africans were at work and said that this is a space where religious meaning is being made. We're not going to look at their doctrines and they're, you know, written they're written texts. We're going to look at their practices, how they make meaning. We're going to look at their rituals we're going to look at. And then he it becomes this wonderful way of looking at lived religion and slave quarters. And then if you notice that photograph, we're going to look at the religion in the cemeteries. So the graveyard becomes a site for lived religion. We'll be looking at the pots and Kongo influenced spaces. What lived religion do I think was a real wonderful opening that our Raboteau gave us to look at how religion was being lived on the ground without any kind of orthodoxy. And how, in the words of Charles Long, how how religion was made through ultimate and ultimate meaning and significance by those who were the producers of that. And others can feel free to add.

**Anthea Butler** [01:07:02] I just want to follow up one and say one thing. I think one of the most important things about this lived religion piece is that it allows for, you know, a not a way to think about things that isn't theologically based. And I think that for us, that's really important because, you know, the ways in which people talk about theology and exit ethics are actually ways to set

boundaries up for and against people about what is religious and what is not. And I think that when you go to something like lived religion, you release something very different, that you can be able to write and talk and think about and honor people who are not just leaders and people who are writing, the people who are doing all kinds of things that are religious in connotation and just as important to communities as it is for people who try to write down and make things systematic. That to me is always the issue is that how does lived religion open up to a whole new way of thinking about religion as opposed to these ways in which people try to boundary religion and keep people out by saying, because you don't have something written, because you don't have it this particular way, that you don't get to be part of that canon.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [01:08:10] And it may be another way to to overcome the limitations of syncretism as well, because it's not about thinking about these discrete traditions that may interact in some way. It's about what people are doing on the ground and how they are making ultimate meaning.

**Tracey Hucks** [01:08:25] The other thing I would say that lived religion does is it shifts, it shifts the gaze. So where syncretism had this other external context, literally just shift the gaze inwardly, and that was where Raboteau was most comfortable in those inner spaces of where religion is being created and generated and and lived.

**Judith Weisenfeld** [01:08:51] Thank you so much, all of you. It's been a really wonderful conversation and a fantastic start to the day. And again, thanks to Alfonso Saville for organizing this. And we are set for a panel discussion at 1 p.m. Eastern time. So this will give you a little bit of a break, but thank you all for your presence and your questions. And we hope that you will come back at 1:00. And also check out the project at Crossroads DOT Princeton about it.