

Not content simply to prophesy an imminent African renaissance dependent upon divine intervention, Walker insists Africans must achieve it for themselves, comporting themselves as their ancient progenitors once did. Conjuring ancestral capacities to fight and resist, Walker inflects Ethiopianism with a militant energy that cannot be denied. But it is also a masculinist energy, which risks leaving women out of its redemptive story. In the chapter of this dissertation that follows, we now focus our attention upon the work of Maria W. Stewart, Walker's friend and protégé, who both extends Walker's reflections on African redemption and challenges his masculinism by positing a central place for women in the narrative he tells.

CHAPTER 3: ELEVATING ETHIOPIA MARIA STEWART AND THE CYCLES OF HISTORY

A belief, however, that the Deity more readily communicates himself to women, has at one time or another prevailed in every quarter of the earth ... The Jews had their prophetesses. The prediction of the Egyptian women obtained much credit at Rome, even unto emperors. And in most barbarous nations all things that have the appearance of being supernatural, the mysteries of religion, the secrets of physic, and the rights of magic, were in the possession of women.

—Maria Stewart, “Mrs. Stewart’s Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston”

The sight of you at once carried me back in memory to the very commencement of the antislavery movement in this city. ... Your whole adult life has been devoted to the noble task of educating and elevating your people, sympathizing with them in their affliction, and assisting them in their needs; and, though advanced in years, you are still animated with the spirit of your earlier life.

—William Lloyd Garrison, “Letter to Maria W. Stewart”

the Afro-American culture of early New England can no more be understood outside the context of Africa and Afro-America than the early history of white New England can be understood without reference to Europe and the remaining colonial New World.

William Piersen, *Black Yankees*

1. STEWART’S CONVERSION AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ETHIOPIANISM

On December 17, 1829, roughly three months following the publication of Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, Maria W. Stewart’s husband, James, died of heart disease in Boston. Although we cannot know with certainty, it appears likely James and Walker conspired to disseminate the *Appeal* to sailors in the Boston area and through them to the entire eastern and southern seaboard of the United States. Walker owned a “slop shop,” or secondhand clothing store patronized by sailors, bartenders, and ship’s outfitters. James was Boston’s only Black shipping agent, in charge of supplying whalers and fishing vessels. The two were also friends.²³⁶ However briefly, then, it is probable James assisted Walker in sewing copies of the *Appeal* into the maritime garments they traded, or in distributing the clothes that Walker had secretly mended. Less than a year after James’s death, on August 6, 1830, Walker himself died amid mysterious circumstances outside his home. In fewer than eight months, as she testifies in her *Meditations*, Stewart lost two of her most intimate companions and collaborators.

²³⁶ Burrow Jr., *God and Human Responsibility*, 32-3.

Stewart describes her resultant grief as prompting a change of heart. Though she studied the Bible as a child while bound out to a white clergyman's family, and later in Sabbath schools, it was not until she had "drunk deep in the cup of sorrow" that she became a professing Christian. Her newfound faith, moreover, seems also to have activated something within her. "From the moment I experienced the change," she says, "I felt a strong desire, to devote the remainder of my days to piety and to virtue, and now possess that spirit of independence that, were I called upon, I would willingly sacrifice my life for the cause of God and my brethren." After the deaths of her husband and friend, the latter of whom many regard as having been murdered by angry whites, Stewart became "fired with a holy zeal for freedom's cause" (*MS* 28). She became an ardent advocate of "African rights and liberty" (*MS* 66).

Stewart's public works from the period immediately following her conversion are exemplary of Ethiopianism. "Pleading the cause of oppressed Africa," she inflects biblical idioms with an African-centered perspective (*MS* 24). She innervates a vernacular that is still used in struggles against white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Joining pan-African race consciousness to Christian registers of speech, Stewart compels us to consider more carefully the sources informing the development of early nineteenth-century Ethiopianism. How should we understand the first twenty-eight years of Stewart's life in relation to her post-conversion persona?²³⁷ What formative influences might she have carried with her into her Christianity? If we follow the assertion of historians such as William Piersen, who claim African cultural practices both proliferated and thrived throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-

²³⁷ In an endorsement of the second publication of Stewart's *Meditations*, Alexander Crummell recounts his first acquaintance with Stewart, whom he met while a schoolboy with Henry Highland Garnet and Thomas Sidney. Crummell's letter contains one interesting observation that may be of consequence for my argument in what follows, which I reproduce below. While I regard it with a certain skepticism, Crummell's suggestion that Stewart was functionally illiterate after she came to New York from Boston—after, that is, the first edition of her *Meditations* was published—lends credence to my speculation she may have been influenced by African oral cultures and traditions while in New England, particularly the cultures of Black women. He writes: "Mrs. Stewart came to New York with less of the advantages of education than this small literary circle, but full of greed for literature and letters. She was then a young widow, and still very much distressed at the loss of her husband. The anguish that occurrence had brought to her caused the outburst of an overwrought soul in these 'Meditations and Prayers,' which she had published a year or so before. The surprise of the case was that a person who had received but six weeks' schooling, who could not even pen her own thoughts, who had to get a little girl ten years old to write every word of this book – that *such* a person could compose essays of this kind and give expression to such thoughts and be the author of such a work!" Alexander Crummell, "Letters and Commendations," (*MS* 10).

century New England, can we assume Stewart's early years in Connecticut and Massachusetts exposed her to Africana ideas and customs which informed her post-conversion activism?²³⁸

I ask these questions to call attention to the fact that most readers have made little of Stewart's pre-Christian life.²³⁹ When they have addressed it, they have chiefly done so to declare the details of her initial three decades irrelevant to her work. This certainly makes sense: Stewart does not speak or write about her pre-Christian life in any depth. In fact, she appears to use her conversion experience mainly as a tool for fashioning her own prophetic Protestant identity. Cedrick May rightly notes that Stewart's account of her calling positions her in the lineage of the Hebrew prophets, for example, and therefore goes on to assert: "Like the biblical prophets, ... the details of [her] life are mostly irrelevant, as the prophet seeks to account for the future, punishment, and/or eventual restoration of the people of God ... not the individual prophet but ... the state, fate, and regeneration of the people."²⁴⁰ In making this claim—which I cite as representative of the scholarship—May interprets Stewart according to the persona she sought to cultivate: that of an ethical prophet, whose life prior to her vocation merits little attention. May therefore perpetuates the lacuna that marks the dominant scholarly reading of Stewart, which leaves unconsidered what her early life might have been like and what religious resources she might have depended upon as a young, free, and orphaned Black woman navigating New England.

While the dominant reading proves instructive for the way it shows how Stewart adapted and transformed the genres of prophetic Protestant speech that proliferated in the early republic, I worry

²³⁸ William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

²³⁹ This despite Marilyn Richardson's challenge that Stewart "affords us, however, a singular occasion to study not only the published thoughts and words of an influential early black female activist, but the unique opportunity to trace the sources of her arguments and beliefs to specific points of origin in the documents she studied and by which she herself was most influenced." Perhaps one problem with this challenge is its positivistic focus upon documents rather than social practices, or upon other aspects of Black life not readily archivable. Marilyn Richardson, "Preface," *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), xvi.

²⁴⁰ Cedrick May, *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic, 1760-1835* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 119.

it obscures precisely when Stewart engaged in her public career. That is, I worry it encourages a failure to historicize Stewart and her communities. As scholars of Africana religion Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks have recently observed, many accounts of Black religion in the U.S. still rather arbitrarily begin their periodizations in the middle of the eighteenth century—during the First Great Awakening—when Africans initially began to convert to Protestantism. They highlight three troubling consequences of this periodization. The first is that scholars tend to ignore the initial century-and-a-half of African presence and religious life in British North America and in the U.S., as well as its enduring influence. The second is that it “reinforces the unstated assumption behind most religious studies research on [Africans in the Americas]—that religion commences with Christianity.”²⁴¹ The third is that it fails to address a critical demographic datum first popularized by the late historian of religions Al Raboteau, namely, that most Africans in the U.S. “remained only minimally touched by Christianity by the second decade of the nineteenth century.”²⁴² To describe Stewart as though Afro-Protestantism were the only source of religious inspiration motivating her social criticism, as most mainstream critics have done, is therefore to risk missing the other fonts from which she may have drawn.

Indeed, not even in the North, where free Africans founded their own independent churches and religious institutions in the late eighteenth century, was the bulk of the Black population Christian. Stewart herself testifies that most of her kin in Boston did not practice Christianity as late as 1832. She says in her “Address, to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston,” for example: “I have discovered that religion is held in low repute among ... us ... Ah! methinks I see this people

²⁴¹ Stewart Diakité and Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies,” 54-5.

²⁴² David W. Wills further supports Raboteau’s historicization, writing: “Most of the Africans who were brought to the English colonies had not been Christians in their homeland and did not become such in the New World. Numerically significant Christianization of the slave population only began after 1760 and did not really come to full tide until after 1830, by which time most American blacks were native born. While some blacks at the time of their capture and enslavement were Muslims, the vast majority were adherents of some form of African traditional religion—and it is presumably as such that they lived and died in America.” Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 149; David W. Wills, “The Central Themes of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White,” *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 14.

lying in wickedness; and as the Lord liveth, and as your souls live, were it not for the few righteous that are to be found among us, we should become as Sodom, and like unto Gomorrah” (*MS* 61). In fact, Stewart’s small corpus contains no fewer than eight prayers for her unconverted African friends. Some might be inclined to regard this as indicative of a form of evangelical piety, and it may very well be. Yet I insist we must remember Stewart’s gloss on her own conversion was that it awakened within her a concern for African rights and liberty. One might therefore also read her concern for her friends’ conversion, as I do, as part of her broader project to fire them with “holy zeal” for freedom’s cause.

I do not want to overstate my case here. My point is not that the dominant reading’s focus on Stewart’s post-conversion prophetic persona is incorrect. Many compelling studies of Stewart have been undertaken from this angle.²⁴³ Nor do I mean to imply Stewart was not “truly” Christian, or that many of her closest friends, neighbors, and colleagues were not also Christians. She was a Baptist; they were Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. My point is rather that scholars of Black religion can—indeed, should—read Stewart’s conversion as an opening; that scholars of Black religion ought to read it as an occasion to query whether and how certain ancestral pieties and spiritualities might inform her religious and ethical orientations. Stewart did not live in an African cultural vacuum in nineteenth-century New England. It is important to treat her as such. This entails reading her against the grains of her own self-descriptions, as well as those of the dominant scholarly tendency.

At this point, I also want to flag how Stewart’s reception serves as an illuminating cipher for the study of Ethiopianism, as the same issues of periodization have also shaped its interpretation. The most notable student of the tradition, Wilson Moses, for example, denies that Africana and/or classical African practices influenced Ethiopianism’s formation. This is because its “ideology revealed no influence of an African priesthood.”²⁴⁴ He claims instead that it “sprang organically out of certain

²⁴³ Jacoby Adeshei Carter, “The Insurrectionist Challenge to Pragmatism and Maria W. Stewart’s Feminist Insurrectionist Ethics,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 49.1 (2013), 54–73.

²⁴⁴ It is important to observe Moses’s definitions of Ethiopianism tend to shift from text to text. In the works cited here, he defines it as literary Black nationalism. When confined to literary circles, I suppose it perhaps makes sense to deny

shared ... experiences of English-speaking Africans during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”²⁴⁵ But why should one make African influences dependent upon the presence of a formal priesthood? And what does it mean to speak of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Black tradition’s “organic emergence” apart from these influences? As Ras Michael Brown and others have observed, the Middle Passage did not obliterate the cultures Africans carried with them to the Americas.²⁴⁶ While the Middle Passage and chattel slavery certainly facilitated the transformation of West and Central African cultures by coercing intensive interethnic contact and exchange—perhaps in the process also wiping out formal structures of religious leadership—they did not deprive Africans of their ancestral beliefs, practices, or religious resources. To account for Ethiopianism (and Stewart) without recourse to these resources, in whatever state of wholeness, is to miss something fundamental about it at best, and to succumb to ideological misrepresentations of early African American cultures at worst.

In chapter 2, I have shown how Walker mixes concepts and ideas derived from Africans’ ancestral and diasporic practices with idioms drawn from the Bible and Anglo-American religious and political traditions, thereby transforming both. As Walker writes on the verge of an epochal shift in Black religion, namely, the widespread adoption and transformation of Protestant Christianity by the enslaved, his mixture of African and biblical religious resources prefigures much of what will later come to mark Black religious thought in general and Ethiopianism in particular.²⁴⁷ Specifically, his redemptive project of dramatizing African history in biblical terms as a larger narrative of decline and

priestly influence. Yet, I wonder about the merits of delimiting Ethiopianism to literature, particularly in view of his alternative descriptions of the tradition as a kind of dynamic mythology. Wilson J. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 28.

²⁴⁵ Wilson J. Moses, “The Poetics of Ethiopianism: W.E.B. Du Bois and Literary Black Nationalism,” *American Literature* 47.3 (1975), 411.

²⁴⁶ Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁴⁷ Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “Introduction: Towards New Visions and New Approaches in African American Religious Studies,” *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), xiii-xv.

recovery appears to have been taken up by many others who asked how Africans might achieve their desired ends.²⁴⁸ Although Walker neither launched this program of thought nor brought it to its culmination, indeed, the fertile vocabulary of the *Appeal* has provided many of his fellows, past and present, with a powerful resource for working out their own programs of African redemption.²⁴⁹

Stewart is Walker's immediate successor in the Ethiopianist tradition. Her *Meditations* testify she considers herself his heir, albeit one whose womanhood substantially alters her vision for African redemption (MS 24).²⁵⁰ While a single sarcastic aside in "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" signals Stewart's tacit support for armed resistance in the spirit of Walker's *Appeal*, many of her other remarks take a more pragmatic tack on how best to achieve Black destiny. In particular, she suggests African redemption may be hastened through what she calls "religious or moral improvement," which she regards as the special province of women (MS 26). Stewart therefore adapts the same lexicon Walker uses in his *Appeal* but inflects it with her own voice. She extends Walker's concern for African rights and liberty into a sphere he ignored, or, worse yet, even denigrated—the sphere of what was then called "domesticity."²⁵¹ In the absence of an armed and awakened Black citizenry capable of self-governance, Stewart maintains ethical formation and social uplift, directed by women, will be the way to bring about redemption. Of the importance of women's influence, she says, for example: "O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you! You have souls committed to your charge, and God will require a strict account of you. It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, the abhorrence of vice, and the cultivation of a pure heart.

²⁴⁸ Herbert Aptheker, "One Continual Cry:" *David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829-1830); Its Setting & Its Meaning* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 45-61.

²⁴⁹ Marcy J. Dinius, *The Textual Effects of David Walker's "Appeal:" Print-Based Activism Against Slavery, Racism, and Discrimination, 1829-1851* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 80-108.

²⁵⁰ Jennifer Rycenga, "A Greater Awakening: Women's Intellect as a Factor in Early Abolitionist Movements, 1824-1834," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21.2 (2005), 59.

²⁵¹ Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3-4.

The seeds thus sown will grow” (MS 26). Because she regards women as the source of communal piety and virtue, and because she believes piety and virtue are the engines of freedom, Stewart places Black women at the vanguard of history.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how Stewart takes up and complicates Walker’s Ethiopianism, even as she innovates by injecting her own concerns into the tradition’s ethical-political vocabulary. As a matter of method, I presume she is familiar with the practices, narratives, and traditions discussed during chapter 2’s interpretation of Walker, such that the work I performed earlier ought to be carried in mind as I now read Stewart.²⁵² I begin by introducing conjure as a paradigm for making sense of her assertion of womanly authority as a social critic amid communities that did not make space for Black women to speak in public. Taking this paradigm to further illustrate her uses of the Bible and Psalm 68:31, I examine next how conjure might also be said to influence her theory of the cycles of history. Then, I explicate her account of religion and its role in African redemption in view of her historical consciousness. Finally, I conclude by setting the stage for an intra-traditional Ethiopianist dialogue between Walker and Stewart, on the one hand, and Martin Delany, on the other, over the necessity of repatriation. Must Africans leave the Americas to be redeemed?

2. CONJURING MORAL AUTHORITY

Like Walker, Stewart interprets Africans’ fight for freedom in religious terms. She also regards their present state as the result of ancestral sin and disobedience. “Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school of learning, and the most illustrious men of Greece flocked thither for instruction,” she writes, “But it was our gross sins and abominations that provoked the Almighty to frown thus heavily upon us and give our glory unto others.” For Stewart, the struggle for emancipation is also therefore a struggle for redemption, in which Africans must repent and recover their glory: “Sin and prodigality have caused the downfall of nations, kings, and emperors;

²⁵² Christel N. Temple, “The Cosmology of Afrocentric Womanism,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 36.1 (2012), 24-5.

and were it not that God in wrath remembers mercy, we might indeed despair; but a promise is left us: 'Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God'" (*MS* 68). She thus draws upon the same longstanding Africana practices of politicizing religion and interpreting slavery as punishment for sin, as well as anglophone practices of biblical typology, or the figural insertion of oneself and one's people into biblical narratives, as did her late friend and predecessor. Speaking to Black Bostonians, whom she understands to be descended from the very African peoples mentioned in the Bible, she announces that her prophetic task is therefore to "arouse you to exertion, and enforce upon your minds the great necessity of turning your attention to knowledge and improvement" (*MS* 3). Like Walker before her, Stewart mixes and matches various ancestral and Christian religious idioms and resources as she labors to awaken her neighbors to the necessity of moral and political transformation.

Unlike Walker, however, Stewart has to confront certain troublesome early nineteenth-century gender norms as she casts her Ethiopianist vision for African religious and moral improvement. Chief among these difficulties is the problem of women's public moral authority. Often identified by scholars as the Cult of Domesticity, or Cult of True Womanhood, the dominant gender ideology of Stewart's time insisted that women were indeed responsible for collective moral formation and the inculcation of social virtue.²⁵³ Yet it also restricted women's pursuit of these obligations to the home, where they were thought to belong. "No woman," writes scholar of African American literature Joycelyn Moody, "was at liberty to leave home without arousing suspicion."²⁵⁴ This was especially true for Black women, whose stipulated obligations not only to their men but to their race effectively rendered them laborers and child-bearers. Indeed, because Black women "were admonished by church and society to consider the home their proper sphere, to look up to men, to demonstrate an appropriate subservience," says historian Marilyn Richardson, Stewart faces a dilemma common to many other early African American

²⁵³ Linda M. Perkins, "The Impact of the Cult of True Womanhood on the Education of Black Women," *Journal of Social Issues* 39.3 (1983), 17-28.

²⁵⁴ Joycelyn Moody, "On the Road with God: Travel and Quest in Early Nineteenth-Century African American Holy Women's Narratives," *Religion and Literature* 27.1 (1995), 37.

women intellectuals and activists: she has to provide justification for her decision to assume the role of a public figure.²⁵⁵ In a raced and gendered social world where “the fair daughters of Africa [are] compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles,” Stewart must put forth a persuasive argument as to why anyone should listen to her (*MS* 32). Although her essays and speeches indicate she considers herself called by God to perform her redemptive work, the strictures of her moment demand she give an account of her vocation.²⁵⁶ She cannot presume an audience.²⁵⁷

Most historians and critics usually adduce as evidence of this issue Stewart’s forced exit from Boston in 1834 by hostile white and Black audiences alike; that her public sentiments were received as too radical even for abolitionists.²⁵⁸ For Stewart to address the public about religion and moral reform in early 1830s Boston was therefore to face censure from all sides, including from those who ostensibly shared her desire to see enslaved Africans emancipated and their free counterparts unbound from the bonds of domestic service. Comparativist Jennifer Rycenga has recently noted how white abolitionist women contributed to Stewart’s departure. Poring over the pages of the “Women’s Department” of the Boston antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, in which women addressed and exhorted one another, Rycenga observes none of the white women who wrote for the publication cited Stewart in their print conversations about women’s roles in the abolition of slavery. “I despair that white female abolitionist readers of the *Liberator* must have been aware of Stewart,” she writes, “yet did not cite her ... ‘either racism or class bias—or both—prevented them from identifying with

²⁵⁵ Richardson, “Introduction,” *Maria W. Stewart, America’s First Black Woman Political Writer*, 22.

²⁵⁶ See Opal Moore, “The Productions of Maria W. Stewart: Rebellious Domesticity and Black Women’s Liberation,” *Early America Re-Explored: New Readings in Colonial, Early National, and Antebellum Culture*, ed. Klaus H. Schmidt and Fritz Fleischmann (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 448.

²⁵⁷ In the preface to his *Appeal*, Walker expresses this very presumption: “It is expected that all coloured men, women, and children, of every nation, language, and tongue under heaven, will try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get someone to read it to them, for it is designed more particularly for them” (*WA* 2).

²⁵⁸ Literary critic Chanta Haywood writes: “Her audacity and tenacity incensed many of her community members, who found it difficult to accept a woman not only speaking publicly about political issues but also professing direction by God. Because of this public reaction, Stewart left Boston.” Chanta M. Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters, Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2016), 6.

Stewart.”²⁵⁹ Whether this lack of identification constitutes special culpability for Stewart’s poor reception in Boston, as Rycenga implies, is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, white women’s refusal to engage Stewart’s antislavery writings can illuminate just how difficult it was for early nineteenth-century Black women, especially orphans and those from the lower classes, to assert themselves as public intellectuals. Caught between white supremacy, gender ideology, and class bias, these women faced double, sometimes triple, disregard and discrimination. As Stewart’s writings testify, they were forced to arrogate their own moral authority.

2.1. BIBLICAL WOMEN AS ANCESTORS AND EXEMPLARS

Stewart responds to this disregard in her final public address, “Mrs. Stewart’s Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston, Delivered September 21, 1833.” Here, she takes up the topic of women’s authority explicitly, and she discusses her negative public reception in view of her sense of God’s call and the significant role many women have played in the history of religion and ethics.²⁶⁰ In an initial interrogatory that links her to broader oral, rhetorical, and performative traditions in Black religious life, Stewart asks: “What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? ... Again: Holy women ministered unto Christ and the apostle; and women of refinement in all ages, more or less, have had a voice in moral, religious, and political subjects” (*MS* 76).²⁶¹ The rights of women to intervene in public affairs both moral and religious, then, are thematized from the outset. Whereas proponents of the Cult of Domesticity insist women must remain content to work in the home—must remain content, that is, to provide moral and religious

²⁵⁹ Rycenga, “A Greater Awakening,” 50.

²⁶⁰ In her “Lecture, Delivered at the Franklin Hall, Boston, September 21, 1832,” Stewart describes her calling: “Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—‘Who shall go forward and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?’ And my heart made this reply: ‘If it is Thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!’” (*MS* 55).

²⁶¹ Andrea McArdle, “The Confluence of Law and Antebellum Black Literature: Lawyerly Discourse as a Rhetoric of Empowerment,” *Law and Literature* 17.2 (2005), 183–223.

instruction only to themselves and to their most intimate relations—Stewart asserts women, “in all ages, more or less,” have and should continue to exert a profitable public influence upon social life.

As the language of her interrogatory implies, Stewart’s discussion of women’s gainful influence is drawn from the Bible and the records of antiquity. As she sees it, histories both sacred and secular bear witness to the fact that the relegation of women to the home is a contemporary mistake with disastrous consequences. For it is women, Stewart maintains, whom God has charged with achieving African destiny. “If such women as are here described have once existed, be no longer astonished, then, my brethren,” she warns, “that God ... should raise up your own females to strive by their example, both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at present. No longer ridicule their efforts, it will be counted as sin.” (*MS* 77). As the rightful guides to piety and virtue, women should not have to seize or assert their authority to address the public; that they do indicates not a problem with them but with contemporary social, cultural, and religious life in Boston. Indeed, she says God has raised them (and her) up “to bring about his most exalted purposes” (*MS* 77). It follows, for Stewart, that her impending exile from the city constitutes an offense against these purposes.²⁶² In the face of dominant ideas about women’s roles and their attendant social pressures, Stewart claims her right to be heard.

In different ways, literary theorists Marjorie Pryse and Katherine Bassard have argued Stewart’s self-authorizing speech can be read through the lens of conjure, here conceived as a Black Atlantic religious tradition that both shapes and is shaped by biblical interpretation. Although their analyses

²⁶² Importantly, Stewart does not connect this offense to Africans’ prospects for redemption. She maintains God’s purposes are greater than her individual fate. Stewart bespeaks her sense of African destiny thusly: “But to return to my subject. The mighty work of formation has begun among this people. The dark clouds of ignorance are dispersing. The light of science is bursting forth. Knowledge is beginning to flow, nor will its moral influence be extinguished till its refulgent rays have spread over us from East to West and from North to South. Thus far is this mighty work begun, but not as yet accomplished. Christians must awake from their slumbers. Religion must flourish among them ... Yet, notwithstanding your prospects are thus fair and bright, I am about to leave you, perhaps never more to return; for I find it is no use for me, as an individual, to try to make myself useful among my color in this city. It was contempt for my moral and religious opinions in private that drove me thus before a public. Had experience more plainly shown me that it was the nature of man to crush his fellow, I should not have thought it so hard.” (*MS* 78-9).

extend beyond Stewart alone, Pryse and Bassard each draw attention to the ways Stewart emphasizes women's ancient powers and special insight. Pryse, for example, stresses how the cultural logics of conjure help account for Stewart's appropriation of authority against broader patriarchal prohibitions. Because the role of conjure woman was well-established in African communities throughout the U.S., Stewart was able to cast herself in this mold when she invoked the Bible and women's historical associations with the "supernatural, the mysteries of religion, the secrets of physic, and the rights of magic" (MS 77). On Pryse's reading, as Stewart identifies herself with the exemplary women of ancient and biblical worlds, she also relies upon the implicit norms around conjurational practice, here taken as a background culture, as she challenges her compatriots to lend her their ears.²⁶³ In particular, she relies upon conjure's broader links to ideas about women's folk traditions, the power that comes from belonging to these traditions, and her own role as a medium of this power, who can bespeak "all the creative force of her black and female forerunners."²⁶⁴ Pryse thus discerns a connection between Stewart's biblical citations and the practice of conjure: she not only "conjures" an ancestral, matriarchal lineage for herself—a cloud of witnesses for and to whom she is accountable—but also steps into the authority of this lineage to fashion a way through the wilderness of the Cult of True Womanhood.

For Bassard, the connection to conjure is even more specific. Reading Stewart alongside other Black women who have drawn upon the Bible in their religious, ethical, and political thought, Bassard theorizes the existence of a "hermeneutics of transformation" that resembles homeopathic medicine. What Bassard perceives across these women's uses of the Bible is their attempt, on the one hand, to use the text to expose the negative conditions in their lives and then, on the other hand, to continue using it to transform these negative conditions into positive ones.²⁶⁵ We have already seen this strategy

²⁶³ Marjorie Pryse, "Introduction: Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women," *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1-24.

²⁶⁴ Pryse, "Introduction," 2.

²⁶⁵ Katherine Clay Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 17.

at work in Stewart's references to Esther, Mary Magdalene, and the women who "ministered to Christ and the apostles." By claiming them as her ancestors, Stewart simultaneously makes an argument about the errors of restricting women to the home and offers an alternative model for women's roles in society, in which they may serve as public examples of religious, moral, and political excellence. Although such appropriations of the Bible might appear rather conventional in cultures that bear a biblical trace, for Bassard this hermeneutics of transformation depends in large part on "an African sacred cosmos that prompted black American cultural adaptations of Euro-American Christianity."²⁶⁶ That is, the patterns she perceives to be at work among African American women interpreters of the Bible owe much to the homeopathic, healing-harming logics at work in conjurational practice. Their hermeneutics of transformation thus draw on traditions of knowledge and action informed by African cultural repertoires, both real and imagined, that operate according to a principle of like-treats-like.

Historical specificity does a lot of heavy lifting here. Following biblical scholar Allen Dwight Callahan, Bassard observes most early African American interpreters of the Bible appropriated the text in a white supremacist context where it accrued meanings weaponized against them—most infamously in justifications for slavery. Rather than accept such meanings, however, Bassard notes that their appropriations of the text occurred in terms familiar to them. Because they knew that "the 'Bible' that Euro-American enslavers presented to [them], read through western eyes, was already primed to enact and legitimate certain racial and gendered subjectivities of difference," they did not read it like their enslavers.²⁶⁷ Instead, they adapted it to the cultural norms and values that suited them. As African American interpreters first drew upon the Bible under conditions of domination in part wrought through the Bible, then, they therefore came to read the Bible against the Bible, to find biblical cures for biblical curses. Indeed, Bassard claims it was only in this way—claims, that is, it was only through

²⁶⁶ Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures*, 13.

²⁶⁷ Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures*, 13-14.

a homeopathic approach to the text—that African Americans could embrace the Bible as authoritative for them. On her account, Stewart’s hermeneutics of transformation thus work in tandem with the conjurational dialectic Callahan identifies between “the good book” and “the poison book,” in which interpreters cite “tonic texts” against “toxic texts.” Aware that the Bible has both power of curse and cure, and aware of its potency for remedying harm, especially harm caused by bad readings of the Bible, Stewart draws on the Bible as medicine for herself and her people—“turning curses into blessings.”²⁶⁸

Consider once again Stewart’s use of biblical women to respond to the problem of women’s public moral authority. On the one hand, proponents of the Cult of True Womanhood appeal to the Bible and to Christian teaching to argue women should embrace purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity, asserting they should remain at home and school their intimates in piety and virtue.²⁶⁹ For such ideologues, the “valiant woman” of Proverbs 31 is the ideal model: “She hath looked well to the paths of her house, and hath not eaten her bread idle. Her children rose up, and called her blessed: her husband, and he praised her” (Proverbs 31:27-28). On the other hand, Stewart draws upon the Bible’s other references to valiant women as she argues that silencing women in public risks squelching their abilities to make a positive influence. Could Mary Magdalene have seen and proclaimed Jesus’s resurrection if she had been at home? Looking at the Bible’s verses not to plumb their depths but to consider their social use, she treats toxic texts with tonic texts. Using the Bible to remedy the Bible, Stewart works to transform the curse of true womanhood into a blessing, transforming women’s piety into a public rather than private good. Indeed, she uses the valiant women of the Bible to conjure a public voice and moral authority for herself.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures*, 9-22.

²⁶⁹ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966), 151-174.

²⁷⁰ In her provocative recent work *Black Cultural Mythology*, Christel Temple describes this strategy as Stewart’s “Ebonic use of heroes.” On Temple’s account, Stewart’s use of these heroic women as ancestors makes neither their place in Jewish and Christian saintly pantheons nor colonialist, civilizationist standards of excellence central to their exemplarity. What she does instead, is adapt them into “models for Black progress without featuring their European-ness as a condition to be emulated.” Christel Temple, *Black Cultural Mythology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 31.

2.2. CONJURE KNOWLEDGE AND PSALM 68:31

Stewart's hermeneutics and strategies of biblical citation place her in a complicated relationship with the practice of conjure. On the one hand, as a Black Atlantic tradition, conjure can be defined by its attempts to arrogate spiritual power for various purposes, including healing, harming, protection, and self-defense; it can also be defined by the role conjurors play as they mediate between their communities and the forces that impinge upon their lives. In these ways, as Pryse and Bassard suggest, there are certain formal parallels to be discerned between Stewart's uses of the Bible and conjure. As she invokes exemplary biblical women and calls attention to their historical associations with magic, for example, Stewart both imagines and creates an authoritative spiritual lineage in which she stands as she asserts her right to have a voice on matters of African rights and liberty. As she uses these same women, too, to confront the biblically sanctioned patriarchal strictures that constitute the reason she must conjure her own authority in the first place, Stewart also employs biblical scripts according to conjure's homeopathic and transformative logics. That is, she invokes the Bible with transformative intent to reimagine a social world in which Black women are to lead the task of African redemption.

On the other hand, beyond her strategic uses of the Bible and invocations of biblical ancestors, Stewart demonstrates almost no concrete connections to conjure as it has been described by historians and ethnographers of Black religions.²⁷¹ Besides the Bible, Stewart employs none of the conventional paraphernalia of conjure. Nor does she appear to have knowledge of conventional conjurational rituals. It would therefore be a misreading to call Stewart a conjure woman in any literal sense.²⁷²

Yet Africana studies scholar LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant has recently suggested there may be a more sophisticated way to think about the relation between conjure and Black women like Stewart, who appear to draw upon conjurational cultural scripts without having any explicit ties to the practice.

²⁷¹ See Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

²⁷² I once again thank Kera Street for pressing me on this point, as she was unpersuaded by my initial formulations of the idea that Stewart sees herself and her audiences as efficacious vessels for spiritual power.

In her essay, “I Had a Praying Grandmother,” Manigault-Bryant offers an account of what she calls “conjure knowledge,” or the ways Black diaspora women have drawn upon ancestral traditions and folkways to counter conditions of domination. On the one hand, she construes conjure knowledge as operating in specific terms that can be traced to the African continent. Through the chain of Black women’s communities, classical African ideas, practices, and paradigms have been handed over and made available to those seeking their assistance. In this respect, Manigault-Bryant contends conjure knowledge comes “directly from ancestors, ancestral traditions, and ancestral powers.” On the other hand, she stresses the general nature of conjure knowledge. It is also available to Black women such as Stewart, who appear to have no explicit or verifiable connection to ancestral supernatural practices. In this case, Manigault-Bryant argues that conjure knowledge is passed down through the socialized inculcation of a religio-political intuition common to Black women, whom she says participate in “a global, transnational conversation where strategies are created to disrupt the various matrices of domination that seek to oppress black women.”²⁷³ Whether the connection to African folkways is real or imagined, direct or indirect, is less important for Manigault-Bryant than the ways conjure knowledge has served Black women as a recognizable means of generating agency, authority, and power as they have negotiated their positions in diasporic societies.²⁷⁴ “Conjure knowledge,” she says, “has always been an undercurrent in black women’s testimonies.”²⁷⁵

To redescribe Stewart’s arrogation of public authority in this way is to suggest that her biblical citations possess a conjurational logic all their own; that they follow the epistemological and cultural norms associated with the practice of conjure even if Stewart herself does not identify with them. It

²⁷³ Manigault-Bryant, “I Had a Praying Grandmother,” 125.

²⁷⁴ Manigault-Bryant’s discussion of conjure knowledge compares fruitfully to Tracey Huck’s ethnographic account of African American women who have chosen to practice both Christian and Yoruba religious traditions. See Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, foreword by Charles H. Long (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 226-70.

²⁷⁵ Manigault-Bryant, “I Had a Praying Grandmother,” 126.

is also thereby to suggest that her invocations of the Ethiopian prophecy might be said to follow the same logics. What do I mean? Many scholars argue that Stewart appears to generate her authority as a social critic by appealing to the Ethiopian prophecy, and, in fact, that Psalm 68:31 forms the key biblical script animating her social criticism and project of African uplift. Whereas I have so far focused on Stewart's citations of valiant women from the Bible as she conjures her authority in the face of gendered proscriptions—focused, that is, on Stewart's self-identifications with exemplary ancient women and their supernatural associations—most interpreters of Stewart's work concentrate on the role played by Psalm 68:31.

Indeed, rhetorician Shirley Wilson Logan argues that Stewart's recurring citations of Psalm 68:31 are the primary means by which Stewart summons credibility among her audiences. "These allusions in Stewart's prose demonstrate a strong sense of African origins," she says, "among a displaced people who needed to recall a proud heritage."²⁷⁶ According to Logan, Stewart's uses of the Ethiopian prophecy bring herself into focus as a representative—or perhaps better, an exemplar—of this very heritage. African American studies scholar Ida Young concurs, writing: "With her distinct rhetorical style, Stewart symbolically wove the ancestral fabric of the African foremother at a time when many looked away from Africa. Her lectures evoked an African past of pride and great achievement."²⁷⁷ Appealing to the Ethiopian prophecy and its implied redemption-historical narrative is not just a way for her to foster an identification with her listeners, however, but also a way for her to conjure the authority of another matriarchal lineage. "With one text in particular, Psalms 68:31," says scholar of religion Valerie Cooper, "Stewart attempts to reclaim Africa from the denigrations of the modern West. By speaking in the manner of the King James Bible ... Stewart appears to inhabit the

²⁷⁶ Shirley Wilson Logan, *"We Are Coming:" The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 23.

²⁷⁷ Ida Young, "Keeping Truth on My Side: Maria Stewart," *Black Lives: Essays in African American Biography*, ed. James Conyers (New York: Routledge, 2015), 119.

texts and wrap herself in the mantle of the Bible's authority."²⁷⁸ Inflecting her voice with the authority of the Bible, and using it like a conjure book, Stewart steps into the role of social critic and challenges her audiences to elevate themselves.

3. PSALM 68:31 AS FRAME FOR INTERPRETING HISTORY AND ETHICS

Eddie Glaude's account of nineteenth-century African American uses of the Exodus narrative is important for my understanding of Psalm 68:31's role in Stewart's ethical and political vocabulary. For Glaude, the Exodus narrative provided its African American interpreters with a linguistic frame for fashioning senses of racial solidarity (what he calls "peoplehood") and mutual obligation. His emphasis is more on the role religious language plays in Black ethics and politics—on the role it plays, that is, in interpreting the past and dramatizing possibilities for the present—than on its role in more conventional religious matters, such as hammering out theological ideas about God's action in history. Through this use of the Exodus narrative, African Americans mobilized themselves for struggle against slavery and white supremacy: "Africa is reread; the middle passage and slavery are reread; America is reread, and aspirations for freedom and citizenship are formulated as divinely sanctioned ends."²⁷⁹ Though Glaude admits the efficacy of these rereadings rested largely in "the socioreligious imagination of African American Christians," he insists they nevertheless became one means for Black people of all backgrounds to imagine what it might take to free themselves from slavery.²⁸⁰

As the most quoted verse in Black religious history, Psalm 68:31 has been another such means. Yet, whereas the Exodus narrative's ethnogenetic march toward freedom, "with its linear progression, its movement from beginning to end," and its emphasis upon liberation have functioned as tools for fashioning senses of peoplehood and national obligation, Psalm 68:31 has generated a different idiom.

²⁷⁸ Valerie C. Cooper, *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2011), 14; see also pp. 98, 154-58.

²⁷⁹ Glaude, *Exodus!*, 94.

²⁸⁰ Glaude, *Exodus!* 3.

In particular, its two dominant themes, rising Africa and the fall of the West, have proven fruitful for Black interpreters concerned to address the problematics of destiny and redemption, as well as their moral and ethical entailments.²⁸¹ Through intensive interpretation and regular ritualization of the Ethiopian prophecy, Black interpreters have prepared themselves for an imminent African renaissance and global race revival. While these events do entail emancipation from slavery, emancipation is here not constituted by liberation so much as redemption.²⁸²

In saying this I do not mean to place the Exodus narrative and Psalm 68:31 in opposition one to the other, as if they were somehow contrasting conceptual constellations in Black religious thought. Instead, I mean merely to signal what I take to be Stewart's central concerns. In fact, it seems to me that Stewart interprets not only African histories, present circumstances, and future prospects through the language and paradigms of the Ethiopian prophecy, but also popular nineteenth-century Black projects of uplift. Thus, she delivers her exhortations not just to local persons and communities but to a worldwide protagonist, a collective African subject, whose existence she imagines and for whom she insists the pursuit of religion and ethical formation are supernaturally sanctioned ends.

Indeed, Stewart's essential claim in her exhortations is that Africans must lift themselves out of their present miserable condition through moral and political effort. What is needed is to challenge racial domination and ideological subordination through unified exertion. "Truly, my heart's desire and prayer is that Ethiopia might stretch forth her hands to God," she declares, bespeaking her

²⁸¹ In his influential study, "The Poetics of Ethiopianism," Moses argues Psalm 68:31 has acquired two dominant thematic glosses as a result of centuries of dramatization and interpretation by Africans. The first gloss is that of "Rising Africa," or the idea that "Africa would 'soon' experience a dramatic political, industrial, and economic renaissance." The second is "the Decline of the West," which stipulates that "the rise in the fortunes of Africa and all her scattered children would be accompanied by God's judgment upon the Europeans." Ultimately, Moses argues the two themes come together such that Psalm 68:31 helps "the Black or African person to view his past enslavement in terms of the broader history of civilization. It serves to remind him that this present scientific technological civilization, dominated by Western Europe for a scant four hundred years, will go under certainly—like all the empires of the past." The Ethiopian prophecy serves to remind the interpreter, that is, that their condition will be redressed and that whites will be revenged. Moses, "The Poetics of Ethiopianism," 411-426.

²⁸² For a quick yet helpful general introduction to the distinction between these two terms, see Sheila Shulman, "Liberation and Redemption: Their Meaning Today," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 28.2 (1995), 2-11.

favorite refrain, “But we have a great work to do. Never; no, never will the chains of slavery and ignorance burst till we become united as one and cultivate among ourselves the pure principles of piety, morality, and virtue” (*MS* 25). Such comments proliferate in her addresses, demonstrating her commitment to the Psalm 68:31-inflected idea that concentrated action for self-improvement is the motor of social change: “Finally, my brethren, let us follow after godliness, and the things which make for peace. Cultivate your own mind and morals; real merit will elevate you. Pure religion will burst your fetters” (*MS* 80). The template of Stewart’s thought is thus easily encapsulated—although Africans find themselves in a “wretched condition; but let us make a mighty effort, and arise; and if no one will promote or respect us, let us promote and respect ourselves” (*MS* 31). Like Walker, Stewart invokes the Ethiopian prophecy’s redemption-historical narrative as she insists that Africans’ present misery has been caused by human action and, thus, that human action is the only appropriate antidote.

3.1. HISTORY AS CYCLE OF RISE AND FALL

The seeming simplicity of Stewart’s ethical and political program is belied, however, by the rather sophisticated understanding of history that underwrites it. She does not adopt a simple moral suasionist approach to social change, which might suggest that Black peoples can earn their freedom by proving their moral excellence to slaveowners and thereby earning their respect. Instead—and notwithstanding the fact Stewart’s perspective is remarkably close to that of suasionists—she appears to regard history as a cyclical phenomenon in which “nations, kings, and emperors” rise and fall in accord with their actions (*MS* 68). On her account, human behavior drives the wheel of history, which is not so much a linear march of progress as an ever-revolving cycle of decline and renewal.²⁸³ Just because a people were once great does not mean they will always be; just because a people are presently laid low does not mean they are fated to remain. “Individuals have been distinguished according to

²⁸³ Wilson J. Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African-American Life and Letters* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 278.

their genius and talents ever since the first formation of man, and will continue to be while the world stands,” she says, criticizing those of her fellows whom she regards as asleep to their agential capacities to realize change. “The different grades rise to honor and respectability as their merits may deserve” (MS 66). For her, the criterion that explains a people’s condition is the quality of their conduct.²⁸⁴ This is why she desires to see her kin pursue virtue and labor for self-improvement. The emphasis is on a people’s ability to change its fate by changing its behavior.

Stewart’s musings on the 1831 First Annual Convention of the People of Color in Philadelphia illustrate the role Psalm 68:31 played in her understanding of the cycles of history. Entitled “Cause for Encouragement,” she here links the rise of the popular Black abolitionist movement to the fulfillment of the Ethiopian prophecy. Investing the Negro Convention Movement with a prefigurative meaning as important for the practices it intends to elicit as for its power of prediction, she writes:

The day-star from on high is beginning to dawn upon us, and Ethiopia will soon stretch forth her hands unto God. These Anti-slavery societies, in my opinion, will soon cause many grateful tears to flow, and many desponding hearts to bound and leap for joy.

And is it the applause of men that has prompted these benevolent ones to take their lives in their hands, as it were, to plead our cause before the great and powerful? Ah, no! It is that holy religion (which is held in derision and contempt by many) whose precepts will raise and elevate us above our present condition, and cause our aspirations to ascend up in unison with theirs, and become the final means of bursting the bands of oppression.

Who have been the greatest and most powerful men since the foundations of the earth were laid? Those who have been the most eminent for their piety and virtue. ... What has caused the downfall of nations, kings, and empires? Sin, that abominable thing which God hates. Why has the Almighty commissioned the destroying angels to execute the fierceness of his anger upon the inhabitants of the earth? Because they have made light of the name of the Lord, and forgotten the rock of their salvation. ... It is high time for us to promote ourselves by some meritorious acts. And would to God that the advocates of freedom might perceive a trait in each one of us, that would encourage their hearts and strengthen their hands.²⁸⁵

Stewart explains the rise of the Negro Convention Movement by recourse to religion and morality; it is not the suasionist pursuit of approbation and respect motivating these abolitionists but holy religion.

²⁸⁴ Carla Peterson, *“Doers of the Word:” African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 66-67.

²⁸⁵ Maria W. Stewart, “Cause for Encouragement,” *The Liberator*, July 14, 1832.

(Recall that her own conversion experience filled her with a concern for “African rights and liberty.”) This in itself proves important for her, as she sees the limits of the politics of respectability—it appeals to the beneficence of those in power but has no ability to enact social change apart from inducing this beneficence (*MS* 57). Even more important, however, is the way these abolitionists’ pursuit of holy religion draws attention toward what she considers the causes of African misery in the first place. Her rhetorical move therefore simultaneously affirms the Negro Convention Movement as the stirrings of destiny while also upholding a distinct interpretation of African history and entanglements with slavery.

Stewart purports to explain Africans’ present miserable condition through appeal to apostasy. In effect, she makes a point echoing Walker’s own explanation—that Africans have “disobeyed their Maker” and brought punishment upon themselves (*WA* 23). Whereas she elsewhere speaks in generalities when explaining Africa’s downfall, Stewart here both assumes a transhistorical unity of African peoples and levels a specific accusation. In this case, she uses God’s punitive action in history to justify her claim that Africans find themselves enslaved because of their own behavior. Or, more accurately, because of the behavior of their ancestors, for which they are now being held to account. Indeed, “as she makes clear throughout her writing career,” observes Cedrick May, “the origin of suffering is sin—specifically, the collective sinfulness of African Americans, who she argues have abandoned God and consequently will continue to suffer from oppression and other ills.”²⁸⁶

Through her analysis of Africans’ plight, Stewart thus bespeaks her understanding of the cycles of history: those peoples who evidence a high quality of character tend toward greatness and power; those who are marked by vice toward servility and abjection. If Africans are to return to their once powerful status, to make themselves once again “the resort of sages and legislators,” they will have to renew their commitments piety and virtue (*MS* 68). This is why she can equate the rise of the Negro Convention Movement and Black antislavery societies with the “day-star from on high [that] is

²⁸⁶ May, *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic*, 117.

beginning to dawn upon us.” On her account, they indicate the beginning of Africans’ rightful return to religion and ethics, and so the beginning of redemption.

3.2. THEODICY, CONJURE, AND ETHICAL CONDUCT

While one reading of Stewart suggests her historical consciousness owes much to the prophetic form of theodicy, which constructs an “ethically rational” cosmos by infusing action and suffering with God-given meaning, here I consider how her historical perspective may also be informed by conjure.²⁸⁷ This is not to deny Stewart’s appropriation of theodicy, as her moral vocabulary is clearly informed by early nineteenth-century African American uses of prophetic speech.²⁸⁸ Rather, I mean to consider how her uses of theodicy may themselves reflect and approximate conjurational practice. My emphasis here is more upon the effects of Stewart’s language and the contexts of its expression—with particular focus upon how her utterances distinguish themselves from other, related modes of prophecy and what they accomplish thereby—than on her use of theodicy as a canonical or fixed genre of speech. That is, I am more keen to see the ways her theodicy works than to argue about whether it is “truly” theodicy.

As a mode of prophetic speech taken from the Bible, political theorist George Shulman claims theodicy should be understood as a performance that means to elicit self-reflection and action among those to whom it is addressed. In particular, theodicy aims to provoke a people to repent, or turn, from their present conduct and forms of life toward alternative behaviors. It does this, first, by presupposing a special relationship between the people to whom it is addressed and God, which is called a covenant, marking them off as a chosen people. Then, it interprets the events of this people’s history (especially if it is a history of misfortune) as God’s just punishment for departing from the terms of the covenant. “Linking agency, punishment, and forgiveness,” Shulman says, theodicians “make the unprecedented

²⁸⁷ Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 305.

²⁸⁸ Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, 37-46.

and problematic invention of a collective subject responsible for its acts because it can act otherwise.” Indeed, by this surprisingly rational if somewhat pitiless logic, theodicy renders intelligible a people’s otherwise catastrophic suffering and supplies a framework for enacting change. As Shulman notes, “If we interpret events as God’s just judgment, we will amend our ways to seek pardon.”²⁸⁹

As the above paragraphs indicate, Stewart draws on theodicy in “Cause for Encouragement,” as well as elsewhere in her *Meditations* when she seeks to account for Africa’s downfall. Africans do not suffer random or contingent violence from slaveholders, but violence authorized by God for their sin. “O ye sons of Africa,” she asks in her 1834 “Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall,” “How can you, when you reflect from what you have fallen, refrain from crying mightily unto God, to turn away from the fierceness of his anger, and remember our transgressions against us no more forever?” (*MS* 68-9). Interpreting historical events as God’s punishment and seeking to create amends, Stewart insists that if Africans would change their conduct, then their condition would be redressed. She works to refashion their ethical choices in light of her biblical rereading of their historical experiences.

Yet Stewart’s theodicy is different. It does not quite follow the logic of its biblical precedents. It is not Africans, after all, who covenanted themselves with God; they are not God’s chosen people. Although many African Americans did indeed figure themselves typologically as the people of Israel, Stewart does not always follow her contemporaries in reinterpreting Africans as biblical Hebrews. Egypt—remember—is “Africa.” It is therefore not to Africans whom God speaks through the prophet Amos, for example, when he says, “Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, you only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you” (Amos 2:4, NRSV). Even if Stewart were to accept vindicationist claims about the Bible and Christian religion as derived from African precedents—a very likely possibility given her associations—the Israelites would still

²⁸⁹ Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 6.

maintain a privileged covenantal relationship with God not shared by others (*WA* 37). What, then, is the basis for God's judgment upon Africans? Why would God hold them and other abstract "nations, kings, and empires" of whom she writes accountable for disobeying a covenant which was not theirs?

One possible answer may be found in another model of historical thinking popular in Stewart's time, which historian Stow Persons calls "the theory of organic cycles." On this model, which became popular in New England in part as a rejection of the perceived enthusiastic excesses of the First Great Awakening, history moves in an endless cycle according to the dictates of universal moral laws. Indeed, these laws establish a correlation between virtue and happiness, on the one hand, and vice and misery, on the other. As Persons writes, "Societies and nations rise and fall in endless sequence according as they observe or disregard those universal moral laws ordained of God and graven upon men's consciences for their governance and happiness."²⁹⁰ On this perspective, it is thus the universal and impartial laws of morality that constitute the basis of God's judgment rather than covenant obligations.

I would be inclined to attribute this view to Stewart were it not for one key distinction. Namely, that the theory of organic cycles emerged precisely as a rejection of all those views of history that held there was a coming millennial day of redemption, or that it was possible to interpret history as a special revelation of God's will. We see both tendencies in Stewart to varying degree: the first in her citations of the Ethiopian prophecy and the second in her use of theodicy. Whereas the proponents of this view acknowledged biblical authority but repudiated all attempts to read historical events as having special meaning ordained by God—repudiated, that is, all attempts to understand history as susceptible of supernatural influence—Stewart advances a historical perspective both cyclical in nature and open to the possibility of providence. Her vision for Africans' redemption is that they might turn the wheels of history through a reformation of their conduct.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Stow Persons, "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 6.2 (1954), 152.

²⁹¹ Persons, "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth-Century America," 147-163.

3.3. BAKONGO RESONANCES IN STEWART'S BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

In *Conjuring Culture*, Theophus Smith proposes that BaKongo values of harmony, balance, and perfection have exerted a significant impact upon African American conceptions of cosmos and history. Speculating about continuities between traditional BaKongo religion and African American culture, he appeals to the influence of the BaKongo practice of making cosmograms, on the one hand, and system of *minkisi*, or sacred medicines, on the other.²⁹² In their constructions of the former, he says, BaKongo ritual experts cast idealized visions of the universe as marked by social harmony and equilibrium—as marked, that is, by “the ancestors’ vision of the cosmos in some idealized form of balance, perfection, and vitality.”²⁹³ They then pursued this harmony by making and drawing upon *minkisi* of various kinds, which they might employ for purposes of healing or harming, depending upon each expert’s distinctive role in BaKongo society. While Smith follows most scholars of Black religion in claiming these practices were not imported wholesale to the Americas, he nevertheless advances the claim that “a covert transmission of African spiritual principles or personalities lies hidden under the conventional Euro-Christian forms found in black religious traditions.”²⁹⁴ That is, despite the impact of the Middle Passage, Smith nonetheless claims these BaKongo principles and practices inform African American appropriations of Christian, democratic, and republican traditions, including philosophies of history.

Most important for my purposes is Smith’s assertion that the Bible replaced both cosmograms and ritual experts as African Americans’ primary source for both envisioning and achieving idealized states of harmony. “Deprived of their indigenous means for ‘curing,’ revising, or revisioning culture,” he says, “the Bible has functioned as an alternative source of formulas and materials (metaphorical

²⁹² See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984).

²⁹³ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 106.

²⁹⁴ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 39.

and metonymic) for African American people.”²⁹⁵ As a consequence of this adoption and subsequent transformation, “the biblical world is reconfigured as a *pharmacopeic cosmos*. More lucid and concise is the term ‘pharmacosm,’ which designates a world capable of hosting myriad performances of healing and harming, in accordance with an ideal world as envisioned by ancestral sources.”²⁹⁶ Indeed, for him, most African American conceptions of the world and of history that draw from the Bible are thus marked by a pharmacopeic, or healing-harming, duality, into which humans can inject themselves through appropriate ritual behavior. Following BaKongo influence, the end goal of this behavior, is to (re)establish social harmony as it is reinterpreted through biblical paradigms. Although speculative, I understand Stewart’s theory of the cycles of history in this light, as it makes sense to me that such a world would follow predictable patterns of weal and woe dictated by the qualities of human conduct, while also holding space for supernatural intervention, or providence, conjured through ritual action.

Indeed, joining this pharmacological duality to the redemptive narrative signified by Psalm 68:31, Stewart strives to awaken her audience to their potentiality to enact change. Like Walker, she aims to help them see that God helps those who help themselves. Pointing up a vindicationist narrative of African decline and redemption, relying upon history’s pharmacological structure, and demanding Africans practice self-help, she can thus be said to employ African resources to cast her Ethiopianist vision. Her exhortatory and theoretical work therefore demand a subject to whose actions can be attributed causality in explaining Africans’ present misery, for such a subject can also be the cause of the misery’s end. Still, even if their misery will eventually come to an end, by what means does Stewart imagine this will be achieved, and by whom will these means be exercised?

4. THE PROBLEM OF DRUDGERY

According to Stewart, the chief problem facing Africans is what she calls the problem of drudgery. “The Americans have practiced nothing but head-work these 200 years,” she says, “and we

²⁹⁵ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 106.

²⁹⁶ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 44.

have done their drudgery. And is it not time for us to imitate their examples and practice head-work too, and keep what we have got, and get what we can? We need never to think that anybody is going to feel interested for us, if we do not feel interested for ourselves” (*MS* 32). Because with few exceptions Africans in the Americas have been nothing but “hewers of wood and drawers of water” for their white counterparts, they have been denied the time to develop the abilities she maintains will enable them to achieve their redemption. Partly, this is a cruel fact of slavery. Even when they have been free, however, she suggests it is well-nigh impossible for Africans to rise above their chief stations as laborers and domestics. Here too, then, in the state of so-called freedom, the demands of drudgery are such that Africans are on the whole prevented from developing what Walker calls “the learning and talents among ourselves, and perhaps more ... to govern ourselves” (*WA* 17). Forced to bury their talents in servile labor, and then often driven to release their frustrations through drink and dance, Stewart maintains Africans have been denied the opportunities to distinguish themselves through moral, religious, and political pursuits (*MS* 69). They have been unable to cultivate an interest in themselves because they have had to perform Americans’ labor.

4.1. WOMEN’S WORK

Here, Stewart argues Black women find themselves in a particularly difficult situation. They are the servants of white Americans and Black men alike. Whether as servants, as daughters, or as wives, then, they find themselves restricted to the home. “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?” she asks, “How long shall a mean set of men flatter us with their smiles, and enrich themselves with our hard earnings; their wives’ fingers sparking with rings, and they themselves laughing at our folly?” (*MS* 32). Indeed, she observes of Black woman that, “As servants, we are respected; but let us presume to aspire any higher, our employer regards us no longer. And were it not that the King eternal has declared that Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God, I should indeed despair” (*MS* 57). Drawing on the

tonic of the Ethiopian prophecy to address the toxic conditions of Black women's lives, Stewart gives voice to a sense of hope and possibility.

For her, this prophetic hope and possibility depend upon Black women's willingness to work together to promote themselves. Should they gather to pursue "union, knowledge, and love," should they "begin to promote and patronize each other," then "that day the Lord will raise us up, and enough to aid and befriend us, and we shall begin to flourish" (*MS 32*). Like many advocates of racial uplift in the nineteenth century, Stewart stresses moral reform as both an individual aspiration and a strategy for transforming the structural conditions of African life. Like many advocates of the Cult of True Womanhood, too, she uses the sentimental values that purport to explain women's moral influence to sanction their entry into the broader political arena from which they are often excluded. If Black women will gather and exert themselves as a collective political subject, both responsible for their own moral transformation and thereby also the transformations of their kin, colleagues, and circumstances, then Ethiopia will soon stretch forth her hands, for God "will surely deliver you with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm" (*MS 35*).

Many interpreters have observed that Stewart's remarks about Black women's stations make her an early progenitor of Black women's liberatory discourses.²⁹⁷ For example, as "one of the first U.S. Black feminists to champion the utility of Black women's relationships with one another in providing a community for Black women's activism and self-determination," writes Patricia Hill Collins, "Maria Stewart has ... laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society."²⁹⁸ Christel Temple concurs, observing that she is "the exemplar and prototype for modeling the cosmology of Afrocentric womanism," which she defines as an

²⁹⁷ R. Dianne Bartlow, "'No Throw-Away Woman': Maria Stewart as a Forerunner of Black Feminist Thought," *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conway (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2007), 78.

²⁹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2-3.

Afrocentric discourse aimed at achieving freedom, prosperity, and self-determination for Black women.²⁹⁹ What is important for my purposes in this chapter is less that she begins to establish a lexicon distinctive for its commitment to Black women's emancipation, although this is certainly true, and more that she complicates the gendered character of Walker's redemptive idiom. That is, Stewart demonstrates that an Ethiopianist vernacular can address Black women's experiences of domination, and, in fact, she uses this idiom to advance a redemptive project of her own, which centers Black women, their distinctive sufferings, and their role in achieving redemption. Unlike Walker, Stewart therefore puts Ethiopianism to work specifically for women, even as she speaks, writes, and thinks in service to the race.

For Stewart, therefore, African redemption begins with women's unique responsibilities. As those responsible for inculcating virtues and dispositions, the work of women and mothers precedes all others. Stewart's redemptive project can thus be thought of as a form of what Eileen Boris calls "social housekeeping," or an "interpretation of political life emphasized the role of women as saviors of the race, justifying their activity because they were mothers."³⁰⁰ This is evident, for example, in perhaps the most famous challenge she extends to African women:

O ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O ye daughters of Africa! What have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? What examples have yet set before the rising generation? What foundation have ye laid for generations yet unborn? Where are our union and love? (*MS* 25).

Confronting them with their responsibilities, Stewart tasks African women with establishing pan-African unity and the formation of a collective African political subjectivity, the force of which will exhibited by future generations. Where Walker casts Africans' redemptive struggle as a masculinist

²⁹⁹ Temple, "Afrocentric Womanism," 24.

³⁰⁰ Eileen Boris, "The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the 'Political,'" *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michelle (New York: Routledge, 1993), 213-14.

affair, enjoining his fellows to “become men” and seize their redemption violently, Stewart frames it in the language of domesticity.³⁰¹ The daughters of Africa can burst the chains of bondage by uniting together and promoting “the pure principles of piety, morality, and virtue” (MS 25). Of course, these women cannot do it on their own. Black men and friendly whites must assist them in their efforts. Yet, for Stewart, the African struggle commences with women, for they are the true “guardians of virtue and ... disseminators of useful knowledge.”³⁰²

Accordingly, Stewart explicitly identifies African women with Psalm 68:31’s figure of Ethiopia. Like Walker before her, Stewart situates Africans within a redemptive narrative as she emplots them in the story implied by the Ethiopian prophecy. Unlike Walker, however, Stewart points up African women’s central role within this story. She rejects the idea, implicit in Walker’s references to women as wretched and traitorous, that “womanly” habits and dispositions are not to be trusted and therefore disavowed.³⁰³ In fact, she suggests precisely the opposite. Those habits and attitudes usually coded as womanlike are that upon which redemption depends. She says:

God has said that Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto him. True, but God uses means to bring about his purpose; and unless the rising generation manifest a different temper and disposition toward each other from what we have manifested, the generation following will never be an enlightened people. We this day are considered as one of the most degraded races upon the face of the earth. It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded reproaching the whites, for that will never elevate us. ...

And why is it, my friends, that we are despised above all the nations upon the earth? Is it merely because our skins are tinged with a sable hue? No, nor will I ever believe that it is. What then is it? O, it is because we and our fathers have dealt treacherously one with another, and because many of us now possess that envious and malicious disposition that we had rather die than see each other rise an inch above a beggar. No gentle methods are used to promote love and friendship among us, but much is done to destroy it. ...

O, woman, woman, upon you I call; for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be anything more than we have been or not. O, woman, woman, your example is

³⁰¹ Christina Henderson has made the important argument that domesticity does not preclude armed resistance for Stewart. In many cases, according to Henderson, Stewart seems to indicate that proper domestic behavior will lead to revolution. While I think Henderson overstates her case, the broader point stands: Stewart was a proponent of armed resistance. Christina Henderson, “Sympathetic Violence: Maria Stewart’s Antebellum Vision of African American Resistance,” *MELUS* 38.4 (2013), 52-75.

³⁰² Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 171.

³⁰³ Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 38-9.

powerful, your influence great; it extends over your husbands and over your children, and throughout the circle of your acquaintance. ... And, O my God, I beseech thee to grant that the nations of the earth may hiss at us no longer. O, suffer them not to laugh us to scorn forever (*MS* 63-4).

If Black people are despised and oppressed, she says, lightly articulating her version of theodicy, it is not on account of biological race. It is, by contrast, on account of Africans' own antics—the treachery and greed they have demonstrated toward one another. In view of their fathers' and their own perfidy, she maintains that, as Cedrick May says, “African Americans have abandoned the moral principles of virtue exercised through the pursuit of knowledge and unifying practices of Christian struggle for justice ... Stewart saw African Americans as derelict in their pursuit of knowledge and education as well as ... the pursuit of civil rights.”³⁰⁴ If they are going to return to their former status as sages and legislators of other nations, therefore, it must be through religious and moral improvement, through the development of fellow-feeling and love, and the pursuit of justice, all which begin in the home, the special province of women. If Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God, it will be because African women hold up her arms.

It is possible to translate this argument into now familiar conjurational terms. Because Stewart understands Africa's decline to have been precipitated by the toxin of apostasy, and because she sees Africans' present condition as the result of treachery, vice, and disunity, she suggests that returning to religion and the virtuous dispositions derived therefrom will serve as suitable tonics. Indeed, because Stewart adapts a homeopathic approach to social ailments, treating like with like, she suggests that “the pursuit of education as a moral obligation will lead to the end of God's punishment.”³⁰⁵

Moreover, Stewart seems to regard women as the sort of ritual specialists whose performances of instruction will ultimately make these pursuits viable. “O, woman, woman, would thou only strive to excel in merit and virtue; would thou only store thy mind with useful knowledge. Great would be

³⁰⁴ May, *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic*, 122.

³⁰⁵ May, *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic*, 123.

thine influence,” she declares, “You are not too far advanced to instil these principles into the minds of your tender infants ... Discharge your duty faithful in every point of view; leave the event with God” (*MS* 26). According to Stewart, Black women only have to discharge their duties faithfully, only have to perform their prescribed roles inculcating religion and morality in their children, for God to make them efficacious. For by discharging their duties, these women conjure God to act. While it would be imprecise to insist Stewart’s view is strictly “magical,” this translation can allow us to see the contours of Stewart’s thought from a different standpoint: the idea that ethically principled human action is efficacious in terms of inducing God to act (*MS* 31).

5. BURSTING THE CHAINS OF SLAVERY AND IGNORANCE

What, then, are these principles? What does Stewart mean when she speaks of religion, merit, and virtue? Partly, there is continuity with Walker: Stewart conceives of religion in progressive, historical terms. “Religion is the most glorious theme that mortals can converse upon,” she writes. “The older it grows the more new beauties it displays ... It is that fountain that has no end, and those that drink thereof shall never thirst; for it is, indeed, a well of water springing up in the soul unto everlasting life” (*MS* 80). On the other hand, she does specify that “the religion of Jesus alone ... will constitute your happiness here and support you in a dying hour” (*MS* 27). She claims a uniqueness for Christianity, such that its wisdom is the only way Africans can achieve their happiness.

5.1. RELIGION, THE SURE FOUNDATION

For Stewart, the pursuit of religion is therefore the pursuit of an accumulated and accumulating historical wisdom. Though she does not say expressly, we may infer because of her familiarity with Walker and his associations Stewart agrees with the vindicationist assertion that Africans first discovered and explicated religion’s universal truths. Chief amongst these truths is the idea that religion is a matter of conduct. Everywhere she decries the lack of religion among her brethren it is related to their behavior. She accuses her brethren of hypocrisy, of cruelty, and of disordered

dispositions toward one another, for example, as evidence of religion's absence. Such ailments would not be so prevalent amongst themselves, she postulates, if they would but observe true religion. Indeed, as Stefan Wheelock observes, Stewart "promotes black courage and democratic change through a subtle shift in the language of religion itself from its stress on doctrine to the emphasis on discipline."³⁰⁶ She views religion as the rightful basis of moral and intellectual life. Like Walker before her, therefore, Stewart regards conduct as the crux of religion.

Yet Stewart issues a cautionary note. "But it is no use for us to boast that we sprung from this learned and enlightened nation," she warns, "for this day a thick mist of moral gloom hangs over millions of our race. Our condition as a people has been low for hundreds of years, and it will continue to be so, unless, by true piety and virtue, we strive to regain that which we have lost" (*MS* 68). By this line of argument, through which she again rehearses the narrative of African decline that was wrought by their fathers, a return to Africa's former glories will be of no use unless Africans become the kind of characters whom history deigns to reward with greatness. If they were to somehow find themselves once again atop the wheel of history but to act as cruelly as their white American counterparts, then their primacy would be short-lived—just as she thinks America's will be (*MS* 34).

Partly, therefore, religion's wisdom is perennially contemporary. "Religion is pure; it is ever new; it is beautiful; it is all that is worth living for" (*MS* 27). It does not matter whether religion's truths are derived from ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, or from biblical teaching, or from divine dispensation. Because religion is the well of everlasting life, at least ethically and politically speaking, Stewart insists it is the "sure foundation upon which we must build" (*MS* 24). Doctrinal particulars matter less than whether one's religion enables them to develop the sort of virtues and political dispositions that orient one towards freedom. If a return to religion is foundational for her project, it

³⁰⁶ Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 152.

is because religion not only forms the basis for the kinds of distinguished action that will lead to redemption, but also because it constitutes a return to the former practices and glories of Africa.

Like Walker, Stewart's public works use prophetic forms derived from the Bible to awaken her audiences. Like Walker, too, she inflects them with African-centered and pan-African sensibilities. Unlike Walker, however, her movement toward redemption also rejects the masculinist politics implicit in the *Appeal*, and does so in order to flag how women's work, as she imagines it, is the precondition for an Ethiopianist redemptive project. Her prophetic idiom thus means to inspire her audiences to recognize the full power of their agency when they are gathered together without regard for gendered proscription. Then, right action can induce positive social and historical change, wrong action can induce suffering. The full meaning of the future, then, depends upon the choices Africans make for themselves. Will it be weal? Or woe? Stewart's aim is to enable her audience to recognize their collective power to determine their fate.

This is precisely the logic at work in Stewart's citations of the Ethiopian prophecy. When she speaks of Ethiopia stretching forth her hands to God, it is in the context of imploring her brethren to lay claim to their abilities to govern themselves. Presumably, this extends to the intervention Stewart herself represents—a public political and ethical intervention that aims to awaken her community to the gendered complexities of racial domination in the nineteenth century. Stewart intends to provide reasons, then, for why Africans should regard their pursuits of religion and virtue as directly relevant to their situation. When her speeches, essays, and exhortations are taken together, Stewart confronts her communities with their collective tragedy and the possibility of their renewal. Because the universe possesses a pharmacological structure, and because history's cycles operate according to the quality of people's actions, Africans, if they would but awaken to the capacities within themselves, can channel the broader forces of existence to work for their merit. The meaning of their religion thus looks

radically different from that of their white Christian counterparts, in the sense that it appears to be a matter of conduct rather than belief.

5.2. VIRTUE AND ELEVATION

Stewart's redemptive vision ultimately turns on women's abilities to inculcate appropriate dispositions in the people with whom they share intimate relations. She asks that they tease out the capacities of their brethren and their beloved alike and pushes them to piety. For in so doing, she believes the bonds of slavery and ignorance will be burst – as virtuous human action naturally drives the wheel of history. Taking the Ethiopian prophecy as her guide, she commits herself to the idea that Africans will soon achieve their desired freedom. And she gives a thorough, if not systematic, account of how they may do so in her collected public works, which were published in 1835 as her *Productions* and again, more than forty years later at the time of her death in 1879, as her *Meditations*.

If Ethiopianism is, as I have argued, both a tradition formed by the joining of African and Christian religious concerns and a social practice concerned with African redemption, then Stewart's *Meditations* not only show us how conjure and Christianity may come together, but also shows how traditionally masculinist discourses of African redemption can take women's problems into account. She demonstrates, in other words, that Walker's masculinism is not necessarily definitive of Ethiopianist discourse writ large. By insisting Black women play a central role in redemptive history, Stewart points up perhaps the most significant way Walker's political vision was shortsighted. She is, therefore, one of Walker's most incisive critics—not to mention his earliest. Under pressure from her experiences, and because of her grief-stricken conversion, Stewart expands Ethiopianist through a refusal of Walker's masculinism.

Despite their differences, however, they are united in their call to their compatriots to awaken. Fearful that they slumber unto death, or acquiesce themselves to their miserable condition because of the psychical exhaustion wrought by slavery and drudgery, Walker and Stewart make their voices heard

in the public sphere. Imagining Africans as ancient Ethiopians, figuring them collectively as Ethiopian-Africans, they labor to convince them of the potentiality of redemption. If nothing else, awakening means for Walker and Stewart being aware of one's capacities to enact material change in one's circumstances. They thus forge an idiom that focuses on redemptive struggle on multiple levels—personal, political, and historical.

6. STEWART (AND WALKER) ON REPATRIATION

I have begun redescribing Ethiopianism with Stewart and Walker because they each show how Ethiopianism involves an African-centered reinterpretation of the Bible, on the one hand, as well as of certain contemporary Anglo-American religious and political practices, on the other. Each shows, in other words, how certain early nineteenth-century African thinkers translated ancestral pieties into a biblical vernacular. By employing the category of conjure, I have argued that Walker's *Appeal* summons spirits of inquiry and investigation in ways resonant with classical African practices and that Stewart's biblical citations appear to follow a pharmacological principle. For her, conditions of injustice created by the Bible can be treated by the Bible. So, too, does a pharmacological principle influence her view of history: the wheel of history revolves according to principles of balance and harmony as they are enacted by human individuals and communities. One can alter this balance through right or wrong moral conduct. As each cites Psalm 68:31 in service to African redemption, they also depend upon certain linguistic and cultural norms associated with the practice of conjure.

By way of concluding this chapter and introducing the next one, I now call attention to the ways the ancestral practice of repatriation can be said to motivate their refusals of white projects of African colonization. Unlike most subsequent Ethiopianist figures, both Walker and Stewart keep open the possibility that African redemption might take place on American soil. For different reasons, each argues that Africans belong in the U.S. as much as in their ancestral homelands. Both therefore

refuse to the country that is the current source of African misery: “They would drive us to a strange land,” Stewart avers, “But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through” (*MS* 73).

6.1. THE COLONIZING TRICK

While their Ethiopianist successors would come to disagree vigorously with them, Walker and Stewart were neither the first nor the last Africans in the U.S. to repudiate returning to Africa via the American Colonization Society. In Article Four of Walker’s *Appeal*, for example, he cites approvingly African Methodist Episcopal clergyman Richard Allen’s argument against it. Printed in the November 2, 1827 issue of *Freedom’s Journal*, Allen’s argument articulates what is at issue for Walker and Stewart. “Respecting this trick,” Allen writes:

I have for several years been trying to reconcile my mind to the Colonizing of Africans in Liberia, but there have always been, and there still remain great and insurmountable objections against the scheme. ... Can we not discern the project of sending the free people of colour away from their country? Is it not for the interest of the slave-holders to select the free people of colour out of the different states, and send them to Liberia? Will it not make their slaves uneasy to see free men of colour enjoying liberty? ... We were *stolen* from our mother country, and brought *here*. We have *tilled* the ground and made fortunes for thousands, and still they are not weary of our services. *But they who stay to till the ground must be slaves*. Is there not land enough in America, or ‘corn enough in Egypt?’ Why should they send us into a far country to die? See the thousands of foreigners emigrating to America every year: and if there be ground sufficient for them to cultivate, and bread for them to eat, why would they wish to send the *first tillers* of the land away? Africans have made fortunes for thousands, who are yet unwilling to part with their services; but the free must be sent away, and those who remain, must be *slaves*. I have no doubt that there are many good men who do not see as I do, and who are for sending us to Liberia; but they have not duly considered the subject—they are not men of colour.—This land which we have watered with our *tears* and *our blood*, is now our *mother country* (*WA* 59-60).

Allen’s chief objection against the colonization movement is bad faith. Not only have many Americans stolen Africans from their homes, required them to labor without profit, and—now that some among the Africans are free—sought to force them back from whence they came, these Americans have done so while pretending to do it all for Africans’ good. On his account, if these Americans were truly the philanthropists they claim to be, then they would give Africans recompense for their labors and allow them to remain as citizens and freedmen. As he says, “This land which we have watered with our *tears* and *our blood*, is now our *mother country*” (*WA* 60).

In this citation of Allen and his subsequent reflections upon it, Walker raises the questions of national belonging and of citizenship. While Walker admits with Allen that Africans were stolen from their natal lands, he also asserts with Allen that the American continent has become their new mother. Africans have been born anew by toil and by blood. Indeed, Walker argues that Africans belong more to the U.S. than white Americans do: “America is more our country, than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our *blood and tears* ... and will they drive us from our property and homes, which we have earned with our *blood*?” (*WA* 67). What he does, then, is fashion a sense of moral identity that is linked to both African and American continents; this identity is other than white American identity but still somehow more authentically American. W.E.B. Du Bois once called a version of this idea “double consciousness,” and framed it as a constant sense of “twoness,—an American, a Negro.”³⁰⁷ Finding himself and his brethren caught between Africa and America, yet bound to the Africans in America by blood and tears, Walker suggests Africans should remain loyal to one another where they are. “Will any of us leave our homes and go to Africa?” he asks, “I hope not” (*WA* 67). As I have shown in the previous chapter, Walker maintains their most pressing task is not to return “home,” but to go to work and free their still enslaved brethren.

6.2. RECONSTITUTING BABYLON

One consequence of Walker’s refusal is that all those Africans who decline colonization now stage a contest over the meaning of America. By refusing to go to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nova Scotia in the name of a deeper belonging to the Africans in the U.S., they open space for reimagining the meaning of America itself. Stewart bespeaks her own version of this challenge in her 1832 “Address, Delivered at the African Masonic Hall.” Like Walker, Stewart disputes white Americans’ claims to ownership of the nation in view of their moral bankruptcy. Like him, too, she roots her

³⁰⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 4.

claims to American belonging in a concern for the Africans presently on American soil. Unlike him, however, she fills her remarks with an eschatological urgency. Indeed, she declares:

It appears to me that America has become like the great City of Babylon, for she has boasted in her heart: "I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow!" She is, indeed, a seller of slaves and the souls of men; she has made the Africans drunk with the wine of her fornication; she has put them completely beneath her feet, and she means to keep them there; her right hand supports the reins of government and her left hand the wheel of power, and she is determined not to let go her grasp. But many powerful sons and daughters of Africa will shortly arise, who will put down vice and immorality among us, and declare by Him that sitteth upon the throne that they will have their rights; and if refused, I am afraid they will spread horror and devastation around. I believe that the oppression of injured Africa has come up before the Majesty of Heaven; and when our cries shall have reached the ears of the Most High, it will be a tremendous day for the people of this land; for strong is the arm of the Lord God Almighty. Life has almost lost its charms for me; death has lost its sting, and the grave its terrors; and at times I have a strong desire to depart and dwell with Christ, which is far better. Let me entreat my white brethren to awake and save our sons from dissipation and our daughters from ruin. Lend the hand of assistance to feeble merit; plead the cause of virtue among our sable race; so shall our curses upon you be turned into blessings; and though you should endeavor to drive us from these shores, still we will cling to you the more firmly; nor will we attempt to rise above you; we will presume to be called your equals only.

The unfriendly whites first drove the native American from his much loved home. Then they stole our fathers from their peaceful and quiet dwellings, and brought them hither, and made bond-men and bond-women of them and their little ones. They have obliged our brethren to labor; kept them in utter ignorance; nourished them in vice, and raised them in degradation; and now that we have enriched their soil, and filled their coffers, they say that we are not capable of becoming like white men, and that we never can rise to respectability in this country. They would drive us to a strange land. But before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through. African rights and liberty is a subject that ought to fire the breast of every free man of color in these United States, and excite in his bosom a lively, deep, decided, and heartfelt interest (*MS* 72-3).

Calling attention to the Indigenous genocide and the trade in African slaves that established the U.S., Stewart nevertheless keeps open the possibility that Africans' seizure of rights and liberty can reconstitute American social relations. They will not presume to rise higher than their white counterparts but cling to equality, and in so doing performatively enact a substantive formation of the ideal. "The 'clinging' she invokes is neither a servile nor a masterful one," writes literary critic David Kazanjian, "rather it is a presumption of and a demand for an incalculable equality. Such recognition is not mere formal equality sustained by codified identities, but rather a substantial, living embodied equality to be called."³⁰⁸ Against visions of America as incurably unequal, or as possibly marked by an inversion of power relations that would simply place Black on top of white in an arbitrary position of

³⁰⁸ Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*, 136.

power, Stewart asserts the redefinitional power of the “sons and daughters of Africa.” If they arise and seize their rights and liberty, then they may finally establish an equality worthy of the name.

As she keeps open the possibility that the meaning of America may be reconstituted, however, Stewart also gives expression to a deeper sense of belonging. Indeed, it appears one reason Stewart can remain in the U.S. and risk struggling over its meaning is because of her convictions about the afterlife: “Life has almost lost its charms for me; death has lost its sting, and the grave its terrors; and at times I have a strong desire to depart and dwell with Christ, which is far better” (*MS* 73). In this, she echoes Walker, who repeatedly asserts in the *Appeal* his willingness to die for his brethren. Among other assertions, Walker says: “Oh Heaven! I am full!!!! I can hardly move my pen!!!! and as I expect some will try to put me to death, to strike terror into others, and to obliterate from their minds the notion of freedom, so as to keep my brethren the more secure in wretchedness, where they will be permitted to stay but a short time” (*WA* 24). Walker’s decision to labor for freedom despite his expectation he will be put to death fills his attempts to awaken his brethren to engage in struggle with the power of conviction. Indeed, it renders him exemplary, as Stewart says, because it suggests he has a sense of African destiny and belonging that supersedes his individuality.

I therefore want to suggest not only that Walker and Stewart stage a contest over the meaning of America—advancing a vision of the nation in which whites, Blacks, and Indigenous peoples might live harmoniously—but also that their vision for this alternative possibility depends upon their sense of belonging to a pan-African community imaginable to them through Christian languages of heaven. The America Walker and Stewart seek is one in which their brethren will be emancipated, yes, but it is not one that will ultimately reunite Africans around the world in restored relationships. This will only occur when they are dead.

This idea may provisionally help us understand why Walker and Stewart reject emigration. For an African to go to Liberia or to Sierra Leone is for them to betray all those to whom they are tied by

means of shared racial destiny. If repatriation as an African-derived religious practice is concerned with the restoration of relationships among Africans both living and dead, and if Walker and Stewart regard colonization as the destruction of those very relationships through betrayal, then it follows that they might feel obligated to oppose colonization on repatriative grounds. Although they do not formulate their repatriative arguments in the same terms that later Ethiopianists adopt when they advance their Back-to-African movements, one may nevertheless still detect repatriative logics at work in their refusals of colonization. They do not want to go to a land that rupture their relationships with their fellow Africans.

Much would change after Walker's death and the conclusion of Stewart's public career. The U.S. of the 1830s was markedly different from the U.S. of the 1850s. The following chapter considers how Martin Delany responded to these different conditions as he advanced his own repatriationist brand of Ethiopianism.

CHAPTER 4: REPATRIATING ETHIOPIA

MARTIN DELANY AND THE DESTINY OF THE AFRICAN RACE

With the light of the age in which we live—with our advantages of educational attainments—
—with the Divine Promise that ‘Princes’ (Power) ‘shall come out of Egypt’ (from among the
African race), ‘and Ethiopia stretch forth’ (from all parts of the world) ‘her hands unto God’
—did we now remain passive, the world should justly condemn us, and posterity curse our
names.

—Martin R. Delany, “Letter to James McCune Smith”

But he was too intensely African to be popular, and therefore multiplied enemies where he
could have multiplied friends by the thousands. Had his love for humanity been as great as
his love for his race, he might have rendered his personal influence co-extensive with that of
Samuel R. Ward in his palmy days, or that of Frederick Douglass at the present time.

—Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*

While Walker, among others, argued that they had a special role in lifting the moral sights of
the world, through Christian messianism, Delany appears to have been alone in believing
that blacks might influence people irrespective of color in a nonreligious sense. His ability to
see examples of black genius in the contemporary world was a factor in his conviction that
the genius of his people was a reality in ancient history and might again help shape the
destiny of humanity.

—Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture*

1. DELANY’S ETHIOPIANISM AND THE PRACTICE OF REPATRIATION

Walker’s and Stewart’s Ethiopianist accounts of Black redemption in the U.S. end as questions:
Would Africans awaken to seize “the day of [their] redemption from abject wretchedness [which]
draweth near?” (*WA* 2). Or would America, alternatively, remain “the Great City of Babylon ... a seller
of slaves and the souls of men?” (*MS* 72). While both maintain that Africans must be the ones to
achieve their destinies, each also holds out hope that “white Christian Americans,” to recall one of
Walker’s favorite formulations, would be changed in the process. They keep open the possibility that
whites might move into a position of moral rectitude, and that they might join Africans in hastening the
day when they would be enabled “to stretch forth [their] hands to the LORD [their] GOD” (*WA* 2).

Both claim such a transformation would change the meaning of “America” itself. It would
make Africans equal participants, or, more properly, would acknowledge their substantial role, in the
making of the U.S. No longer would whites deny or dupe themselves about the ways Africans’ blood
and tears had enriched the soil; no longer would Africans curse their white counterparts, even in the
face of ongoing cruelty and exploitation. Stewart testifies to this possibility’s significance when she

addresses her white neighbors (identifying them as her kin) directly: “Let me entreat my white brethren to awake and save our sons from dissipation and our daughters from ruin... so shall our curses upon you be turned into blessings; and though you should endeavor to drive us from these shores, still we will cling to you the more firmly; nor will we attempt to rise above you; we will presume to be called your equals only” (MS 73). What Melvin Rogers writes of Walker can therefore readily be applied to Stewart, too: “He knows that the full realization of freedom does not solely depend upon the actions of blacks, even if it is a condition for their freedom to acquire meaning in the world. ... For this reason, Walker also seeks to reclaim whites by enlightening them regarding what they otherwise recognize in themselves—namely, the demandingness of freedom.”³⁰⁹ For Walker and for Stewart, Psalm 68:31’s promised redemption of Africa also entails the regeneration of white society.

While Martin Robison Delany shares Walker’s and Stewart’s Ethiopianist concern with African redemption, he does not possess their expansive redemptive vision. Or, he is at least not well-known for the more conciliatory periods of his career. Generally heralded as “the father of Black nationalism,” Delany is most often remembered as a militant, pan-Africanist separatist who regards Black freedom and equality as nonstarters in white societies, and especially in the U.S. One gets a sense for the timbre of Delany’s commitments in a letter he writes to Frederick Douglass on July 10, 1852: “I care but little, what white men think of what I say, write or do; my sole desire is to benefit the colored people; this being done, I am satisfied—the opinion of every white person in the country or the world, to the contrary notwithstanding.”³¹⁰ Although Delany’s attitudes and opinions varied widely during his roughly four decades as a public intellectual, as Tunde Adeleke, Paul Gilroy, Robert Levine, and Nell Painter insistently remind us, his most significant contributions to the history of Ethiopianist discourse are his uncompromising arguments on behalf of emigration, or what this dissertation calls

³⁰⁹ Melvin Rogers, “Living an Anti-Slavery Life: Walker on the Demandingness of Freedom,” unpublished manuscript, 57.

³¹⁰ Martin R. Delany, “Letter to Frederick Douglass, 10 July 1852,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 23 July 1852, 3.

“repatriation,” in which he asserts that Black peoples must remove themselves from any societies wherein they do not comprise the demographic supermajority if they are to “redeem” themselves as a race.³¹¹ Because the redemption of the Black race is impossible in such mixed societies, Delany maintains Africans must come out of Egypt if they are to stretch forth their hands to God.

Unlike Walker and Stewart, therefore, Delany does not even implicitly seek white regeneration. Rather, he casts a vision for African redemption rooted in a racialist reading of Psalm 68:31, fashioning a deeply African-centered account of Black history and destiny to make sense of Africans’ experiences apart from mainstream white interpretations of the same. Further, he forcefully translates this vision into political and nationalistic terms, concluding that Black peoples must forge their own independent polities in order to pursue their destiny apart from the other races. As perhaps his most famous slogan makes clear, Delany is about African redemption by and for African peoples: “Our policy must be—and I hazard nothing in promulging it; nay without this design and feeling, there would be a great deficiency of self-respect, pride of race, and love of country, and we might never expect to challenge the respect of nations—*Africa for the African race, and black men to rule them*. By black men I mean, men of African descent who claim an identity with the race.”³¹² Indeed, with deference to St. Clair Drake, who claims it is with Edward W. Blyden that Ethiopianism first escapes its confines in “the circle of Negro church people” and becomes “something of greater significance for the black world,” I contend Delany marshals the prophetic energies and redemptive narratives surrounding this tradition in service to a thoroughly intellectual, nationalistic, and racially exclusivist program of Black repatriation.³¹³ That is, he advances an Ethiopianist vision of redemption rooted in Black Atlantic practices of homemaking.

³¹¹ Tunde Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race: The Other Martin Robison Delany* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 37; Robert Levine, *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 4; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 20; Nell Irvin Painter, “Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism,” *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Leon Litwack and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 170.

³¹² Martin R. Delany, *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1861), 61.

³¹³ Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion*, 53-4.

It is not surprising that Delany is more pessimistic than either Walker or Stewart about Black destiny in the U.S. He lived and worked during the second half of the nineteenth century, when what few rights free Black people had in the antebellum period were stripped away by the Fugitive Slave Act and *Dredd Scott v. Sanford*, and when the promises of postbellum Reconstruction were belied by white greed. He also experienced personal disappointment at the hands of whites: after having been among the first cohort of Black men admitted to Harvard Medical School in 1850, Delany was forced to leave over white students' objections to learning alongside Black classmates. If Walker and Stewart could hold out hope for the abstract possibility of "white Christian American" repentance and redemption, Delany witnessed them refuse multiple concrete opportunities to embrace it, as well as the entrenched habits animating their refusals. As political theorist Robert Gooding-Williams writes: "In Delany's view, American custom and law alike express 'deep-seated prejudices' animated by 'all the malignity and negro-hate' that [he regards as] 'inseparable from ... [the] very being ... [of] Christian democrats and American advocates of equality.'" ³¹⁴ Because Delany views white Americans, their government, and their civil society as premised in their very being upon white supremacist malignity and what is now called anti-Blackness, he does not seek the transformation of America.

He reserves particular vitriol for the Fugitive Slave Act. Describing the bill as "the crowning act of infamy on the part of the general government towards the colored inhabitants of the United States—and act so vile in its nature, that rebellion against its demands should be promptly made in every attempt to enforce its infernal provisions," Delany observes its one object is "the reduction of every colored person in the United States ... to a state of relative *slavery*; placing each and every one of us at the *disposal of any and every white* who might choose to *claim* us, and the caprice of any and every upstart knave bearing the title of 'commissioner'" (PD 358-59). It is not enough that most Africans in

³¹⁴ Robert Gooding-Williams, "Martin Delany's Two Principles, the Argument for Emigration, and Revolutionary Black Nationalism," *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 86.

the U.S. are already enslaved, he remarks, but now white Christian Americans seek to enthrall the few remaining free Africans as well; they want to subject all Africans to their whims. Though he had already long championed repatriation, politically speaking, we might say it is the Fugitive Slave Act that ultimately goads him to advocate for it as the *only* plausible answer to the Ethiopianist question of African destiny.³¹⁵ “What then shall we do?—what is the remedy—is the important question to be answered?” he asks readers of his 1852 *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered*. “This important inquiry we shall answer, and find a remedy in when treating of the emigration of the colored people” (CD 174).

If the general question I put to Walker and to Stewart is how they translate classical African ideas, customs, and attitudes into the idiom of African redemption now known as Ethiopianism, then the specific task of this chapter is to examine how Delany imagines redemption as repatriation. Indeed, the problem Delany demands I confront is why and how certain Africans born in the Americas came to understand continental Africa as their destined home, as the site of their rightful return. This problem becomes especially acute when one considers that Delany’s repatriationist attitude was not widespread among his contemporary American-born free Africans—many of whom, as Richard Allen says, regarded America as their “*mother country*.”³¹⁶ How, then, could he be sure “the blessed promise” of Psalm 68:31 testifies to the idea that repatriation was “the grandest prospect for the regeneration of a people that ever was presented in the history of the world?” (CD 62). What might explain his insistence that repatriation rather than social or structural transformation constitutes the fulfillment of African destiny—“the consummation of their desires?” Especially in view of Walker’s and Stewart’s repudiation of repatriation-as-redemption, the sources of Delany’s brand of Ethiopianism and of his conception of redemption thus invite rigorous scrutiny.

³¹⁵ Grant Shreve, “The Exodus of Martin Delany,” *American Literary History* 29.3 (2017), 449.

³¹⁶ Richard Allen, “Letter from Bishop Allen,” *Freedom’s Journal*, November 2, 1827, 134.

Following critic Jerome McGann, while differing significantly in some concrete particulars, I argue Delany's idiom of African redemption emerges out of a religious inheritance and orientation specific to the peoples of the Black Atlantic. "Everything in Delany's life," says McGann, "shows that his revolutionary consciousness was grounded in a black religious consciousness. In terms of actual history, God's plan is to drive a new birth of human freedom through the agency of an emancipated black consciousness. Recognizing that plan, hearing God's call, Delany passes it along to his contemporary world."³¹⁷ Indeed, I take as axiomatic Delany's involvement in broader African American and African diasporic practices of repatriation, beginning perhaps with those of his grandfather, Shango, who left the U.S. for his home in the Niger River Valley after being manumitted. As with Walker and Stewart, I read Delany's concern for African destiny as not stemming chiefly from his identification with an abstract conception of Africanity, but from the concrete African communities and legacies he fought to sustain; my intention here is therefore to offer a way of reading some of the most distinctive elements of Delany's thought in view of certain religious practices and attitudes long observed by these communities. Consequently, I locate key elements of his Ethiopianism in Black diasporic attempts to repair what Giulia Bonacci calls slavery's "delocalizations" and the political status these delocalizations engendered—that is, I locate the power of his Ethiopianist pursuit of African redemption in the centuries-long history of movements "back to Africa."³¹⁸

Adopting an attitude of positive speculation, I consider in this chapter what might be learned about the history and development of Ethiopianism if I foreground Black diaspora traditions of repatriation in my interpretation of Delany's thought and so link him to these forebears rather than interpret him as doing something new. Instead of mistakenly identifying him as "the father of Black nationalism" or as the originator of the slogan, "Africa for the Africans," for example, I read Delany

³¹⁷ Jerome McGann, "Rethinking Delany's *Blake*," *Callaloo* 39.1 (2016), 88.

³¹⁸ Bonacci, *Exodus!*, 3.

as a pivotal figure in the history of diasporic Africans seeking to “return home.”³¹⁹ This means treating him not as exceptional but as exemplary—as, that is, an excellent case of the practice of repatriation, which many Africans have pursued since the earliest days of slavery and exile. Reworked as a question, in this chapter I ask: What might one learn about the entanglements between Ethiopianism and repatriation by making this distinctive religious inheritance a key to Delany’s vision for Black destiny?

To tell this story of Delany’s Ethiopianism is to see his political considerations as grounded in Black Atlantic religious practices precisely to the degree that many Africans’ desires to return to their natal lands have historically been tied to religious notions of home, ancestors, belonging, and redemption. It is also to see how, as Delany advocates for Black peoples’ departure from the U.S. and for their subsequent settling in Central and South America as well as West-Central Africa, he imagines the meaning of Psalm 68:31 and its promise of Black destiny anew, with an influence that has extended from his time into contemporary Black religious thought and practice.

2. SHANGO AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Because the historiography coalesces around claims about the influence of his grandparents, I begin with a story of Delany’s ancestry before turning to how it relates to his Ethiopianism.³²⁰ In her *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, which she composed under the pen name Frank Rollin, biographer Frances Rollin opens her narrative with the observation that, “It has always been admitted that the early slaves of America were the vanquished of the wars waged among rival tribes of Africa. Among these were kings, chiefs, and their families, accustomed to state and circumstance.”

³¹⁹ I do not understand the honorific to work in a literal sense, in that I do not think those who call Delany “the father of Black nationalism” mean Delany is its sole or singular progenitor. I nevertheless worry that the emphasis upon Delany’s originality obscures his connection to broader currents in the Black world. Take the slogan, “Africa for the Africans,” which many attribute to him. A cursory overview of mid nineteenth-century British newspapers demonstrates that South Africans had already rallied around this slogan well before Delany ever put it into writing, using it to motivate resistance to the colonization of their lands. The November 17, 1851 edition of the London *Evening Mail* states, for example: “We can no more make permanent terms with the Caffres than the backwoodsmen of the old States could have made terms with the Kentucky Indians. ‘Africa for the Africans,’ is the cry of the aboriginal protectionists.” *Evening Mail*, November 17, 1851, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/London-Evening-Mail>.

³²⁰ Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 115-16.

Emphasizing the extent to which “regal African ancestry” functions as a source of self-esteem for Black peoples in the Americas, she notes that many hold to their heritage “with a pride worthy of a citizen of Rome in her palmyest days. Regardless of the gloom of barbarism which encircled their ancestry, knowing that the race which now stands at the zenith of its power suffered like disadvantages, the colored people cherish this proud descent with all the strong feeling so characteristic of them. Prominent among them in this pride of race stands the subject of this work.”³²¹ With these lines, Rollin positions Delany as *primus inter pares* of all those Africans who insist upon and celebrate their ancestral lineage as evidence that Black peoples will soon be restored. Indeed, another biographer renders the stakes of Rollin’s claim in now familiar terms. Victor Ullman declares Delany’s commitment to the idea of his royal ancestry means: “There was no doubt in Delany’s mind that ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall haste to stretch out her hands unto God once more.’ He was one of the princes of legitimate descent.”³²²

Delany’s sense of princehood was not rooted in abstract ideas about African royalty, however. His was not an imagined heritage; it was grounded in concrete familial and ethnic identifications. Rollin informs readers his paternal grandparents were Gola and his maternal, Mandinka. As the story goes, his father’s father was a Gola chieftain who had been captured with his family during an intratribal war and sold into North American slavery. At some point during their enslavement, Delany’s paternal grandfather, his wife, and their two sons escaped to what is now Toronto before being returned, “by some fiction of law, international policy, old musty treaty, cozenly understood,” to their master in Richmond, Virginia.³²³ (Ullman notes that this “would place the escape and return before 1793 when Canada ... set an example for the new democracy in the South, by abolishing slavery in the colony.

³²¹ Frank A. Rollin [Frances Rollin], *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany: Sub-Assistant Commissioner Bureau Relief of Refugees, Freedmen, and of Abandoned Lands, and Late Major 104th U.S. Colored Troops* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1883), 13-14.

³²² Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 4.

³²³ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 15.

Since that date, Canada has returned no fugitive slaves to the United States.”³²⁴) It was back in Virginia that Delany’s grandfather was ultimately murdered as he resisted punishment from an overseer. Little is said about his grandmother, but it may be surmised that she did not meet a cheerier fate.

The impulse to defy slavery demonstrated by Delany’s paternal grandparents quite literally marked his father, Samuel, as well. One year before Samuel purchased his freedom in 1823, he was wounded by a sheriff for refusing to be whipped by a slave-breaker named Violet. According to Delany family oral traditions, Samuel “did not mangle or harm Violet in any way. He merely tore off his clothing. Nine times he stripped Violet without harming anything but his modesty.” Although Samuel was not killed by the sheriff and his deputies upon their arrival, the wound Samuel received at their hands left a permanent scar upon his face. “With this mark of brutality daily before the eyes of his children, and in its train all the humiliations and bestial associations to which their hapless race was subjected,” writes Rollin, “it is no matter of wonderment that Martin Delany should ... contribute his aid to root out every fibre of slavery and its concomitants.”³²⁵ According to another biographer, historian Dorothy Sterling, this scar served as “a reminder to Martin through the rest of his father’s life” both of the forced servitude of his family and their legacy of dissent.³²⁶

Like his paternal grandparents, Delany’s maternal grandmother and grandfather were captured during intratribal warfare and sold into slavery. Unlike the former, who were Gola from what is now Liberia or Sierra Leone, however, these grandparents were Mandinka from the Niger River Valley. This grandfather was named Shango, after the orisha of traditional Yoruba religion associated with fire, lightning, and axes. In keeping with the customs of their people, among whom “none took, save by inheritance, so sacred a name as Shango, and the one thus named was entitled to the chief power,”

³²⁴ Ullman, *Martin R. Delany*, 4.

³²⁵ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 27

³²⁶ Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American: Martin Robison Delany, 1812-1885* (New York: Da Capo, 1996), 13.

Delany's family regarded this name as indicative of his grandfather's royal status. So, too, did the white slaveowners, who, according to Rollin, "recognized among themselves that no African of noble birth should be continued enslaved. Thus, by virtue of his birth, Shango was enabled to return home."³²⁷ Of course, we do not know whether Shango ever successfully repatriated, for his family never heard from him again. Nevertheless, Sterling hypothesizes that Shango's presence loomed large in young Delany's childhood imagination. Here was an African prince who returned home.³²⁸

Although Delany's maternal grandmother, Graci Peace, received her freedom with Shango, she did not repatriate to the Niger River Valley. Instead, she remained in the U.S. with their daughter, Pati, with whom she lived, worked, and raised her grandchildren. By nearly all accounts, it is Graci who proves most responsible for Delany's African consciousness. Not only did she form her daughter into a "high-minded Mandingo-Golah" woman who inherited "all the finer traits of character of her Mandingo origin," as Rollin suggests, she also nursed in Delany the dream of returning to Africa, for her stories, songs, and the games she played with her grandson "depicted ... all the gorgeous imagery of the tropics ... the story of their lost and *regal* inheritance."³²⁹ Indeed, Sterling writes that it is likely Graci introduced him to West African languages, songs, and gods, as well as to ideas of her homeland, "farther away than he could imagine," which must have seemed like "the Garden of Eden."³³⁰

2.1. REPATRIATION AS INHERITED YEARNING

For Rollin, Sterling, Ullman, and many other biographers, the influence of Delany's maternal grandparents strongly accounts for his stubborn commitment to the view that repatriation was to be the consummation of African destiny.³³¹ For them, his grandparents constitute both the roots of what

³²⁷ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 17.

³²⁸ Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American*, 1-5.

³²⁹ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 18.

³³⁰ Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American*, 2.

³³¹ Cyril Griffith says, "the only consistency in his life was the obsession with Africa." Cyril Griffith, *The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 1.

literary critic Robert Levine calls his “sense of genealogical connection to Africa” and the reason Africa holds “a sacred place in his imagination.”³³² It is their instruction and example, these biographers speculate, that explain how, “by the time he was 24, Delany had already mapped out his own plan for a Black Israel.”³³³ They also explain why Delany behaved as he did while in West Africa. For example, Rollin says he inquired into his ancestry in the Niger River Valley so as to prove what he already knew:

To possess himself of the early origin of his family was in keeping with a mind so richly endowed, and soaring always far beyond the confines which the prejudices of this country apportion him. Not that he expected it to elevate him in America, knowing that custom and education are alike averse to this—scarcely allowing him to declare with freedom from derision the immortal sentence, “*I am a man*,” and claiming rights legitimately belonging to its estate. For by observing his history, it may yet prove that the sequel is but the goal of his earliest determination, and not of recent conception, but nursed from his high-minded Mandingo-Golah mother, and heard in the chants of a Mandingo grandmother, depicted with all the gorgeous imagery of the tropics, as the story of their lost and *regal* inheritance. Thus becoming imbued with its spirit, it shaped itself in the dreams of his childhood, it entwined about the studies and pursuits of his youth, and, through that remarkable perseverance which characterizes him, it was realized in the full vigor of manhood to trace satisfactorily his ancestors’ history on the soil of its origin.

Thus Africa and her past and future glory became entwined around every fibre of his being; and to the work of replacing her among the powers of the earth, and exalting her scattered descendants on this continent, he has devoted himself wholly, with an earnestness to which the personal sacrifices made by him through life bear witness.³³⁴

On her account, the circumstances of Delany’s nature and his nurture inculcated in him a passionate commitment to Africa and its peoples throughout the globe.³³⁵ “For upon his parentage and race rests whatever of success and prominence our subject has achieved,” Rollin writes, “they have entered so strongly into all his pursuits ... that they reflect themselves in every act, and each act, marked by this strong personality, leads to the individual himself.”³³⁶ Drawing upon the typical assumptions of early nineteenth-century race science, Rollin stands them on their head by suggesting Delany’s desires and determinations, his “life and services,” may be attributed to his African roots and racial constitution.

³³² Levine, *Martin R. Delany*, 10, 316.

³³³ Ullman, *Martin R. Delany*, 7.

³³⁴ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 18.

³³⁵ See also Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 190-208.

³³⁶ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 21-22.

As Levine has noted, however, it is likely that Delany's motivations on behalf of his race are much more complicated than these speculative accounts indicate. For one thing, we know race science is a specious discourse with little explanatory power—even by way of inculcating the “we-intentions” that Eddie Glaude calls racial solidarity.³³⁷ For another, Delany was not as consistent as Rollin makes him out to be. He was very marginally committed to Africa at various times in his career. Nevertheless, it is the similar speculative conceit of this chapter to run with the idea that the influence of Delany's grandparents at least partially explains why he could state that “my destiny is fixed in Africa, where my family and myself, by God's providence, will soon be happily situated,” and that he viewed Africa as “the field of my destined labor” in 1861 and 1880, respectively.³³⁸ That is, I speculatively explore the possible influences of repatriation, conceived as a religious inheritance, upon his Ethiopianism.

It will perhaps be useful to offer a brief review of repatriation. As I have theorized it in chapter 1, repatriation denotes the centuries-long Black diasporic cluster of customs, beliefs, and attitudes oriented around returning to the African continent to repair the dislocations of slavery. As I use the term, this constellation of related practices includes, for example, certain religiously inflected behaviors such as throwing oneself into the sea, returning home during sleep or dreams, and flying, as well as more explicitly political practices such as appealing to governments, chartering ships, and organizing mass exoduses.³³⁹ Thus, the 1773 petition of four enslaved African men to the Massachusetts legislature asking that they be allowed to “leave the province ... [and] procure money to transport ourselves to some part of the coast of Africa, where we propose a settlement,” the 1803 mass suicide at Igbo Landing, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Gullah-Geechee stories about airborne Africans, Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line, and Rastafari “returns” to Ethiopia can all be classified as instances

³³⁷ Levine, *Martin R. Delany*, 315; Glaude, *Exodus!*, 15-16.

³³⁸ Martin R. Delany, *Weekly Anglo-African*, October 5, 1861; Martin R. Delany, “Letter to Coppinger,” December 18, 1880.

³³⁹ On the matter of flying and the limits of scholarly studies of repatriation, see Jason R. Young, “All God's Children Had Wings: The Flying African in History, Literature, and Lore,” *Journal of African Religions* 5.1 (2017), 50-70.

of repatriation.³⁴⁰ Each of them is oriented around a notion of redressing slavery's ruptures. What proves important about these practices for my purposes, then, is neither their success, nor their empirical efficacy. Instead, it is how they serve practitioners as vehicles for imagining notions of pan-African solidarity and global Black diaspora consciousness—the ways, that is, they have helped diasporic Africans such as Delany fashion normative claims about their identities, aspirations, and belonging, as well as fitting forms of life.

In Delany's case, I suggest repatriation can be considered what Dianne Stewart elsewhere calls “a spiritual desire, a yearning, an appetite and need for home, freedom, and fulfillment” first inculcated in him by his grandparents, which he then self-consciously takes up and adapts into a response to the developments of his moment.³⁴¹ Speculative as this suggestion is, I claim Delany can be read as blending this religious inheritance (to recall Rollin's description) with certain ideas and concerns derived from then-contemporary controversies over emigration as he advances his Ethiopianist account of Black redemption as a movement back-to-Africa. What matters for me is not denying the distinctiveness of emigration as pursued by nineteenth-century Black figures and communities with whom Delany would have been familiar, but pointing up its historical precedents tied to longstanding Africana orientations. In particular, I use repatriation here to highlight how Delany's citations of Psalm 68:31 can and, indeed, should be linked to this broader set of practices such that scholars might see his use of the Ethiopian prophecy afresh. That is, such that scholars of Black and Africana religions may see how Delany's use of the Ethiopian prophecy is both distinctive in the history of Black religious thought and how it reflects the influence of certain religious concerns common to many peoples in the African diaspora. Even as Delany does something new with Ethiopianism, he is linked to those who came before—whom I here represent by appealing to his grandparents, Shango and Graci.

³⁴⁰ Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, Chester Joie, “Petition to the Representative of the Town of Thompson, April 20th, 1773,” Library of Congress, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.03701600/>.

³⁴¹ Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 60.

3. AWAKENING TO DESTINY

While Delany advances repatriative program “that included one of the first strong articulations of an Ethiopianist or Pan-African political philosophy” in his 1861 *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, his most sustained arguments on behalf of repatriation come in two early works.³⁴² Namely, his 1852 book, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered*, and his keynote address to the 1854 National Emigration Convention of Colored People held in Cleveland, Ohio, *Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent*, which was later published in the convention proceedings. Although these works vary in important ways, and, indeed, although *Condition* offers two distinct proposals for repatriation to Central and South America, on the one hand, and eastern Africa, on the other, they are united in their expression of a common set of concerns and principles, which form the core of Delany’s argument for repatriation in *Official Report*. I therefore survey these concerns and principles in order, beginning with *Condition* before turning to *Political Destiny*. My idea is to forge a progressive sense of the principles Delany derives from his political analyses of the conditions of African American life in the U.S. Following this survey, I conclude by addressing *Official Report*’s Ethiopianist political philosophy, in which Delany describes repatriation as “the grandest prospect” for the fulfilment of Africans’ destiny.

As Walker and Stewart before him, Delany addresses *Condition* to “the public in general, and the colored people of the United States in particular,” observing that his “sole object has been, to place before the[m] ... great truths concerning this class of citizens, which appears to have been heretofore avoided” (CD 35). Like his predecessors, Delany aims to awaken his Black brethren to what he calls the reality of their condition, specifically, that they exist as “a nation within a nation—a people who although part and parcel of the population, yet were from force of circumstances, known by the peculiar position they occupied, forming in fact, by the deprivation of political equality with others,

³⁴² Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 188.

no part” (*CD* 42). Deliberately confronting his readers with “historical facts that cannot be controverted,” he addresses them, in effect, as an unfree people subject to the capricious whims of their white masters (*CD* 41). Even his free readers, though they differentiate themselves from their enslaved kin, he says, are subject to the same arbitrary interference and degradation from whites as their brethren in chains. “They have no part nor lot in the government of the country,” he writes of the enslaved, “neither have we. They are ruled and governed without representation ... and so are we. Where then is our political superiority to the enslaved?” (*CD* 44). Collapsing the distinction between slave and free on the basis that even free Africans do not have rights that whites are bound to respect, he challenges his readers to see the difficult truth that they are not Americans, though many of them were born in America, but “a distinct nation of people” subject to all manner of depredations.³⁴³

Although Delany echoes Walker’s complaint that there are “none like us,” that is, no people whose condition is more unfavorable than Africans in the U.S., he acknowledges they form part of a broader historical pattern of domination, in which ruling classes have tended to deny their subordinates equality and citizenship. Calling attention to the Israelites in ancient Egypt and the Irish, Welsh, and Scottish in the nineteenth-century United Kingdom, among others, he suggests domination might be regarded as a brute fact of political existence.³⁴⁴ Where the strong have been able to dominate the weak, they have generally acted accordingly. “That there have been in all ages and in all countries, in every quarter of the habitable globe,” Delany writes, “classes of people who have been deprived of equal privileges, political, religious and social, cannot be denied, and that this deprivation on the part

³⁴³ Delany says, for example, “The United States, untrue to her trust and unfaithful to her principles of republican equality, has also pursued a policy of political degradation to a large portion of her native born countrymen, and that class is the Colored People. Denied an equality not only of political but of natural rights, in common with the rest of our fellow citizens, there is no species of degradation to which we are not subject. ... Reduced to abject slavery is not enough, the very thought of which should awaken every sensibility of our common nature, but those of their descendants who are freemen even in the non-slaveholding States, occupy the very same position politically, religiously, civilly and socially, (with but few exceptions,) as the bondman occupies in the slave States” (*CD* 44).

³⁴⁴ Painter, “Martin R. Delany,” 154-55.

of the ruling classes is cruel and unjust, is also equally true” (CD 41). He also advances the proposition that this arbitrary deprivation of political equality leads ruling classes to fashion ideas about their superiority in the language of racial differences, as these ideas significantly curtail the sympathy and opposition that might otherwise be interposed on the subordinates’ behalf. Treating this proposition as a premise, moreover, he infers ideas about racial superiority, because they are not rooted in actual differences in capacity between human populations but in domestic strategy, are political tools, what he calls “matters of policy,” that enable ruling classes to “prescribe whatever terms at discretion for their government” suit their purposes (CD 42-3).³⁴⁵ They are not accurate descriptions of differences that obtain between human groups but ideological fictions that bolster relations of domination.³⁴⁶

For Delany, what thus distinguishes Africans in the U.S. from other classes of the oppressed are the contingent historical particulars of their existence. While they share the common circumstances of having been dominated and racialized with many other peoples around the world, especially the lower orders of Europe, the distinct brutality of their condition is what sets them apart. Partly, then, *Condition* narrates the origins and development of these particulars. He repeats his insistence that the “object of this volume is, to enlighten the minds of a large class of readers upon a subject with which they are unacquainted, expressed in comprehensible language,” namely, the history of their deprivation (CD 76). By rehearsing this story, he aims to awaken his readers to the causes of their present condition

³⁴⁵ Another way to say this is that Delany fashions a theory of racialization as he outlines the contours of African American life in the initial chapters of *Condition*, framing ideas about racial superiority as one means by which ruling classes produce and preserve the part of the population that has no part. Indeed, as Johnson observes, Delany’s descriptions of the political conditions of African American life lead him to suggest that “*race was how one political population dominated others as an internal colony*.” His observations denaturalize racial formations—suggesting they are not discovered but made. Johnson, *African American Religions*, 234 (emphasis original).

³⁴⁶ In this Delany perhaps prefigures key features of the groundbreaking accounts of race and racialization put forth by medievalist Geraldine Heng and anthropologist-historian Ann Laura Stoler, in which race is theorized as a “structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content” produced by imperial formations “that in their very making thrive on opaque taxonomies ... [and] the production of exceptions and their uneven and changing proliferations,” respectively. Where Delany may be perhaps more radical than Heng or Stoler, however, is in his insistence that race is as old as the history of dominating polities and not just a modern or even medieval phenomenon. See Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3; Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 177.

as “nonentities among the citizens, and excrescences on the body politic,” and spur them to action on their own behalf. “Have we not now sufficient intelligence among us to understand our true position, to realize our actual condition, and determine for ourselves what is best to be done?” he asks. “If we have not now, we never shall have, and should at once cease prating about our equality, capacity, and all that” (CD 45). Although composed in a different genre and so register of voice, *Condition* is thus written in the same spirit as Walker’s *Appeal* and Stewart’s *Meditations*. It aims to awaken its readers both to the sources of their misery and to their capacities to change their conditions—to awaken them, that is, to their abilities to achieve their destiny.

4. AFRICAN MISERY AS ETHIOPIANIST HISTORY

Unlike Walker and Stewart, however, Delany does not solicit divine assistance in his attempts to arouse his brethren. He does not invoke gods or ancestors as he confronts his audience with facts about their condition. Instead, he repeats a narrative of domination and misery, “which should awaken every sensibility of our common nature” (CD 44). Many scholars of Ethiopianism therefore construe Delany as secularized and secularizing because his arguments, while clearly drawn from the wellspring of Ethiopianist rhetoric, do not appeal to God or biblical prophecy as often as his predecessors. “For the most part,” writes historian George Fredrickson, “he stressed practical and worldly forms of self-help rather than divine support and inspiration.”³⁴⁷ Critics such as Fredrickson thus infer that his stress upon human agency as opposed to divine activity as the necessary condition for accomplishing Black destiny marks a decisive moment in the development of Ethiopianist thought—thereby making him into a transitional figure between Ethiopianism’s earlier religious iterations and its later worldly strains. “Delany,” says anthropologist Charles Price, “can be attributed with developing a more secular version oriented around a pragmatic self-help program, combined with a repatriation to Africa program.”³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 66-7.

³⁴⁸ Charles Price, “‘Cleave to the Black’: Expressions of Ethiopianism in Jamaica,” *New West Indian Guide* 77.1 (2003), 33.

Yet, depicting Delany in this way obscures two important things. The first is the fact that much nineteenth-century Black political speech (especially that associated with the Black church) was crafted in and through religious language, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Eddie Glaude have carefully demonstrated.³⁴⁹ Noting the involvement of figures like Delany with key features of African American religious life, Glaude writes of their speech, for example, that it “was constructed, to some extent, within a language that linked biblical figures to postbiblical persons, places, and events.”³⁵⁰ Indeed, while it may therefore be correct in an empirical sense to note that Delany invokes God and the Bible less than his predecessors in the Ethiopianist tradition, I submit that moving from this observation to a claim about the secularizing character of his thought obscures the meaningful entanglements between religion and politics that are everywhere discernable in his work. Even when Delany appears to be at his most secular, his ties to African American communities and institutions mean he remains indebted to religious categories, practices, and orientations. In fact, I thus suggest his work troubles the overall meaningfulness of a sacred-secular distinction as an analytic lens for making sense of Ethiopianism.³⁵¹

More significant for my purposes, however, are the ways this gloss on Delany as a transitional figure in Ethiopianism downplay a vital continuity between him and his Ethiopianist predecessors. Despite his emphasis upon “practical and worldly forms of self-help,” Delany still adopts the same essential strategy as his forebears. Whereas Price asserts a qualitative break between Delany and those who came before him, Delany’s lack of reliance upon divine assistance does not translate into the abandonment of key Ethiopianist social practices. That is, Delany also strives to awaken his brethren to their capacities to effect change by rehearsing a declension narrative in which Black misery is framed as a contingent product of human action; like Stewart and Walker before him, he aims to arouse kin

³⁴⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1-18.

³⁵⁰ Glaude, *Exodus!*, 4.

³⁵¹ For one possible counterargument, see Sorett, “Secular Compared to What?” 45-48.

and countrymen to the nearness of their redemption by pointing out it would be theirs if they would but “go and possess it.” “All that is left for us to do,” he declaims at the end of *Condition*, “is to *make* ourselves the ‘*lords* of all terrestrial creation” (CD 226). Even if it is true that Delany can be construed as more secular than his earlier counterparts, he nevertheless takes up and adapts their formal strategy of retelling African history as a means of inducing collective awakening and political organization.

4.1. RACIALIZATION AND DOMINATION

Perhaps the central premise of Delany’s narrative of African decline is his notion that the earliest European settlers in the Americas were drawn from the ruling rather than common classes. He writes: “Those who came to the new world, were not of the common people, seeking in a distant land the means of livelihood, but moneyed capitalists, the grandees and the nobles” (CD 77). Because these wealthy white settlers had no intention of laboring themselves to extract material wealth from the New World, he says, they determined to enslave a class of people to help them claim it. They had two initial alternatives for this dubious distinction: the working classes of Europe or the indigenous peoples of the Americas. But problems arose with each. On the one hand, according to Delany, European laborers too closely resembled their proto-capitalist masters, thus prompting feelings of identification and sympathy. Such laborers could not therefore be easily exploited. “The condition of society *at the time*,” he writes, “would not admit of it” (CD 49). On the other hand, while the indigenous peoples were sufficiently distinguished from Europeans on the basis of physical differences, such that they elicited “less interest on the part of the oppressing class, in their favor,” they were “wholly unaccustomed to labor, and therefore sunk under the insupportable weight, two millions and a half having fallen victims to the cruelty of oppression and toil suddenly placed upon their shoulders” (CD 48). These workers did not survive their brutal conditions. Finding both white and indigenous laborers ill-suited to the accumulation of wealth, powerful European settlers turned their eyes toward Africans. On his telling, it was these settlers’ pursuit of wealth that led to Africans’ bondage in the New World.

Partly, Delany argues Africans were enslaved because they were accustomed to grueling labor. Here he echoes the arguments of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the sixteenth-century Spanish Dominican who was the first to argue that Africans should be imported to the Americas to replace the Native populations in the mines. Unlike Las Casas, however, Delany makes this claim this less because of supposedly innate characteristics than millennia of custom and habit.³⁵² Europeans had long been aware of African attainments in agriculture, architecture, engineering, and the arts and sciences, he says, as well as the skillfulness of African labor. This is why European settlers in the Americas turned their attention toward the western coast of Africa. Advancing what will later become a characteristically Afrocentric and Black nationalist riff on Ethiopianism, he claims:

From the earliest period of the history of nations, the African race had been known as an industrious people, cultivators of the soil. The grain fields of Ethiopia and Egypt were the themes of the poet, and their garners, the subject of the historian. Like the present America, all the world went to Africa, to get a supply of commodities. Their massive piles of masonry, their skilful [sic] architecture, their subterranean vaults, their deep and mysterious wells, their extensive artificial channels, their mighty sculptured solid rocks, and providences of stone quarries; gave indisputable evidence, of the hardihood of that race of people (*CD* 78).

Like Stewart, Walker, and other Black thinkers before and after him, Delany asserts the peoples of antiquity went to Ethiopia and Egypt to benefit from their labor and learning. Like Stewart and Walker, too, he claims this has not fundamentally changed: Africans still perform the work that enriches the world. The substantial difference of the nineteenth century, however, is that Africans perform this work in the Americas as enslaved rather than free persons. Indeed, in *Political Destiny* he goes on to enumerate the many benefits Africans brought with them to the Americas—including knowledge of hemp, cotton, tobacco, corn, rice, and sugar cultivation, as well as husbandry and herdsmanhip, which he calls arts “acquired in their native Africa” (*PD* 348). For now, however, Delany argues that it is “for this cause and this alone, were they selected in preference to any other races of men, to do the labor of the New World” (*CD* 80). Europeans turned to Africans because they had developed the resources and skillfulness requisite for making the most out of new climates by means of labor and toil.

³⁵² See Lawrence Clayton, “Bartolomé de las Casas and the African Slave Trade,” *History Compass* 7.6 (2009), 1526-1541.

The force of Delany's inversion of the typical subject-object relations of anti-Black discourse proves powerful here. Rather than perpetuate racist tropes about lazy laborers and peoples without history, Delany suggests Africans have played a central role in the history of civilizations. Whether in ancient or modern worlds, they have supplied the labor that has made society possible. Not only have they contributed to histories of high culture through religion, morality, arts, and architecture, but they have also fed, constructed, and braced the development of "nations, kings, and empires," to recall one of Stewart's favorite formulations. While Delany does not therefore reject civilizationism as such, he does repudiate and reverse those civilizationist perspectives that erase African history. In this, his story reiterates the conventional Ethiopianist strategy of insisting upon Africans' prior greatness.³⁵³

Partly, too, however, Delany argues that Africans were enslaved because their physical features readily set them off as a separate class of persons. "The policy of all those who proscribe any people," he says, "induces them to select as the objects of proscription, those who differed as much as possible, in some particulars, from themselves. This is to ensure the greater success, because it engenders the greater prejudice, or in other words, elicits less interest on the part of the ruling class, in their favor" (CD 48). If Africans were selected in preference as laborers due to their skillfulness, then they were made to be slaves because of their distinguishing physical characteristics. By enslaving a people who look different from themselves, and by basing these differences upon distinctions more permanent than dress and culture, the ruling classes can preclude feelings of solidarity between the more liberally-minded among them and their new subordinates. Because Africans in the early Americas were as visually foreign to white settlers as to the indigenous peoples and so unlikely to elicit feelings of identification or sympathy from either, white settlers regarded them "as the very best class that could be selected" (CD 48). On his account, it is therefore because of their skill and their appearance that Africans were brought to the Spanish colonies in 1502 and to the British colonies in 1619.

³⁵³ See Anthony Bogue's description of Ethiopianism as a "counterpractice." Bogue, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, 156.

Delany's story of African enslavement in *Condition* conveys his arguably correct view—also the view of many affiliated with what has since come to be known as “the Black radical tradition”—that racial formations are imbricated with class distinctions; that they interpenetrate one another such that the making of races is part and parcel of the making of slaves and workers, and vice versa.³⁵⁴ But Delany goes further than simply asserting that race and class are entwined. He also demonstrates how race has historically functioned as a discursive means of rationalizing the domination, exploitation, and extermination of the lower orders.³⁵⁵ Articulating a political identification with the colored races and the unfortunate classes of Europe alike, Delany describes race as at least a partial construct of policy, that is, practices of governance which produce and preserve distinctions among different groups of people in service to capital. Indeed, *Condition* exposes how “the absurd idea of [the] natural inferiority of the African” was only “recently adduced by the slave-holders and their abettors, in justification of their policy” (CD 51). In crucial ways, then, Delany shows both his contemporaries and twenty-first century readers how broader historical processes of racialization served to rationalize the social order that would eventually invent the idea of the deracinated, ahistorical African laborer.

4.2. RACE AND SLAVERY AS POLITICAL RATHER THAN MORAL PROBLEMS

Philosopher Bernard Boxill argues the most striking feature of Delany's story in *Condition* is “the omission of any mention of morality as a possible constraint on the Europeans' desire to enslave Africans.”³⁵⁶ He notes it never seems even to occur to Delany to imply that Europeans had to overcome moral inhibitions against slavery to make slaves of Africans. Yet, because Delany regards the formation of races and of class distinctions throughout history as the result of political processes of dispossession and domination, his omission of moral considerations does not prove particularly

³⁵⁴ See David Scott, “On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition,” *Small Axe* 17.1 (2013), 1-6.

³⁵⁵ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 27.

³⁵⁶ Bernard Boxill, “Two Traditions in African American Political Philosophy,” *Philosophy Forum* 24.1-3 (1992-93), 119-135.

surprising. He here considers Europeans neither especially cruel, nor hate-filled. Indeed, in contrast to later arguments in *Political Destiny, Condition* explicitly denies that it was “on account of hatred to his color, that the African was selected as the object of oppression” (CD 50). Delany claims instead that Africans were selected because they were especially suited to the tasks at hand, and because their distinctive phenotypical features made it easier to separate them from the rest of the populations of the Americas. In *Condition*, Delany thus fills the general outline of his understanding of political history—patterned as it is by the proclivity of the strong to dominate, racialize, and enslave the weak—with the particular content and histories of people of Black African descent in the Americas.

Delany’s refusal to engage moral considerations might also be attributed to his opposition to the strategy of moral suasion, or Black social uplift through moral reform, which was championed by such nineteenth-century figures as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Maria W. Stewart. As I previously indicated in my discussion of Stewart, suasionists tended to assert Africans could free themselves by proving themselves exemplary members of society.³⁵⁷ For myriad reasons, some better than others, they maintained collective ethical formation would inevitably result in Black emancipation. This sentiment is plainly expressed in the “Address” of the 1832 Second Negro National Convention: “We yet anticipate ... a final redemption from the evils that have been illegitimately entailed on us ... We yet expect by due exertions on our part, together with the aid of the benevolent philanthropists of our country, to acquire a moral and intellectual strength, that will unshift the calumnious darts of our adversaries, and present to the world a general character, that they will feel bound to respect.”³⁵⁸ Although he supported moral suasion during his years as an antislavery lecturer for *The North Star*, Delany had come to oppose it by the early 1850s. Chief among his many reasons is that moral suasion depends upon an erroneous assumption that ethics and politics are essentially imbricated, that morality

³⁵⁷ Adeleke, *In the Service of God and Humanity*, 3.

³⁵⁸ “Minutes and Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention,” Howard H. Bell, ed. *The Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 34.

influences policy. “We have speculated and moralized much about equality—claiming to be as good as our neighbors, and everybody else,” Delany writes of suasionist advocates for Black emancipation, “all of which may do very well in ethics—but not in politics” (CD 67). Indeed, for Delany, the political problem Africans face in the U.S. is statelessness. They remain outside the body politic, and upstanding moral character cannot rectify this condition.

In circumstances such as these, Delany maintains that sympathy, or the imaginative power to identify with another, is perhaps the only chance the oppressed have of becoming integrated (CD 42). But sympathy is not equally distributed. “Sympathy,” Boxill says, “spared only some of the weak.”³⁵⁹ For Delany, this unequal distribution is by design. He has already claimed that European sympathies prevented the wholesale enslavement of white laborers, but not of indigenous ones. Recall, too, his assertion that the “policy of all those who proscribe any people induces them to select as the objects of proscription, those who differed as much as possible, in some particulars, from themselves. This is to ensure the greater success, because it engenders the greater prejudice” (CD 48). Even if sympathy is influenced by such factors as contiguity and familiarity, as David Hume argues, the mitigating influence of race means they matter little in the case of Africans in the Americas.³⁶⁰ Given racialization’s power to produce and preserve distinctions among different populations, the racialized dynamics of physical difference trump the possibility of establishing a common sympathy based upon shared custom and habit, or even upon physical proximity. Indeed, race’s power is such that it is not enough many Africans in America have assimilated themselves to white American culture and mores: “Being distinguished by our complexion ... we are still singled out—although having merged in the habits and customs of our oppressors” (CD 221). Such are the facts to which he means to awaken his audience: neither Black moral uplift nor white sympathy solves the political problem of statelessness.

³⁵⁹ Boxill, “Two Traditions in African American Political Philosophy,” 120.

³⁶⁰ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 229; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 488.

Delany bolsters this argument by dedicating roughly one-third of *Condition* to enumerating the achievements and contributions made by exemplary Black figures to U.S. life. Although tedious, these lists establish his point: the laws and provisions of the country do not include or protect Africans—not even those who have given immensely to the nation. “If such evidence of industry and interest,” he says, “as has been exhibited in the various chapters on the different pursuits and engagements of colored Americans, do not entitle them to equal rights and privileges in our common country, then indeed, is there nothing to justify the claims of any portion of the American people to the common inheritance of Liberty” (CD 159-60). Given that Africans’ many contributions to the country have failed to earn them citizenship, or even simple legal protections from arbitrary enslavement and domination, Delany therefore concludes: “We must abandon all vague theory, and look at *facts* as they really are; viewing ourselves in our true political position in the body politic. To imagine ourselves to be included in the body politic, except by express legislation, is at war with common sense, and contrary to fact ... We are politically, not of them, but aliens” (CD 173).

The Ethiopianist declension narrative of *Condition* thus purports to explain how Africans came to their “miserable position” through a centuries-long process of selection and separation (CD 213). First, Delany argues Africans were selected to “work” because of their suitability for the demands of American labor, and in view of the inability of white and indigenous workers to meet these demands. Then, they were racialized through appeals to physical difference that rationalized their transformation into bondage. Finally, they were disavowed as laborers and citizens in the life of the American nation, and, through the Fugitive Slave Act, even free Africans residing in the U.S. were grouped together with the enslaved as “excrescences on the body politic” (CD 44). While contemporary readers might quibble with some of Delany’s narratological strategies, the power of his account, as Sylvester Johnson says, resides in his claim that “Blacks, *whether enslaved or free*, occupied essentially the same status precisely because slavery was a form of racial rule. As a political institution ... slavery subjugated Blacks to the political authority of Whites and deprived them of protections and governing privileges

... that Whites enjoyed as a matter of course.”³⁶¹ That is, the force of Delany’s story rests in his claim that slavery is a political relation that renders Africans perpetually foreign to the American nation.

4.3. ANCESTRAL DISOBEDIENCE AS CATEGORY MISTAKE

Indeed, Delany’s explicit focus on politics distinguishes his story of African decline from the ones rehearsed by Walker and Stewart before him. In contrast to many of his fellows who argue that African enslavement is divine retribution for the sins of their ancestors, Delany insists it is the result of political economy and domestic policy alone. “Any other doctrine than this,” he says, “is downright delusion, unworthy of a free people, and only intended for slaves.” Offering an objection to many of his contemporaries’ interpretations of African history, he declares, “but, what we here desire to do is, to correct the long standing error among a large body of the colored people in this country, that the cause of our oppression and degradation is the displeasure of God towards us, because of our unfaithfulness to Him” (CD 66). Likely not appreciating the classically African contours of this interpretation because of their proximity to the precepts and purposes of mid-nineteenth-century white proslavery religion as he understands it, Delany offers an alternative formulation: God has not authorized African misery. God has nothing to do with it. It is humans who are responsible for the conditions of earthly life. Because God is just, Delany says, punishment will certainly be meted out to whites in the afterlife, so Africans ought now to concern themselves with their present circumstances—to remain content to let God be the cause of Africans’ misery is to remain asleep.

What are we to make of this objection? On the one hand, Delany frames it not as a rejection of Black and African religious sensibilities writ large, but of forms of Black religion that seem to have acquiesced to the slaveholding status quo. For him, the idea that God would punish Africans for their forefathers’ disobedience is a fiction on par with that of race marking innate differences in humanity. Both are tools for legitimating domination and unjust social orders; both are arraigned against Black

³⁶¹ Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000*, 229.

flourishing. As African American studies scholar Britt Rusert observes, Delany therefore does not criticize Black religious practice in itself, but only those forms which he thinks oppose themselves, either explicitly or implicitly, to political struggle.³⁶²

On the other hand, Delany appears to suggest Africans might be predisposed to observing precisely these forms of religious practice. “The colored races are highly susceptible of religion,” he writes, “it is a constituent principle of their nature, and an excellent trait in their character. But unfortunately for them, they carry it too far. Their hope is largely developed, and consequently, they usually stand still—hoping in God, and really expect him to do that for them, which it is necessary they should do themselves. This is their great mistake” (CD 64). For Delany (as for many other nineteenth- and twentieth-century Black thinkers), Africans are marked by a troubling impulse to search for answers to their political problems in the realm of religion. They suffer from an excess of hope, and one consequence of hope’s semblance—of an ill-fitting (because too great) expectation in God—is their acquiescence to material misery. That is, it seems to me Delany worries his compatriots’ proclivity for immoderate hope (as he sees it) perverts their religious observances and generates in them an otherworldly political orientation.

In his later serialized novel, *Blake, Or the Huts of America*, Delany bespeaks this criticism again, albeit more directly, in the voice of his protagonist, Henry Blake, who regards quietist religious practice with disdain. This time criticizing the antipolitics of “the silly nonsense of conjuration,” Delany writes:

“Now you see boys,” said Henry, “how much conjuration and such foolishness and stupidity is worth to the slaves of the South. All that it does, is to put money into the pockets of the pretended conjurer, give him power over others by making them afraid of him; and even old Gamby Gholar and Maudy Ghamus and the rest of the Seven Heads, with all of the high conjurers in the Dismal Swamp, are depending more upon me to deliver them from their confinement as prisoners in the Swamp and runaway slaves, than all their combined efforts together.”³⁶³

³⁶² Britt Rusert, “Delany’s Comet: Fugitive Science and the Speculative Imaginary of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly* 65.4 (2013), 817.

³⁶³ Martin R. Delany, *Blake, Or the Huts of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 138.

Sparing neither Christianity nor conjure from censure, *Blake* clarifies Delany's assertion in *Condition* that humans must be responsible for the conditions of their own lives, and that appeals to supernatural intervention are therefore a category mistake.³⁶⁴ Indeed, *Blake* makes clear that Delany's theodicy means to turn Africans away from misplaced hope in the supernatural toward hope in themselves.³⁶⁵ Africans are the adequate means to their own ends, that is, if they would but awaken to this knowledge. Somewhat paradoxically then, Delany's denunciation of the otherworldly excesses of Black religion, which I have earlier suggested can be traced to the discourses of classical African religions, are carried out in the name of what we may recognize after Walker and Stewart as an Ethiopianist religious ideal—the principle that the forces are latent within Africa and Africans to redeem themselves from slavery.³⁶⁶ Rusert provides a helpful way to think about this paradox: while Delany does criticize the ostensibly “superstitious knowledges” of his compatriots, he nevertheless “repeatedly abandons the dry plane of rational knowledge production for a mystically inflected praxis of freedom.”³⁶⁷ That is, he turns to the languages and tools of religion to challenge slaveholder power.

³⁶⁴ The full version of Delany's theodicy reads as follows: “God himself is perfect; perfect in all his works and ways. He has means for every end; and every means used must be adequate to the end to be gained. God's means are laws—fixed laws of nature, a part of His own being, and as immutable, as unchangeable as Himself. Nothing can be accomplished but through the medium of, and comfortable to these laws. . . . That which is Spiritual, can only be accomplished through the medium of the Spiritual law; that which is Moral, through the medium of the Moral law; and that which is Physical, through the medium of the Physical law. Otherwise than this, it is useless to expect any thing. Does a person want a spiritual blessing, he must apply through the medium of the spiritual law—*pray* for it in order to obtain it. If they desire to do a moral good, they must apply through the medium of the moral law—exercise their sense and feeling of *right* and *justice*, in order to effect it. Do they want to attain a physical end, they can only do so through the medium of the physical law—go to *work* with muscles, hands, limbs, might and strength, and this, and nothing else will attain it. . . . The argument that man must pray for what he receives, is a mistake, and one that is doing the colored people especially, incalculable injury. That man must pray in order to get to Heaven, every Christian will admit—but a great truth we have yet got to learn, that he can live on earth whether he is religious or not, so that he conforms to the great law of God, regulating the things of earth; the great physical laws” (CD 64-5).

³⁶⁵ Jerome McGann puts it clearly, writing: “Religion dominates the political action in *Blake*. It maps the struggle between what is perhaps the most basic repetition/comparison in the work: between false religion that justifies and promotes racist oppression and a religion of promise.” McGann, “Rethinking Delany's *Blake*,” 88.

³⁶⁶ Carole Lynn Stewart, *Temperance and Cosmopolitanism: African American Reformers in the Atlantic World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 35.

³⁶⁷ Rusert, “Delany's Comet,” 818.

4.4. OTHERWORLDLY RELIGION IN THE BLACK CHURCHES

It is possible that Delany's objection to the otherworldliness of certain Black religious attitudes derives from his roughly two-year tenure as a coeditor and antislavery lecturer for Frederick Douglass's abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*. Between 1847 and 1849, Delany traveled through Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, and Delaware, delivering antislavery lectures to Black communities and churches as a means of drumming up support for abolition. According to historian Tunde Adeleke, Delany and Douglass had expected Delany to be received by these churches with open arms—in part because of the Black church's history as a separatist institution—and had thus hoped that the churches would take a leading role in antislavery struggle. What Douglass and Delany found, however, was that many Black churches were not interested in direct action against injustice. Instead, these communities focused their attention upon religious revivalism and developing their members' capacities to withstand suffering, such that they might receive their blessings in the afterlife. "A good number of antebellum Black churches," writes Adeleke of the revivalistic churches which Delany encountered, "preached otherworldly and compensatory theology which confined the churches' function to helping their congregants psychologically endure temporal injustice in preparation for heavenly inheritance."³⁶⁸ While such churches were not opposed to abolitionism in itself, as they almost universally regarded their brethren's enslavement throughout the world as an offense, they generally opposed political action and determined instead to rely upon divine intervention and rewards. To say this is not to say these churches were apolitical or antipolitical, as the cultivation of communal capacities to withstand suffering is itself an important political practice. It is, however, to say they pursued a form of freedom through religious observance rather than contest and struggle—a form of freedom Delany disavowed.

One such church was in Lancaster City, PA. In a letter to Douglass dated January 16, 1849, which was published in the February 16, 1849 issue of *The North Star*, Delany describes the African

³⁶⁸ Tunde Adeleke, *In the Service of God and Humanity: Conscience, Reason, and the Mind of Martin R. Delany* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2021), 28.

population of this city as “few in number, and generally well to do, and ... intelligent; yet there is an indifference about them in regard to [antislavery] meetings and lectures.” He ascribes this indifference to their unfamiliarity with political education, for there is an “almost entire absence of such meetings among them.” Why were they absent? According to Delany, it was because the clergy in Lancaster City did not foster their presence. “As among our people generally,” he writes, “the church is the Alpha and Omega of all things. It is their only source of information—their only acknowledged public body—their State Legislature, as it were—their common council—their supreme court—their dictator and only acknowledged adviser; hence, that which does not emanate from the church, may not expect to interest the people to any considerable extent.” Although Delany applauded the two clergymen of Lancaster City because they “not only gave their consent to the use of the church, but gave their continual presence at the meetings, and also subscribed for the paper,” he decried their disinterest in his lectures, for “they had no interest in anything but religious meetings.” Such a lack of interest, in his mind, necessarily trickled down from clergy to their parishioners, which explained why his lectures were not only poorly attended but also regularly interrupted by bad behavior.³⁶⁹

In his assessment of the Black church in Lancaster City, Delany implies its leadership has been susceptible to influence from slaveowners and ideologues. In particular, he says their focus on religion rather than politics can be tied to “an error arising from the miserable blunders of our former spiritual teachers, instilled into them by their pro-slavery and slaveholding oppressors.” This error holds that politics corrupts true religion, that the means to be used for the abolition of slavery, “however moral, necessarily interfere with their religion.” Consequently, Delany writes, “many readily declare that they would rather be slaves than do anything that will interfere with their religion! Gracious God! to what a state of degradation and ignorance have we been reduced!”³⁷⁰ While it is necessary to quibble with

³⁶⁹ *The North Star*, February 16, 1849, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84026365/1849-02-16/ed-1/>.

³⁷⁰ *The North Star*, February 16, 1849.

Delany's top-down model of religious influence here, in the sense that it cannot be taken for granted that parishioners follow their clergy's lead, his point remains.³⁷¹ He is worried his contemporaries operate under misguided assumptions that underwrite the slaveholding status quo; that a certain kind of religious orientation keeps them from responding intelligently to their situation. Eddie Glaude puts the matter this way: "Delany ... wanted to break the hold that a certain reading of Christianity had on the minds and lives of African Americans: a naïve pacifism or quietism when confronted with the evil of white supremacy."³⁷²

Delany summarizes the erroneous teaching of churches such as the one in Lancaster City in a March 1849 op-ed in *The North Star*. Tying their doctrine to "the hell-originated mandates of slavery," he says, "There is nothing more common among the colored people in this country, than to hear continually enjoyed, and see constantly conformed to, the divine precept, 'First seek ye the Kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness and ALL other things shall be added.'" On the one hand, Delany takes no issue with the precept itself. On the other hand, he suggests its history of interpretation in Black churches owes more to slaveholder influence than to textual fidelity. One does not enter heaven by seeking first the kingdom and living a life of pious suffering, as the clergy of Lancaster City assert, but by acting in accord with Christian precepts to live with dignity. For Delany, the injunction to seek first the kingdom applies only to the original followers of Jesus, to whom it was addressed, and even then only to prove that "they would find means adequate to their wants and demands" in their lives as disciples. To translate this precept into a universal ethical injunction is thus to misread it, and, worse, to do so in a way that favors white slaveholders, for it keeps Africans from pursuing their wants and

³⁷¹ Scholars of lived religion have long troubled the assumption that clergy, leaders, and other forms of official hierarchy represent and guide the religious lives of adherents. While clergy may influence certain trends and behaviors, they are rarely the cause of such things—for they are as caught up in mutual webs of practice, orientation, and attitude as are the people they serve and direct. See especially essays by Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, R. Marie Griffith, and Robert Orsi in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

³⁷² Glaude, *Exodus!*, 19.

demands in order to render them “dejected, cast down, spiritless, and sighing in hope of a better world.” That is, it prevents them from engaging in direct action to rectify their condition.³⁷³

Of course, Delany did not find all Black churches to be in error. He was himself a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh. Many of the churches he toured on his lecture circuit opened their doors to him, with a significant number taking it upon themselves to assist antislavery.³⁷⁴ Delany commends certain ministers and parishioners, such as Mary Ann Shadd (Cary) of Wilmington, DE, for example, as exemplary of “choice character.” In particular, he recommends what is likely Shadd’s 1852 pamphlet, *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West, in Its Moral, Social and Political Aspect*, as “an excellent introduction to that great subject, the Moral Elevation of the colored people.” Against interpreters who construe him as secularizing, then, and inasmuch as his characterization of Black churches as “the Alpha and Omega of all things” in their communities is an accurate description of them as centers for politics, Delany thought churches had potential. They could prove both a harm and a help in Africans’ broader struggle to end chattel slavery in the U.S.³⁷⁵

4.5. THE RIGHT USES OF RELIGION

Gayraud Wilmore argues Delany’s ambivalent assessment of many Black churches stems from his “functionalist” understanding of religion, in which religious practice is assessed by its use-value for improving the quality of African life. Because Delany thinks God has stipulated right means for every end, Wilmore writes, “Delany reasoned that the right use of religion required an understanding of its function and limitations as ordained by God himself. ... that it is foolish to try to gain equality ... by praying for it. The universe is governed by spiritual, moral, and physical laws, and each restricted to ... own sphere of operation. Hence ... a spiritual blessing is to be prayed for, a moral good sought by

³⁷³ *The North Star*, March 23, 1849, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84026365/1849-03-23/ed-1/>.

³⁷⁴ Painter, “Martin R. Delany,” 152.

³⁷⁵ *The North Star*, March 23, 1849

exercising one's sense of justice, and a physical end requires the use of might." On Wilmore's view, Delany thinks religious observances can be called good only insofar as they are used properly and for the proper ends. Praying to get to heaven is good, then, because it is how one accomplishes this goal. The otherworldliness of certain Black churches proves a problem, however, because it tends to stress spiritual answers to physical problems. Praying for deliverance against white supremacists and slavers will not amount to much. Consequently, the right use of religion as Delany imagines it consists in its use as a tool for orienting people in the world such that they might pursue their own well-being. "Thus, more than any other person of the period," Wilmore writes, "[Delany] anticipated and developed one of the major emphases of black theology," namely, directing Black religion toward Black liberation.³⁷⁶

Adeleke extends Wilmore's claim, also framing Delany's "utilitarian and secular definition of religion" as a nineteenth-century precursor to Black liberation theology. "In the alternate theology Delany preached," writes Adeleke, "God functioned by *means* not *miracles* and had given humanity all the necessary *means*."³⁷⁷ Indeed, as an alternative to pursuing a heavenly reward, Delany proclaims that "NOW is the accepted time, TODAY is the Day of salvation."³⁷⁸ The problem with certain Black churches, then, is that they trust God too much. They ask God to do what they should themselves do: take action to lift themselves up. "To depend for assistance upon God," writes Delany of his ideal religious attitude, "is a *duty* and right; but to know when, how, and in what manner to obtain it, is the key to this great Bulwark of Strength, and Depository of Aid" (CD 64). For him, religion is a means of teaching, awakening, and conjuring Africans to summon the power to contest their status as slaves.

It seems to me Delany's notion of religion might therefore be said to approximate what contemporary scholars of religion call a repertoire, or a storehouse of resources orienting persons and

³⁷⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 137.

³⁷⁷ Adeleke, *In the Service of God and Humanity*, 30.

³⁷⁸ *The North Star*, March 23, 1849.

communities toward power.³⁷⁹ As a “great Bulwark of Strength, and Depository of Aid,” religion is a toolkit for the negotiation of various situations in which one might find oneself and one’s community. One must simply use it correctly, or with the appropriate know-how, for it to be effective. Of course, Delany was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and his writing regularly appealed to Christian norms and values. As we have seen, his work often suggests there is a proper religious orientation in the world, which contemporary pluralistic scholars of religion might deny on principle. At the same time, however, Delany also advances an early form of historical consciousness, in which he suggests religion has been fashioned by various peoples for diverse purposes. Like Stewart and Walker before him, Delany claims religion was first used by ancient Ethiopians and Egyptians—whom he regards as one people—as a means for inculcating social ethics and political order. Indeed, perhaps the most interesting element of Delany’s description of Ethiopian and Egyptian religion is his representation of their practices and deities as “matters of policy.”³⁸⁰

I say this is interesting because it demonstrates a certain self-awareness on Delany’s part about the contingency of religion as a historical category. Even as Delany thinks religion ought to situate people in a particular way in the world, he recognizes that other peoples have used religion differently. Although rudimentary, his reflections on religion appear to allow for the category to function as both a first- and second-order term. As a first-order term, Delany seems to think religion ought to serve people as a repertoire of practices, beliefs, and attitudes for attaining their desired spiritual ends; this is its prescriptive purpose. As a second-order term, he seems to think religion explains historic processes of social organization and ethical formation; this is its descriptive purpose. Like Walker and many nineteenth-century Black thinkers roughly contemporaneous with him, Delany thinks there is a

³⁷⁹ Kathryn Lofton, “Religious History as Religious Studies,” *Religion* 42.3 (2012), 384.

³⁸⁰ Martin R. Delany, *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color, with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization, from Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry* (Philadelphia: Harper & Brother, Publishers, 1880), 103.

determinate content to religion—content that has been revealed by God—but he does not dismiss all those religions that depart from it. He merely asserts that forms of religion can be judged better and worse directly in proportion to how much they adhere to this content.

Although Delany certainly regards otherworldly Black religious attitudes with disdain, his core concern in *Condition* is not delineating a proper notion of religion. Unlike Stewart and Walker before him, his Ethiopianist history of African misery does not demand a return to right religion. Instead, he means to rehearse a political narrative about how Africans in the U.S. have come to constitute the part that has no part—have come, that is, to exist in a condition of statelessness. Delany's objection to Africans' sleepy and slavish religious sensibilities therefore derives in large part from his sense that these sensibilities play a role in perpetuating African dispossession. Religion is a key concern for him, then, only insofar as it has the power to stir up resistance to oppression or the power to reinforce acquiescence to it. As Delany corrects his readers' misguided views about spiritual means of elevation, then, he does so in view of the paradox I earlier identified—that is, Delany criticizes forms of Black religion for being too religious based on an Ethiopianist ideal.

5. THEORIZING AFRICAN REDEMPTION

If *Condition* rehearses a story about Africans' enslavement by whites that aims to rouse them to rectify their statelessness in 1852, then *Political Destiny* translates this story into a political philosophical argument in 1854. Indeed, *Political Destiny* depicts the political problem of Black misery in terms even more striking than *Condition*. It addresses colonization—not as in the American Colonization Society's attempts to remove superficially free Africans to Liberia, which Delany adamantly disavows—but as in the total political subjection of one people by another. “We have not addressed you as *citizens*,” the speech begins, “a term desired ever cherished by us, — because such you have never been. We have not addressed you as *freemen*, because such privileges have never been enjoyed by any colored man in

the United States. Why, then, should we flatter your credulity, by inducing you to believe that which neither has now, nor never before had, an existence?" (PD 327).

Delany therefore opens *Political Destiny* with an interrogatory framed by the trope of citizenship. Using the freeman as a figure, he moves between the political conditions of African life in the U.S. and the curtailed desires of African persons, the actualization of which he calls "destiny." Because many of his contemporaries, for example, operate under the "false impression ... that the privilege of *voting* constitutes, or necessarily embodies, the *rights of citizenship*," he feels compelled to say, "A more radical error never obtained favor among an oppressed people." In the speech's opening lines, he thus links citizenship to sovereignty rather than to suffrage, the latter of which he says is simply a "*privilege*—there is no right about it—of giving our *approbation* to that which our *rulers may do*, without the privilege, on our part, of doing the same thing" (PD 329). Delany roots citizenship and freedom not in the granting of rights, which may be given to a colonized and dominated people, but in a people's ability to make its desires "binding"—that is, in their ability to determine their destinies without depending upon the permission of another. For a people to exist as free citizens in his mind, then, is for them to "constitute an essential part of the *ruling element* of the country in which they live" (PD 329). Freedom, Delany says, consists not in rights but in power; it is the ability to enact and to actualize one's political desires. This is why Africans in America have been neither freemen nor citizens. It is also why they have been unable to fulfill their destinies.

5.1. PRINCIPLES OF SOVEREIGNTY AND ORIGINAL IDENTITY

Robert Gooding-Williams calls this formulation Delany's "sovereign principle." He writes, "Put precisely, the sovereign principle is the proposition that an individual counts as *politically free*—that is, as enjoying the political liberty of a free agent in a free government—just in case his right to govern himself, and thus to govern (to participate in any government that governs him), is *acknowledged* by the actual rulers, that is, by those who govern." Observing that for Delany the individual stands in

for the whole, Gooding-Williams further notes that this means acknowledgement here is constitutive of a people's sovereignty, as it is acknowledgement which confers upon one the power to make their desires binding.³⁸¹ For Delany, it matters little whether acknowledgement "be founded upon a true or false, a just or an unjust basis" (*PD* 329). All that is required is the conferral of a status. In theory, one might demand an acknowledgement through brute force, or one might receive a principled acknowledgment from one's interlocutors upon the basis of ideas about universal equality. We have seen in *Condition*, however, that Delany thinks such principled acknowledgements unlikely. History suggests the strong tend to dominate and disavow the weak whenever they can and, moreover, that they justify this domination by fashioning ideas about essential racial differences. As pertains to Africans in the U.S., then, Delany maintains they must either find a way to force an acknowledgment of their sovereignty and so become an essential ruling element of the country in which they live, or they must leave. But because he thinks forcing an acknowledgement impossible in America, he insists they must depart the U.S.

But why does Delany believe this is Africans' only choice? Presuming Africans do not possess the requisite numbers or might to force an acknowledgement, he observes that they have further been disempowered by American custom and law. Where in *Condition* he describes this disempowerment as a generalized social proscription, in *Political Destiny* he says white Americans have made "the color of the blacks ... a badge of degradation, acknowledged by statute, organic law, and the common consent of the people" (*PD* 331). He thus identifies two fundamental problems: the problem of law, on the one hand, and the problem of custom, on the other, both of which contribute to the negative racialization of African peoples. Apart from a rebellion, which he does not deem prudent on the basis of numbers (*PD* 355), the only way Delany thinks Africans will receive an acknowledgement of their sovereignty in the U.S. will be for them, first, to alter the law, such that it would, "in its decrees, entirely

³⁸¹ Gooding-Williams, "Martin Delany's Two Principles," 80.

[destroy their] identity as an inferior, leaving no trace of [their] former condition visible,” and, second, to change American customs, such that the denigration of Blackness would no longer be a practice buttressed by common consent (*PD* 331). Yet Delany despairs that the problem of custom will ever be rectified because he thinks that American law is not just productive of racial hatred but, as we have seen, also expressive and preservative of “all the malignity and negro-hate inseparable from [the] very being, [of] Christian democrats and American advocates of equality” (*PD* 332). That is, Delany worries the very being of the citizens that compose the ruling part of the U.S. means Africans will always be denied citizenship.

Delany thus invokes a second political principle in his argument on behalf of leaving the U.S., the “principle of original identity,” which holds that a people must comprise the *ruling element* of the country in which they live “by necessity of numbers” to secure their sovereignty. It also holds that this necessity of numbers must be united by an original identity, or what he sometimes calls “an identity of origin.” If the principle of sovereignty focuses on the *ruling* component of this construction, then the principle of original identity addresses the *element*. It is the necessity of numbers, Delany thinks, that secures a people’s capacities to rule itself. “Upon this solid foundation,” he writes, “rests the fabric of every substantial political structure in the world, which cannot exist without it; and so soon as a people or nation lose their original identity, just so soon must that nation or people become extinct. Powerful though they may have been, they must fall.” Indeed, he asserts this principle helps explain the downfall of “Egypt, Carthage, Rome, and the former Grecian states,” as well as the present power of “Great Britain, Russia, the United States, and Turkey.” Where the former states ultimately fell because they admitted too many diverse peoples into their midst, the latter have risen because they have enshrined one population as the ruling class (*PD* 333). The principle of original identity is not a matter of justice, of right and wrong, but of empirical fact. Just as history shows that the strong tend to dominate the weak, it also shows those united by original identity tend to be the strong.

For Delany, having an original identity means, in part, having common interests. Because he maintains individuals stand in for the whole, he thinks a people can only be said to have common interests when these interests make a claim on each of its individual members, such that each individual identifies with the interests of the group. The “Platform: or Declaration of Sentiments of the Cleveland Convention,” where *Political Destiny* was first delivered as a speech, says much the same thing, when its authors insist “that no People can maintain their freedom without an interested motive and a union of sentiment as a rule of action and nucleus [*sic*] to hold them together.”³⁸² Indeed, according to both Delany and the Convention, a people have common interests and thus an original identity when they are joined together in pursuit of certain purposes. Not essentialisms but historical artifacts, original identities are thus constituted in the mundane pursuits of ordinary existence, where diverse individuals gather in common and in so doing generate “a sense of being one of us,” or a sense of solidarity.³⁸³

In *Condition*, Delany worries Africans in the Americas do not have common interests because he thinks many have acquiesced to their status as slaves, developing what he calls “Second Nature.”³⁸⁴ He writes that his early repatriationist schemes, which he first advanced as a young man, were “always hooted at, and various objections raised: one on account of distance, and another that of climate.” Yet he observes a troubling inconsistency, namely, that he “has since seen some of the same persons engage themselves to their white American oppressors—officers in the war against Mexico, exposing

³⁸² *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, the 24th, 25th, and 26th of August, 1854* (Pittsburgh: A.A. Andersen, 1854), 23.

³⁸³ Glaude, *Exodus!*, 15-16.

³⁸⁴ For Delany, “Second Nature” names the acceptance of either the condition of being enslaved or of being a noncitizen. In each case, what troubles him is the way that this acceptance leads to changes in demeanor. He says, for example, “The degradation of the slave parent has been entailed upon the child, induced by the subtle policy of the oppressor, in regular succession handed down from father to son—a system of regular submission and servitude, menialism, and dependence, until it has become almost a physiological function of our system, an actual condition of our nature ... It is not necessarily degrading; it would not be, to one or a few people of a kind, but a *whole race of servants* are a degradation to that people ... A continuance in any position, becomes what is termed ‘Second Nature’; it begets an *adaptation*, and *reconciliation of mind* to such condition. It changes the whole physiological condition of the system, and adapts man and woman to a higher or lower sphere in the pursuits of life. The offsprings of slaves and peasantry, have the general characteristics of their parents; and nothing but a different course of training and education, will change the character.” (CD 72; 213; 218)

themselves to the chances of the heat of the day and the damp of the night—risking the dangers of the battle-field, in the capacity of servants. And had the Americans taken Mexico, no people would have flocked there faster than the colored people from the United States” (*CD* 198). For the Delany of *Condition*, Second Nature means certain segments of the African population in the U.S. are improperly attached to their masters and so unable to desire their freedom as they ought.

By contradistinction, Delany opens *Political Destiny* with the assertion that Africans in the U.S. do share a common desire to be citizens and freemen. Recall the framing interrogatory: “We have not addressed you as *citizens*,—a term desired and ever cherished by us,—because such you have never been. ... Why, then, should we flatter your credulity, by inducing you to believe that which neither has now, nor never before had, an existence?” (*PD* 327). In view of Delany’s concerns in *Condition*, one might be inclined to consider this interrogatory as more of a rhetorical device, more of an attempt to engender this desire in his audience, than of an accurate description of their desires. What matters for Delany in *Political Destiny* is that the Black population of the U.S. is united by its common desire for citizenship. For it is in view of this common interest that he can propose repatriation as a strategy for achieving their goals, as it would appear to meet the conditions of Delany’s two principles. If Africans were to repatriate to an appropriate location, then they would be able to constitute the demographic supermajority, so the numerical ruling element, as well as ensure their attachments to one another were not threatened by such perils as Second Nature.

Political Destiny therefore provides the philosophical counterpart to *Condition*’s narrative. Where the latter tells a story about how Africans might achieve their destiny in view of history, the former provides a principled analysis. Indeed, in view of this analysis Delany proposes that Africans in America ought to move to Central and South America or the West Indies based on his principles of sovereignty and original identity. On the one hand, by moving to a majority Black locale, Africans will not have to force their acknowledgement; they will receive it because they reside in a polity where

Black peoples are already sovereign. On the other hand, such movement will reinforce the already existing political unity and demographic power of Black peoples in these regions. This is why the Delany of *Political Destiny* maintains Africans must repatriate if they are to secure their freedom. They will not be able to change American customs or laws given their entrenched white supremacist character, but they can join already-existing polities where Africans and other people of color constitute a supermajority and in this way, they will be able to make their desires binding. *Political Destiny* thus develops and extends *Condition's* declension narrative into the form of a political philosophical argument.

5.2. REVOLUTIONARY PROPHECY

Despite *Political Destiny's* character as a political-philosophical argument, Gooding-Williams observes that Delany occasionally adopts a prophetic tone, “as when he proclaims that black American emigration could have a world historical significance that exceeds the concerns of black Americans per se.” Although his speech chiefly stages an analytic argument about how Africans in the U.S. ought to establish a polity in which they can enjoy freedom and citizenship for themselves, it also performs “revolutionary prophecy” that attempts to galvanize its audience to engage “a struggle of monumental significance that will decide not only the political destiny of the colored race on the American continent but, ultimately, the *world's* destiny.”³⁸⁵ Curiously, however, Gooding-Williams elides this element of Delany's thought in his analysis of *Political Destiny*. He suggests in a footnote that those interested in this register of Delany's voice might turn to Michel Foucault's notion of race war to make sense of it. While Foucault's prescient analysis of race, racial formations, and racialization can certainly illuminate readings of Delany, it seems to me this suggestion risks abstracting Delany from his own contexts, in which discussions of religion, racialization, and race war were already prevalent. One need only think of Henry Highland Garnet's 1843 “Address to the Slaves of the United States,” for instance.

³⁸⁵ Gooding-Williams, “Martin Delany's Two Principles,” 94.

Indeed, this suggestion even risks avoiding Delany's own reflections on racial formation in *Condition*. Like Walker and Stewart before him, Delany draws upon several African American, African diasporic, and pan-African political and religious traditions which take racial formation seriously precisely as a religious and political problem.

6. ETHIOPIANISM AS MEANS OF ELEVATION

I have already briefly discussed one of these traditions in chapter 2's analysis of Walker. When Delany decides to situate Africans' political destiny within the frame of a prophetic horizon, thus repudiating a strong distinction between sacred and secular histories, he takes their involvement in the histories of civilization and Christianity to imply an ongoing significance that has not yet been attained. Such a position is reminiscent of the tradition I earlier called "vindicationism" after St. Clair Drake and Wilson Moses, and it typically indexes the idea that Africans not only have a destiny yet to be attained but have also played a key role in human history. In fact, Drake and Moses cite Delany as one of this tradition's chief exemplars. The "vindicationist tradition, nurtured by Delany and others," writes Moses, "asserted that African peoples had once been something more than objects of pity and contempt – that they had been contributors to human civilization 'from the earliest period of the history of nations.'"³⁸⁶ We see Delany's emphasis upon Africa's glorious past and promising future in his 1879 *Principia of Ethnology*, for instance, when he observes that the first Gentile to receive the Christian gospel after the death and resurrection of Jesus was an Ethiopian and he therefore asks: "Is this not wonderful? ... Is there not in this a prophetic destiny shown for this people, in a higher scale of morals and religion than has yet been attained?"³⁸⁷ Drawing upon an example from sacred history, the authority of which, he says, can withstand the strongest critical scrutiny, Delany uses it to identify

³⁸⁶ Moses, *Afrotopia*, 228.

³⁸⁷ Delany, *Principia of Ethnology*, 89.

an authentic past of Ethiopian-African greatness, as well as to verify his sense that Africans have much in store for them.³⁸⁸

Yet vindicationism does not quite capture the prophetic dimensions of Delany's reflections upon African history and destiny. It is chiefly concerned, after all, with the vindication of the ancestors. Furthermore, most vindicationists, such as John Marrant in the eighteenth century and St. Clair Drake in the twentieth, have tended to maintain that African peoples have contributions, or "gifts," to offer humanity without making a corresponding appeal to prophecy or divine destiny. Despite vindicationist sentiments commonly taking a prophetic tone, such a register of voice is nonnative to the tradition; it is derived from another, related discourse. What else then can explain Delany's prophetic declamations about African destiny? I understand Delany's sense of Africans' impending destiny to be linked the promise many nineteenth-century Black figures found in Psalm 68:31. Like Walker, Stewart, and others before him, Delany draws upon the Ethiopian prophecy and its attendant narratives as he fashions his claims about the ways Africans have and will yet shape human history.

In outlining Ethiopianism as a mode of Black religious thought I have thus far emphasized its characteristics as a tradition, not only as a diachronic social practice but also its distinctive arguments, (dis)agreements, and some of its key contributors. I have aimed to show, too, the contentious historical narrative that is its animating impulse, and which also works to forge a connection between Africans' imagined pasts, presents, and futures. For these reasons I can now say the meaning of the Ethiopian prophecy is not fixed; that those whom scholars sometimes call Ethiopianists neither think within the parameters of some preordained discourse; nor that they meditate upon African history and destiny by replacing critical thought with discourses of authority, as if the "right" view of African history would lead to their ultimate liberation. Yes, Black Africans *qua* Ethiopians have been unjustly enslaved and modern (white) history has been one-sidedly narrated to rationalize their enslavement—Walker,

³⁸⁸ Mandy A. Reid, "Utopia Is in the Blood: The Bodily Utopias of Martin R. Delany and Pauline Hopkins," *Utopian Studies* 22.1 (2011), 91-103.

Stewart, and Delany have been clear on this—but, for those bespeaking Ethiopianist refrains, this is primarily a moral and political rather than empirical problem. Whereas vindicationists tend to be concerned with “proving” Africans’ humanity through historical revision, Ethiopianists therefore treat battles over Black history and destiny as problems to be addressed in politics rather than in knowledge, and the Ethiopian prophecy as a resource with which to spur political action.

As those whom I am calling Ethiopianists typically use it, the message of Psalm 68:31 is that Africans’ ought not acquiesce to their situation. Indeed, in my view, Psalm 68:31 should be understood as a prophecy not because it has been used to predict particular African futures. Instead, it is because the psalm proves a powerful rhetorical device for addressing Africans, conceived here as a community united by history and race, and so also mediating this community’s relationships with the larger realities of enslavement, disenfranchisement, and diaspora.³⁸⁹ If prophets are understood to occupy a distinctive social role, or an office, as George Shulman has argued, which involves announcing truths and calling peoples to action, then prophecy can be seen as the mode of address most appropriate to this office.³⁹⁰ The Ethiopian prophecy therefore functions to address the African community by confronting them with the harsh realities of their situation and summoning them to do something about it. The specific question this chapter puts to Delany, then, is how he uses the message of the Ethiopian prophecy to prompt a particular form of religious and political action—repatriation.

6.1. THE PROBLEM OF ENTRENCHED WHITE SUPREMACY

Indeed, this is the reason I have spent so much time discussing Delany’s analysis of the plight of Black peoples in the U.S. This discussion has been necessary background for understanding why

³⁸⁹ Following Kamau Brathwaite, David Scott suggests that the Black diaspora can be thought of as “a very special kind of community: the community of those for whom ‘Slavery’ is the permanent name of a trial and tribulation which they are yet to overcome, and ‘Africa’ the name of a difference, of a refusal, and therefore of a horizon of hopes at once moral and historical, aesthetic, and political.” I take Ethiopianists to be working toward a conception of Black diaspora community, and, indeed, of Africinity, such as this one. David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 106-127.

³⁹⁰ George Shulman, “Thinking Authority Democratically: Prophetic Practices, White Supremacy, and Democratic Politics,” *Political Theory* 36.5 (2008), 713.

Delany—unlike Walker and Stewart before him—ties the message of Psalm 68:31 to a repatriative project rather than one of political and structural transformation. What Delany sees that Walker and Stewart did not is the entrenched character of white supremacy in the U.S. Despite the country’s professed norms and aspirations, Delany’s disappointments, both personal and political, convince him that the possibility of structural transformation is a fiction. In particular, he sees that even free Africans cannot truly be called free—as the dictates of U.S. custom and law do not protect Africans’ sovereignty as they protect whites. He says, “We are politically, not of them, but aliens to the laws and political privileges of the country. These are truths—fixed facts, that quaint theory and exhausted moralizing, are impregnable to, and fall harmlessly before” (*CD* 173). For him, U.S. custom, law, and habit are immutably opposed to Black flourishing. He therefore uses the Ethiopian prophecy to address his audiences differently than did Walker and Stewart: by summoning their energies not to fight, initially, but to flight. He believes the only way Africans can overcome white supremacy and slaveocracy is for them to construct a polity of their own with which to challenge their hegemony.³⁹¹

6.2. REPATRIATION AGAINST SLAVEOCRACY AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Many nineteenth-century repatriationists saw their work as challenging white American power. Perhaps none more so than those involved with the African Civilization Society. Founded in 1858 by Henry Highland Garnet before dissolving in 1869 due to financial difficulties, the African Civilization Society (contrasted with the American Colonization Society) aimed to aid the “great work” of fulfilling Psalm 68:31 by promoting “the civilization and Christianization of Africa, as well as the welfare of her children in all lands.” From the outset a Christian organization, the African Civilization Society tied its hopes for civilization and Christianization to political economic projects of Black independence. It held the prophecy would not be fulfilled if whites rather than Blacks were directing Africa’s destiny. But when Africans began to lift one another up, thought the founders of this organization, then the

³⁹¹ It is the distinctive force of Delany’s version of this claim that has caused many scholars to designate him the “father of Black nationalism.” Moses, “Introduction,” 1-42.

psalm would soon be fulfilled. “It is evident,” declares Garnet in the society’s constitution, “that the prophecy that ‘Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God’, is on point of fulfillment, and that the work, when commenced, shall be ‘soon’ accomplished.”³⁹² But what precisely is “the work?” How did Garnet and his collaborators imagine the Christianization and civilization of Africa?

In a combative letter sent to Frederick Douglass during one of their debates about the merits of repatriation, Garnet describes the work as consisting in the promotion of agriculture, lawful trade, and commerce in continental Africa, as well as the destruction of the slave trade and U.S. slavery.³⁹³ For members of the African Civilization Society, the goal of repatriation was not simply to remove free Africans from the U.S.—as it was for the American Colonization Society—but also to use this removal, which they thought more properly a “return” or a “repair” to weaken slavery’s profitability and thereby to transform decisively the racial character of U.S. political life. The work of the African Civilization Society as its founders imagined it, then, was to redeem Africans both *from* the U.S. and *for* the project of advancing their own interests.

An article published in *The New York Times* on May 16, 1860 further demonstrates how Garnet and other supporters of the African Civilization Society imagined themselves to be at cross purposes with the American Colonization Society. Reporting the testimony of a certain pro-civilizationist in support of Garnet and the African Society, one J.B. Smith, for example, the article states, “The Society, he said, stood upon its own basis, and had nothing to do with the Colonization Society. ... The facts were that while the Colonization Society did not propose to interfere with Slavery in this country at all, while the Civilization Society believed in interference with Slavery, and encouraged all societies

³⁹² *African Civilization Society, Constitution of the African Civilization Society; Together with the Testimony of Forty Distinguished Citizens of New York and Brooklyn, to the Importance of the Objects Contemplated by its Friends, Also, the Anniversary Address, Delivered by Rev. Joseph P. Thompson, D.D., at the Annual Meeting of the Society, May 19th, 1861* (New Haven: Thomas J. Stafford, 1861), 1.

³⁹³ Frederick Douglass, “African Civilization Society,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, February 1859, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/african-civilization-society/>.

organized for that purpose.”³⁹⁴ Making interference with slavery a defining characteristic of their movement, the African Civilization Society and its supporters described themselves as interested in Africans’ well-being rather than that of America. Indeed, such may be said to be the difference that makes a difference between emigration and repatriation, that the former hopes to keep Black peoples under white power, and the latter hopes to establish Black power.³⁹⁵

6.2.1.REPATRIATION AND ITS CRITICS

Several important criticisms of repatriationist societies such as the African Civilization Society have been leveled since their emergence, nearly all of which question the idea that there is a substantive difference between repatriation and emigration as I have just glossed them. Douglass articulates the first forcefully in his exchange with Garnet, and it may be summarized by his pithy slogan: “We prefer to remain in America.”³⁹⁶ That is, as I indicated in the previous chapter, many opponents of repatriation determined that Africans should remain in America, “the land of their birth,” and work to better their condition there. Figures in this camp reason that any sizable African departure, whether by repatriation or colonization, entrenches white supremacist power and thereby works against Africans’ purposes.

The second criticism has been most powerfully leveled by twentieth- and twenty-first century scholars of African religions and cultures, although Phillis Wheatley offered an early iteration in the 1700s, and it consists in the charge that repatriationist projects are anti-African; that their visions for returning to Africa and repairing the dislocations of slavery import so-called “western” perspectives on African life. Wheatley proves instructive here. Refusing an eighteenth-century colonizationist’s

³⁹⁴ “THE AFRICAN CIVILIZATION SOCIETY.; Response to its Opponents No Connection with the Colonization Society,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1860, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/1860/05/16/archives/the-african-civilization-society-response-to-its-opponents-no.html>.

³⁹⁵ Martin R. Delany, “Introduction,” William Nesbit, *Four Months in Liberia: Or African Colonization Exposed* (Pittsburgh: J.T. Shyrock, 1855), 81-86.

³⁹⁶ Douglass, “African Civilization Society.”

epistolary request that she “return to Africa” as a missionary, Wheatley suggests she has nothing to say to native Africans. “Upon my arrival,” she declares, “how like a Barbarian shoud [sic] I look to the Natives; I can promise that my tongue shall be quiet for a strong reason indeed being an utter stranger to the language of Anamaboe.”³⁹⁷ As David Kazanjian observes, Wheatley’s refusal not only refutes the colonizationist’s assumption that African cultures are homogenous—are, that is, so uniform that a Black woman reared in the U.S. should be able to communicate readily and instinctively with West Africans—but also challenges the idea that continental Africans are inferior to those in the diaspora, who have gleaned the “civilizing benefits” of modernity.³⁹⁸ By depicting herself as a barbarian, she reverses the usual cultural hierarchies in eighteenth-century moments of encounter, making the natives of Anomabu (in what is now Ghana) the ones who would marvel at her babble. Wheatley thus intimates, however subtly, that the suggestion she return to Africa to evangelize the natives is grounded in a cultural provincialism, which holds that continental Africans are needful of something the western world has to offer. “Do Africans truly need the agricultural, cultural, and religious knowledges of modernity?” she asks, rhetorically.

The third major criticism of repatriation, most often leveled by theorists of racial capitalism, maintains that repatriationists and their institutions advance an early form of Black settler colonialism, in which Americanized Black peoples inaugurate forms of life amenable to the accumulation of capital. Alex Zamalin argues, for instance, that Delany’s vision for a Black settlement in Africa merely replicates the contours of elite life in the United States, imagining a Black utopia in which white supremacy can no longer prevent educated and self-possessed Africans from acquiring wealth and power. “For him,” Zamalin writes, “the core question was always whether Africa was serviceable for the exploits of black American individualism, whether its natural resources were ripe for production, and whether its

³⁹⁷ Phillis Wheatley, “Letter to John Thornton,” October 30, 1770.

³⁹⁸ Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*, 126.

population could be moralized through Christianity.”³⁹⁹ In effect, critics such as Zamalin hold that even as Delany and his collaborators imagine themselves at cross purposes with proslavery organizations such as the American Colonization Society, they nevertheless advance the interests of racialized (and racializing) capital by establishing capitalist colonies on the western coast of Africa. The freedom they imagine and fashion for themselves is thus infected with the cultural and economic logics of racial capitalism, at best, and another form of slavery, at worst.⁴⁰⁰

6.3. REPATRIATION, REDEMPTIONISM, AND BLACK FOLK RELIGION

For my purposes, Wilson Moses provides the most instructive criticism of repatriationists such as Delany, Garnet, and the African Civilization Society. Combining versions of the second and third criticisms, which we may understand as cultural and critical theoretical criticisms, respectively, Moses claims these figures—whom he calls “redemptionists,” owing to their reliance upon Psalm 68:31—try to reconcile their nascent pan-Africanist commitments to self-determination with “the modernizing formula of the so-called three C’s, Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization.”⁴⁰¹ On Moses’s account, the crux of redemptionism is that Black peoples can and should improve their condition by pursuing collective uplift and self-reliance. The redemption of Africa is a matter for Africans only, he writes of their separatist philosophy, and “only by putting first things first could the black race vindicate its claims to equality, and force the proud Anglo-Saxons to acknowledge its rights.”⁴⁰² Yet Moses regards their attempted rapprochement between African redemption and the three C’s as unfortunate. In his view, their promotion of Christianity, commerce, and civilization tended to make them contemptuous of traditional African cultures and institutions—for they sought to replace “ancestral” societies with

³⁹⁹ Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 23.

⁴⁰⁰ Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents*, 210.

⁴⁰¹ Moses, *Afrotopia*, 26.

⁴⁰² Moses, *Crummell*, 127-28.

“modern” ones. That is, despite their protests to the contrary, redemptionists make the same mistake as colonizationists, the one Wheatley so powerfully points out, by assuming that ancestral societies are “barbaric” rather than civilized and then intensifying this supposed barbarism by working to install the machineries of racial capitalism in their place.⁴⁰³

As Gayraud Wilmore observes, however, it is likely that redemptionists’ sense of concern for Africa and its peoples are more complicated and emerge out of the contours of Black religious life; that redemptionism, in other words, has a more complicated intellectual history than many critics allow. Following Charles Long’s account of the relationship between religion and theology, Wilmore suggests redemptionists’ “theology of missionary emigrationism and racial destiny evolved from the aggressive thrust of black religion toward liberation from slavery and an African homeland.” Rather than locate redemptionism as a late-stage Black appropriation of Manifest Destiny, Wilmore argues its concern for the redemption of Africa emerges from the norms implicit in Black religious practice. Although Delany sometimes criticizes his contemporaries for the irrationality of their religious life, as *Blake* shows, Wilmore hypothesizes that his redemptionist commitments can be read as extensions of Black religious attitudes, including the Africana desire to venerate and vindicate the ancestors. Extrapolating “a theological principle from folk religion ... ‘God helps those who help themselves,’” writes Wilmore, Delany forges his own distinctive idiom: “an explicit theology of race redemption ... essentially an understanding of God as liberator—a God who was calling oppressed blacks out of the land of their captivity to a place that he had appointed for them and their posterity forever.”⁴⁰⁴ Neither lambasting Delany for his promotion of the three Cs in West Africa nor sentimentally excusing him in view of his liberative aspirations for African peoples, Wilmore argues that Delany (and other redemptionists) found in the details of Black religious life stimulus for his project of Black destiny.

⁴⁰³ Brit Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 159.

⁴⁰⁴ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 137.

For Wilmore, it is not the early modern apparatuses of progress but Black diasporic peoples' creative reenactments of their histories—their regular ritualization and intensive interpretation—that grounds Delany's vision of African redemption. While it is true Delany and his redemptionist compatriots were sometimes dismissive of continental African customs, this was an intracommunal affair, so to speak, rather than a simple instance of overly Americanized Africans importing “modern” values back to the continent and imposing them upon those whom they imagined to be their racial kin.

This is also where I enter. On Wilmore's account, whereas Delany draws from the abstract “realism and wisdom of folk religion”—draws, that is, from a rather thin conception of the norms and values laden within nineteenth-century Black religious practice—I argue Delany draws from the concrete legacy of diasporic African attempts to “return home.” In particular, I argue that Delany draws from the inherited legacy of his maternal grandparents, Shango and Graci Peace. As not simply a nineteenth-century movement emerging in response to white projects of colonization, this legacy is as old as the earliest communities of the enslaved in the Americas, and it is animated by the impulse to repair slavery's destructions and dislocations. To say this is not to disagree with Wilmore but to develop his claim—for repatriation is a religious practice elaborated in folktales about flying Africans and folk customs celebrating the recently departed dead as reuniting with their loved ones in “Guinea.”⁴⁰⁵ As I understand Delany after Wilmore, it is these practices that rest at the heart of his repatriationist account of African redemption. For the Black race to achieve its destiny, that is, the consummation of its desires, slavery's dislocations must be redressed.

If it is true that Delany's reflections on African redemption are grounded in the thrust, realism, and wisdom of Black folk religion, and if these reflections are carried out in an Ethiopianist key as I have claimed, then these influences should be audible in his uses of Psalm 68:31. By my lights, the clearest example of the entanglement of repatriation and the Ethiopian prophecy in Delany's thought

⁴⁰⁵ Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1967), 196-198.

rests in his 1861 *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, which he composed following a 1859-1860 scouting trip to Yorubaland. Written in the same spirit as *Condition* and *Political Destiny*, this document sets forth Delany's dramatic plan for establishing a viable, independent Black state in what is now Nigeria. I conclude this chapter, therefore, by considering *Official Report*. For some critics, *Official Report* is fatally flawed in its proposal for pan-African redemption, because its elitist, masculinist, and American-centered conception of Africanity excludes most Africans from its purview. For others, such as historian Toyin Falola, *Official Report* proves a groundbreaking work of pan-Africanist theory, "the first of its kind in tone and focus," celebrating Africans' capacity for self-governance as well as their past and future glories.⁴⁰⁶ I think it is more accurate to say, however, that *Official Report* wrestles with the question of how to secure the survival (and even flourishing) of Black diaspora peoples in a nineteenth-century world growing increasingly hostile to their well-being.⁴⁰⁷ *Official Report* thus performatively enacts a tension constitutive of Ethiopianism and difficult to resolve: What will it take for the Ethiopian prophecy to be fulfilled? If prophecy means not so much prediction, as I have argued, but a mode of address and ethical-political exhortation—indeed, a summons—then how should one understand the promise of Psalm 68:31 in relation to Black destiny?

7. DELANY ON BLACK DESTINY

Delany's most forceful use of the Ethiopian prophecy links him to a nascent pan-Africanism, on the one hand, and to the vindicationist sensibilities and customs of African Americans, on the other. Both of these traditions as Delany inhabits them stress the need for Black self-determination and racial uplift. Toward the end of *Official Report*, Delany declares:

Our policy must be—and I hazard nothing in promulging it; nay, without this design and feeling, there would be a great deficiency of self-respect, pride of race, and love of country, and we might never expect to challenge the respect of nations—*Africa for the African race, and black men to rule them*. By black I mean, men of African descent who claim an identity with the race. ... "Princes shall come out of Egypt;

⁴⁰⁶ Toyin Falola, "Introduction," Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered* and *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004), 17.

⁴⁰⁷ Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 48-85.

Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”—Ps. Lxviii. 31. With the fullest reliance upon this blessed promise, I humbly go forward in—I may repeat—the grandest prospect for the regeneration of a people that was ever presented in the history of the world. The disease has long since been known; we have found and shall apply the remedy. I am indebted to Rev. H.H. Garnet, an eminent black clergyman and scholar, for the construction, that “soon,” in the Scripture passage quoted, “has reference to the period ensuing *from the time of beginning*.” With faith in the promise, and hope from this version, surely there is nothing to doubt or fear (CD 359-60).

Grant Shreve notes that this prophetic address constitutes a “plea against passivity and for collective action.” If Africans would only act, then they could rectify the problem of their statelessness; if they were only to pursue repatriation, then they might have a separate polity of their own with which to realize their desire to challenge the global white supremacist order. “If these Israelites would only march,” Shreve writes, “then God would surely follow, and Canaan could be built.” Though Shreve confuses biblical figures here, framing Delany’s plea in the mold of the Exodus narrative rather than the Ethiopian prophecy, he is certainly correct: Delany’s *Official Report* aspires to envision a new order for Africans throughout the world, working at the “outer limits” of Black thought to fashion ideas about global racial solidarity and moral community.⁴⁰⁸ Asserting “Africa is our fatherland and we its legitimate descendants,” Delany argues that repatriation will regenerate Africans at home and abroad.

For this reason, Eric Sundquist claims that Delany’s *Official Report* advances “one of the first strong articulations of an Ethiopianist or Pan-African political philosophy.” Because Delany ties the promise of Psalm 68:31 to the founding of a Black state that has implications for global political order, Sundquist avers, the *Official Report* anticipates “ideas that were to be key to a later generation of Pan-African nationalists such as Edward Blyden, Henry Turner, and Du Bois.” Indeed, on Sundquist’s account, *Official Report* projects not just the founding of a Black state but also a revolution of Africa’s status. “Because the African race, under New World slavery, was already ‘the principal producer of the greater part of the luxuries of enlightened countries,’” he writes, “it was arguable that their industry and skill, along with the wealth of territory, population, and climate granted to Africa, could make

⁴⁰⁸ Shreve, “The Exodus of Martin Delany,” 470.

their native nations in world industry.”⁴⁰⁹ As Sundquist reads him, Delany therefore ties Psalm 68:31’s predicted African renaissance to the founding of a Black colony in western Africa. Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands and accomplish her destiny as soon as diasporic Africans heed Delany’s call to sail to Africa’s western shores.

⁴⁰⁹ Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 188, 205.

CONCLUSION

REDESCRIBING ETHIOPIANISM AND THE REDEMPTION OF AFRICA

“The hands which the land of Burnt Faces is today stretching forth to the God of Things-that-be are both physical and spiritual; and today, as yesterday, they twine gnarled fingers about the very roots of the world.”

W.E.B. Du Bois, “Inter-Racial Implications of the Ethiopian Crisis”

“the ‘norm’ of slave religion was not Jesus Christ, but the ‘ancestors and elders.’ Indeed Jesus himself tended to be interpreted in terms of the religiosity of ancestors. Thus the ‘Christian faith answered to African religious imperatives.’ Drawing together the visible and the invisible—the seen and unseen matrices of the sky, earth, and all these things—the hermeneutical center is an ‘Africanness,’ from which the matrix of black religion is diffused.”

Josiah Young, *A Pan-African Theology*

1. REDESCRIPTION AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICATION

In different ways, I have worked in the previous four chapters of this dissertation to redescribe the Ethiopianist tradition in Black religious thought.⁴¹⁰ My central claim has been that Ethiopianism is a distinctive Black Atlantic social practice, in which African ancestral pieties exert a significant influence upon biblical interpretation (where biblical interpretation also constitutes a key site for Black religious, ethical, and political speech). On the one hand, offering this redescription has meant holding more conventional theological and philosophical approaches to Black religious thought at arm’s length for the sake of my argument. On the other, it has also meant expanding the usual set of references and conceptual vocabularies available for talking about Afro-Protestant thinkers and traditions. I could then redescribe how Psalm 68:31 was used by three African critics of white supremacy, chattel slavery, and racial domination in ways that foreground their roots “in the subsoil of the African diaspora.”⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ Richard Rorty provocatively describes redescription as a method in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: “Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things. ... The latter ‘method’ of philosophy is the same as the ‘method’ of utopian politics or revolutionary science (as opposed to parliamentary politics, or normal science). The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions. This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like ‘try thinking of it this way’ – or more specifically ‘try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions.’ It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else.” Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

⁴¹¹ Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, 16.

Another way to say this is that I have provided an account of Ethiopianism as a social practice “carried out mainly in terms of African tradition.” Insisting with late poet and critic Kamau Brathwaite that “African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment,” I have persistently given interpretive priority to those ideas, practices, and attitudes that demonstrate continuities with classical African religious concerns.⁴¹² Employing my provisional concepts of conjure and repatriation, I have sought to show that Ethiopianism’s distinctive idiom of Black destiny and African redemption (as well as this idiom’s core constellation of concepts) constitutes more than simply an appropriation and reinterpretation of the Bible’s Ethiopian verses, but also a key part of what Monica Schuler and Dianne Stewart might call “the African religious tradition” in the Americas.⁴¹³ That is, I have claimed in different ways that Walker’s, Stewart’s, and Delany’s work expresses an “African” orientation, whereby African denotes their regular reliance upon ancestral pieties. After all, the Black peoples who first gave voice to Ethiopianist refrains in British North America were Africans whose cultures and backgrounds did not disappear simply because they were transplanted to strange lands and made to live under brutal conditions; and those who picked up these refrains and reworked them in subsequent centuries did not wholly evacuate them of their ancestral content just because they became more intimate with Christianity. I have therefore argued that to describe Ethiopianism without recourse to ancestral pieties is to rehearse a dramatic narrative that omits many of the historical tensions, conflicts, transformations, comedies, and tragedies that make for the dynamic story of Black religious life and thought in the Americas.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 192.

⁴¹³ Monica Schuler, “Afro-American Slave Culture,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 6.1 (1979), 135; Dianne M. Stewart Diakité, “Religious Pluralism and African American Theology,” *Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Katie G. Cannon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 331-50.

⁴¹⁴ Here I invoke and extend an assertion that Erna Brodber attributes to Brathwaite: “What I am suggesting here is not that there is a ‘right’ African explanation, or a ‘wrong’ Euro-scientific one, but that a proper understanding of ourselves can only be arrived at by a recognition of both traditions, both areas of explanation; and that for the Afro-Caribbean, it will be increasingly more just to seek, in the first instance, African explanations and sources of overstating.” Brodber, “Re-engineering Blackspace,” 73.

One response to my attempted redescription of Ethiopianism might be that it only makes sense within the worn-out confines of Boasian approaches to the study of Black religion, in which matters of origins and verification reign supreme. A critical reader might object, for example, that the analytical distinction between African ancestral pieties and Christianity I have loosely relied upon to render my redescription reveals a bankrupt investment in a kind of authenticationist epistemological paradigm. I might be regarded as endorsing the view that it is not only possible to verify “authentic” Africanity by uncovering continuities with an African past, on the one hand, but also desirable for this Africanity to be used to explain away certain elements of Christianity, on the other. Does not this paradigm betray a naïve view of religions and of cultures as comprised of discrete, quantifiable parts that compose meaningful wholes, one might wonder, parts which can be readily and unproblematically reconstructed in isolation through analytical processes of selection and separation?⁴¹⁵ Are not these components also framed in static rather than dynamic terms, as if the (supposed) building blocks of religions and cultures were not persistently shifting?⁴¹⁶ Does not my redescription thus focus too much on the quantitative parts of Black religious thought—on, that is, “fixed” constituent ideas, practices, and attitudes—at the expense of its qualitative character?⁴¹⁷ On such a critical reading of my project, the argument might be that my work is only compelling insofar as one accepts the premise that it is a legitimate task for scholars of Black religion to identify and corroborate indigenous African and extra-Christian elements of Black traditions in the Americas. If one does not accept this premise, then one may wonder about the value of this dissertation. What has it achieved that previous scholarship has not, if anything?

⁴¹⁵ David C. Scott, “That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1.3 (1991), 275.

⁴¹⁶ Paul E. Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion Under Slavery,” *Studies in World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* 2.1 (1997); Kathryn Lofton, “The Perpetual Primitive in African American Religious Historiography,” *The New Black Gods: African American Religions After the Great Migration*, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 171-91.

⁴¹⁷ Richard Price, “Commentary,” *Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Societies*, ed. Vera Rubin and Arthur Tuden (New York: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1977), 495-500.

By way of conclusion, I offer two responses to this question. The first is that my chief aim has not been to demonstrate conclusively the “authentic” cultural continuities between the classical religions of Africa and nineteenth-century Ethiopianism. Though identifying continuities has certainly been part of my task, it has not been my chief aspiration to prove their incontrovertibly African history and character. We might recall chapter 1’s discussion of Black religion’s relationship to European and Indigenous religious practices, for example, or its account of conjure’s additive, syncretic sensibilities. Instead, my primary investment has consisted in giving an account of the ways these continuities, in whatever form, can be said to have informed three thinkers’ attempts to perform what David Scott calls “the normative imagining of a moral-political vision of black diasporic community.”⁴¹⁸ That is, my goal has been to show how careful attention to the religious contexts in which Walker, Stewart, and Delany lived and worked reveals the influence of African ancestral pieties upon their Ethiopianist visions for Black destiny and African redemption. By crafting the alternative conceptual vocabulary of conjure and repatriation, my idea in this project has therefore been to claim that even though Ethiopianism is not “purely African” (as if anything could be purely African), if one reads Ethiopianist thinkers in *this* way, then one can perceive connections between these figures’ central concerns and the discourses of classical and diasporic African traditions. From the standpoint of these connections, moreover, I have argued for the recasting of conventional narratives about Ethiopianism that move beyond Afro-Protestantism by integrating Black Atlantic religious practices. Put simply: I have argued that talking about Ethiopianism well requires that scholars attend to the dynamic interplay between classical African and Afro-Protestant elements that constitutes its animating spirit.

Indeed, as a work of African-centered redescription, this dissertation has sought to clear the requisite epistemological and discursive space for making such talk possible. By demonstrating how most previous scholarship on the tradition has been inclined to read it through the familiar frames of

⁴¹⁸ Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 109.

Christian theological categories and a methodological (African) American nationalism, among others, I have raised the possibility that it might just be better to discuss Ethiopianism from the hermeneutical perspective of Africa and its diasporas.⁴¹⁹ To invoke Richard Rorty for a moment: I have suggested that talking about Ethiopianism in *this* way might enable scholars to develop newer and better ways of analyzing it and its related ensemble of figures, practices, and traditions.⁴²⁰ These modes of analysis might also thereby lead us to adopt better and more appropriate concepts and scholarly conventions for examining Black religious and political thought writ large, to recall Paul Gilroy's argument from the introduction. In fact, in that chapter, I offered a foretaste of what I now mean via my reading of Robert Alexander Young's "Ethiopian Manifesto." By considering the "Manifesto" from an African-centered perspective, I argued that one could decipher its "quasi-mystical" utterances and comprehend its arguments about how Africans ought to live in view of their present circumstances.

This leads to my second response, which is to say that the stakes of my project do not conclude with the determination that Ethiopianism should be described from an African-centered perspective. My dissertation is not a simple revisionist project; rather, I have redescribed Ethiopianism as a Black Atlantic tradition in order to make possible the further explication of its moral and political vocabulary as centered upon the figures of Africa (*qua* Ethiopia) and redemption. In other words, by using conjure and repatriation as analytical tools, I have aimed to make possible a description of Ethiopianism that parallels Josiah Young's theological redescription of slave religion: "the 'norm' of slave religion was not Jesus Christ, but the 'ancestors and elders.' Indeed Jesus himself tended to be interpreted in terms of the religiosity of ancestors. Thus the 'Christian faith answered to African religious imperatives.' ... the hermeneutical center is an 'Africanness,' from which the matrix of black religion is diffused."⁴²¹

⁴¹⁹ For a similar metatheoretical argument about the field of African American studies, see Monique Bedasse, "Revisiting the Gomez Imperative: Exchanging Our Country Marks and the Africana Studies Tradition, ASWAD, 2017," *The Black Scholar* 48.4 (2018), 19-27.

⁴²⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 9.

⁴²¹ Young, *A Pan African Theology*, 104.

Even though Walker, Stewart, and Delany are certainly Christians in the conventional sense of the term (that is, believers), the focus of their religious and political utterances remains Africa, its peoples, and their redemption. Like Young and his “Manifesto,” they inflect Christian and biblical paradigms with African ancestral pieties and cast novel visions for African life and moral community.

2. BLACK DESTINY AND AFRICAN REDEMPTION AS MORAL AND POLITICAL HORIZONS

If Ethiopianism can thus also be construed as a normative, ethical-political attempt to imagine Black Atlantic community through the two figures of Africa and redemption, then it seems appropriate to close this dissertation by considering what sort of moral subjects it seeks to conjure into being. Let me offer five theses that correspond to the narrative structures of chapters 2-4. That is, let me suggest Ethiopianism as a moral discourse (with all the problems of power and knowledge evoked by the term) seeks to form African-Ethiopian subjects that are: (1) awakened; (2) bound by ties of common history and ancestry; (3) aware of religion’s urgency for ethical and political life; and (4) committed to African-centered projects of Black destiny; that (5) result in African redemption. Drawing upon my rereadings and informed by Walker’s, Stewart’s, and Delany’s uses of the Ethiopian prophecy, I claim:

First, that each of the figures surveyed in this dissertation cries out to their brethren to awaken. For Walker, Stewart, and Delany, awakening is a key term that denotes an awareness of the reality of Africans’ condition, as well as the causes of this condition and their appropriate remedies (*CD* 174). All three worry the Middle Passage, chattel slavery, and white supremacy have inculcated servile dispositions in their compatriots, which cause them to identify with slaveowners and acquiesce to a life lived below their potentials. For Stewart, this acquiescence impacts not only individuals but the whole community. The acquiescence of one facilitates the acquiescence of many: “O ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties ... What examples have ye set before the rising generation? ... O, God, forgive me if I speak amiss. The minds of our tender babes are tainted

as soon as they are born; they go astray, as it were, from the womb” (*MS* 25). Like Walker and Delany before and after her, therefore, Stewart aims to engender in her audiences a spirit of inquiry and investigation that will result in the eventual overthrow of slavery: “Have the sons of Africa no souls? ... Shall the chains of ignorance forever confine them? ... Where can we find among ourselves the man of science, or a philosopher ...? Show me our fearless and brave, our noble and gallant ... where is the man that has distinguished himself in these modern days by acting wholly in the defense of African rights and liberty?” (*MS* 67). In short, and taking Stewart as my example, the Ethiopianist call to awakening constitutes a challenge to rise up on behalf of the race, grasp the facts of the situation, and put one’s full potential in service to social and political transformation.

Second, that Ethiopianists appeal to a long-lost and glorious African past as evidence of this potential. This past not only serves to index Africans’ capacities for greatness and power, but also explains their common racial bond and mutual obligations. “When we take a retrospective view of the arts and sciences—the wise legislators—the Pyramids, and other magnificent buildings—the turning of the channel of the channel of the river Nile, by the sons of Africa or of Ham,” Walker declares, “I say, when I view retrospectively the renown of that once mighty people, the children of our great progenitor, I am indeed cheered” (*WA* 22). For many Ethiopianists, the defining rupture of African history is not slavery but something prior to it. This both locates the substantive “we” of Africanity in something other than what contemporary critical theorists might call the abjection of Blackness and explains the Ethiopianist commitment to the idea that Africans may be mighty once again. However this declension narrative is articulated, as St. Clair Drake says, its reliance upon Psalm 68:31 functions to give “feelings of esteem to the individual, but also as a sanction for varied types of group action. It generated concern for the ‘redemption’ of black men in the Motherland as well as the Diaspora so that the ancient state of power and prestige could be restored.”⁴²² By inverting the typical subject-

⁴²² Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion*, 50.

object relations of nineteenth-century discourses about African peoples, Ethiopianist retellings of history dramatize and give substance to Africans' experiences apart from mainstream white interpretations of the same.

Third, that Ethiopianists view religion as an integral tool for their return to their former state. Importantly, they do not all agree about the role of religion in this return. They do all agree, however, that religion has a role to play. For some Ethiopianists such as Walker, religion is the central means by which African renewal will be achieved (*WA* 30-32). Indeed, if ancestral disobedience names the sin of apostasy, as Stewart maintained, then a return to proper belief and practice may drive the wheel of history such that Africans find themselves back on top (*MS* 68). For others, such as Delany, religion serves the more moderate purpose of orienting persons and communities rightly in the world—toward power, toward purpose, and toward the fulfillment of their desires.⁴²³ On this more modest view, the right use of religion involves ensuring that Africans know it is up to them to make their desires binding. The wrong use of religion is to “stand still—hoping in God, and really expect him to do that for them, which it is necessary for them to do themselves. This is their great mistake” (*CD* 64). Whether true believers, skeptics, or somewhere in-between, then, Ethiopianists use resources drawn from the storehouse of Black religious life to cast visions of Black destiny and African redemption.

Fourth, that Ethiopianism is perhaps most recognizable for its racist understanding of who must achieve Black destiny. For all the figures surveyed in this dissertation and, indeed, nearly all the figures associated with this tradition in Black intellectual and religious history, the central Ethiopianist commitment the idea that the solution to Africans' problems must come from Africans themselves. “*Africa for the African race*,” Delany says, “*and black men to rule them*” (*CD* 358). Africans may receive help from friendly whites and the other “colored races,” but such assistance is merely ancillary, supportive, of the work they must do for themselves. Writing of white refutations of Thomas Jefferson’s racist

⁴²³ Textual performances of this sentiment can also be found in W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1920 multi-genre Ethiopianist manifesto, *Darkwater*. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999).

assertions about Africans, for example, Walker says: “For let no one of us suppose that the refutations which have been written by our white friends are enough—they are *whites*—we are *blacks*. We, and the world wish to see the charges of Mr. Jefferson refuted by the blacks *themselves*, according to their chance; we must remember that what the whites have written respecting this subject, is other men’s labours, and did not emanate from the blacks” (*WA* 18). For Stewart, too, the task is one of lifting themselves up. “We need never to think that anybody is going to feel interested for us,” she says, “if we do not feel interested for ourselves” (*MS* 32). In the eyes of Ethiopianists, Black destiny can only be achieved when Africans assert themselves in pursuit of their desires. As Delany says, “Every people should be the originators of their own designs, the projector of their own schemes, and creators of the events that lead to their destiny—the consummation of their desires” (*CD* 221).

Fifth, and in view of the prior theses, that “redemption” is the name of an ethical and political horizon of hope. By drawing upon the Ethiopian prophecy, Ethiopianists invoke “the redemption of Africa” to fashion forms of individual subjectivity and communal belonging that emphasize Africans’: capacities for awakening and enlightenment; bonds of pan-African solidarity and mutual obligation; constitutive entanglements with the history of religion; and responsibility to themselves to determine the best and most appropriate solutions to their own problems. Formidable though these problems might be, they are no match for Ethiopia of the Outstretched Arm.

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