

Craig Steven Wilder

*In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City*

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The African Society's harmony came from its members' ability to see its creation and success as antislavery gestures. There was a single common theme that overpowered whatever differentiated them: they were African men – enslaved, once enslaved, or sons of the enslaved. (131)

This passage from Craig Steven Wilder's *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* captures the logic of all African societies in New York and in other northern cities. African societies had four basic objectives: to resist and overthrow the institution of slavery, to provide material assistance in one form or another, to formulate methods to achieve political empowerment, and to further the intellectual and moral education of children and adults. Some societies took on all four of these objectives, some only one or two, but their common goal was the deflection or neutralization of the toxins of the virulently anti-African climate that existed in the 18th and 19th centuries, during which they emerged and matured. They collectively laid the foundation for African American economic and civil rights successes that would not be realized for well over a century. While the book's title suggests a discussion of the role of Black men in battling the anti-African social and political climate, and their drawing upon African culture to do so, it is as much — or perhaps more — about the societies and associations through which those men carried on the fight.

Notwithstanding American slavery's particular villainies, the objectives of African societies were not dissimilar to those of other ethnic groups whose members were either forced, in some way, to journey to the United States or chose to do so in pursuit of private opportunities. Many of these immigrants settled in big cities. Chinese immigrants facing ever increasing discrimination, which crested between the time of Los Angeles's Chinese Massacre of 1871 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, were, as well, forced to take the matters of their survival and flourishing into their own hands. With little official protection or political muscle, the Chinese community in Los Angeles erected mutual aid and relief societies similar to the African societies of the eastern cities. One such society was the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, which culled and focused the efforts of other similar groups. The Emigrant Aid Society (EAS), established in New York in 1841, assisted thousands of starved Irish coming to New York for a better life. As was the case with the West Coast Chinese, many of these Irish faced various forms of virulent discrimination and oppression upon their arrival. In the 1830s, societies that assist-

ed German immigrants were established in Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, and other cities. Their functions were to guide the newly arrived through the thickets of an all new and often hostile environment by assisting them with employment and material needs. Likewise, there were societies for Czechs, Italians, Poles, and other ethnic groups.

A distinction that Wilder draws between organizations like the EAS on the one hand (as well as other European American societies such as the German Society and the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, to name but a few) and African societies on the other is that African societies, on his account, were fueled by a theme of political "disloyalty" due to the conditions of slavery. In some sense, Wilder is correct — the theme of "disloyalty" to the status quo was much more prominent among Africans than German, Irish or Italian immigrants who pursued fraternal interests rather than wholesale social change. But, as Frederick Douglass would exemplify, that resistance was not to the basic founding legal instruments and political objectives of the nation, but to odious practices that ran counter to those instruments and objectives and that were acknowledged by many prominent whites to be impediments to the nation's progress or even survival. So while resistance was clearly a common plank in the platform of many Black societies, it can be argued that political "disloyalty" certainly was not — at least not always.

In any event, the issue of loyalty to the organs of state was to some degree beside the point. Africans would first need standing within the political compact before fealty could become a salient concern. Douglass and other Black strategists, being aware of this, fought for that entrance while limiting the nature of their rhetoric to practices and not the organs of state in general or to the state's political ideals. They sought the conditions for loyalty, without which wholesale bloodshed would be the inevitability — and most of the blood shed, in the final analysis, would probably have been African.

The logic of solidarity in the midst of oppressive circumstances is not particular, but universal. When the larger society refuses to provide the support required for the basics of life, let alone for flourishing (or, in Ronald Dworkin's words, when "sovereign virtue" is all but absent), humans fill the lacunae with their own toil, resources, and spirits. This was as true of Africans in the United States as it was of immigrant populations coming by choice to these shores. African societies were not exceptional in kind. What was exceptional was the nature of the obstacles to be overcome, and this created pragmatic distinctions between them and other ethnic associations. One thing that Wilder makes clear, regardless of how he might draw these distinctions, is that those who believed Africans incapable of such organizations could not have been more wrong.

Wilder places the genesis of such African societies as the New York African Society for Mutual Relief (NYASMR) and a number of similar societies in other Northern cities such as Philadelphia (the home of Richard Allen and the Free African Society) with African maroons — descendents of fugitive slaves who established coherent communities in the Caribbean and Americas, from Brazil to Long Island, and who drew upon African forms of communal organization. Wilder writes,

In eighteenth-century Jamaica, Royal Africa [a notorious British slave trading company that transported many Africans to the Caribbean] confronted two ancestral cults descended from West African secret societies. Maroon villages and cults exposed Africans' capacity for exploiting the West African heritage to establish their own institutions in the Americas. ... [Likewise] Africans in New York responded to bondage by calling upon African forms. In the summer of 1706, white New Yorkers got a hint of that ability. On July 22, Edward Lord Viscount Cornbury, the provincial governor, armed justices of the peace in Kings County (today's Brooklyn), Long Island, with the death penalty in order to deal with African maroons who, after freeing themselves, were striking fear among the local colonists.... New York officials were concerned with the safety of the colonists, and their fears highlight the most easily ignored evidence of African influence: that web of interpersonal obligations and dependencies that can quickly be discarded as "slave unity." West African cultures were a complex of overlapping communities divided by age, gender, and lineage, grounded in ancestral and spiritual beliefs, and regulated by complicated ethical systems. Enslaved New Yorkers had West African models on which to pattern an African American collectivism. The legal and political machinery of eighteenth-century New York constantly reacted to such networks of the unfree. (16)

Wilder discusses these "African forms" scantily, primarily with cursory references to West African secret societies, certain rituals (specifically the "circle ritual" which involved imbibing and secret meetings), and blood oaths that bound maroon men together in a communion of resistance and self-determination. The purpose of these forms, as Wilder states, attended the notion that "[t]he participants could not be violent unless they were united; they could not be joined unless they were believers" (23). This seems true enough, inasmuch as maroon resistance involved the risk of one's life and the lives of one's fellows. But where it may be clear that there were such borrowings, it is unclear in Wilder's survey just what they were and how they operated. Believers in what, exactly? What were the specific spiritualities, the specific beliefs, the metaphysics of the African men that led and participated in these "forms"? What specific notions of community, individuality, and personhood were drawn upon? It would be more defensible to have omitted more detailed answers to these questions, were it not for the book's subtitle.

Beyond the influences of West African communal traditions, Africans had other influences that proved crucial in their efforts to resist and engage in mutual assistance. As Wilder correctly put it, "Certainly every assemblage of Black people did not constitute a borrowing of African tradition" (17). In the nineteenth century, evangelical Christianity also served as a powerful emancipating ideology, and Wilder discusses this in some detail. Evangelical Christianity shuffled the existential deck, so to speak, and (i) provided Africans with an alternative and highly devel-

oped metaphysics, a metaphysics pliable enough to withstand their own interpretations and portable enough to traverse conditions of servitude and class distinctions, and, perhaps most important, (ii) bound white oppressors to Africans in their ultimate metaphysical commitments in a way that would help prove fatal to the incompatible political and moral logic of the slave system. Evangelical Christianity not only added an additional basis for the establishment of new societies and organizations, and a reservoir of new arguments to support the political demands of Africans, it also provided an alternative and sometimes controversial religiosity that made the conditions of slavery more bearable by providing an assurance of two worlds after death — a heaven for the divinely manumitted slave, and a hell in which their masters would reap a just desert.

Wilder explores with sensitivity and subtlety the otherworldliness of certain Black Christian perspectives. In his own interpretation of Jupiter Hammon's *Address to the Negroes of the State of New York* before the New York African Society, an address that was branded as effete and dangerously apolitical (and to this day both the address and Hammon remain so seen by many African American scholars), Wilder states,

The salvation theme in early African-Christian discourse [such as proffered by Hammon] causes historiographical mischief because of the conceit that centers social study around white actors and leads to the assumption that white people's thoughts and interests shaped such statements. Mechal Sobel, in her history of eighteenth-century Virginia, asserts that the evangelical celebration of the afterlife as a joyous spiritual and familial reunion—the basis of Christianity's social optimism—is itself an Africanism: a product of African ancestral values translated into the Christian paradigm. Encountering African religiosity at revivals, funerals, and deathbed sites, "white Virginians began to speak of preferring the after life death to the present one" and African familial and ancestral beliefs "now became 'white' ones as well." If one can extrapolate, Hammon's confidence in the bounty of the afterlife was a particularly African contribution to Christianity. The fact that Hammon's "Address" is free of any direct concern for the souls of white folk strengthens the interpretation.... Hammon believed in freedom, but it did not dominate his vision of the world. (65)

These are interesting insights. But I disagree with Wilder's extrapolation regarding Sobel's anecdotal evidence of a few white Virginians' utterances into a general religious conclusion that a belief in the bounty of the afterlife was an "Africanism." To say that there were African cognates to long-standing Christian (not to say, Western) tradition and theology would be to say enough. After all, the Christian catacombs of Rome are filled with first century Jupiter Hammons.

What is most interesting in Wilder's discussion of Hammon is the last sentence. While Hammon's position contrasted sharply with those of politically

engaged clergy such as Henry Highland Garnet (whose 1843 *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* was anything but other-worldly) and Alexander Crummell, the possibility of a new kind of dissent — from mundane political and social action — added new and rich dimensions to serious African discourse and moral analysis. A metaphysics that could relegate, for those in bondage, political rebellion and resistance to less than a supreme position in the hierarchy of moral imperatives and that resisted the limitation of one's self-definition to one's state of servitude was, on Wilder's interpretation, a humanizing rather than a dehumanizing possible predicate of Black life. Unlike a flaccid stoic resignation, Christianity understood moral agency as within the dynamic between the individual and his/her God, rather than as a mere response to outward circumstances, whatever they might be. This understanding of moral agency was, for some African American Christians just as for other Christians, the apotheosis of moral freedom. The African reception of Christianity caused some to place the question of slavery into a broader metaphysical perspective, without decrying political solutions to bondage.

African American involvement in Freemasonry created new possibilities for association, and, as Wilder points out, Freemasonry also had its blood oaths and intense organizational secrecy, on pain of injury (or worse); Black Freemasonry was a powerful movement that was reminiscent of African secret societies. It proved to be another vehicle for the creation of African solidarity and moral purpose: "Manhattan's Black Masons — although organized around the same contrived secrets and rituals as the white craft — had a public career that mirrored that of the NYASMR" (111).

Outside of Wilder's discussions of African societies, fraternities and associations, there are interesting cursory discussions of individual men (and women) who founded, organized, or worked through (or sometimes, around) them, including Alexander Crummell, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Samuel Cornish, James McCune Smith, James Varick, and Peter Williams, one of the founders of Mother Zion church along with members of the New York African Society whom, Wilder argues, "guided" many Africans' conversations to Christianity. Wilder discusses the intrigues, rivalries, and the complexities that existed among these men as they waged battles on behalf of their people and struggled to maintain cohesion in the midst of clashing perspectives and ideologies.

*In the Company of Black Men*, with over ninety pages of notes, is a marvelously well-researched account of Africans' efforts to cling to and assert their humanity in the face of almost impossible odds, and it is a very worthwhile addition to any library of Africana texts. The numerous societies, associations, and fraternities discussed, as well as a plethora of insightful and sometimes stunning observations, make the book a welcome tool for anyone researching the African American social networks and organizations that laid the foundation for contemporary African American iterations.

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