

THE ABENG

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Word count: 5,000 (approximately)
Abstract: 150 words

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Word count: 1,000 to 2,000 (approximately)
Abstract: 50-75 words

File Format: Microsoft Word (Times New Roman, 12 point, Left Justified, Double-spaced)

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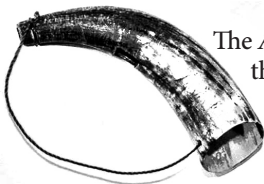
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editor@signifyingscriptures.org

Editorial Mailing Address:
Institute for Signifying Scriptures
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ATLANTA, GA
APRIL 11-13, 2024



Foreword

The ISS gathered in Atlanta from April 11 to 13, 2024 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the African Americans and the Bible Conference alongside the 20th anniversary of the inaugural conference of the Institute for Signifying Scriptures. Amid poignant and meditative expressions of what these landmark events signified, discussions broached the future possibilities for continuing to fathom the work we make scriptures do for us.

In the standalone essay in this supplemental volume of *The Abeng*, Vincent Wimbush's keynote address "Meaning of Movement, Movement of Meaning; or, Reading Darkness as Marronage" frames these celebratory notes alongside their continuing resonances.

OPENING ADDRESS*

Institute for Signifying Scriptures

Friday, April 12, 2024

MEANING OF MOVEMENT, MOVEMENT OF MEANING;

OR, READING DARKNESS AS MARRONAGE

Vincent L. Wimbush

I

Madam Chair, Planning Committee members, ISS members longstanding and brand new, colleagues and friends, attendees/participants—those of you here in this room, and those who join us in the virtual world, I am so pleased and honored that you are here today and throughout this weekend of special anniversary celebration. We celebrate the 20th Anniversary year of The Institute for Signifying Scriptures and the 25th Anniversary of the African Americans and Bible International Conference, ISS's foundational and motoring project. These initiatives are the occasion and inspiration for assessing the work of the past, our present situation and its challenges and opportunities; and the question whether, and—if affirmatively so, in what directions—there will be some sort of future for this project. I am especially touched by the physical presence of so many who

have travelled here from great distances. (I assume LalruatKima again gets the prize for his travel from the Indian subcontinent to be with us.) I am not unaware of the physical and psychological difficulties and challenges and the high costs of travel these days. I understand the commitments and, in some cases, the sacrifices you have made to be here, whether from another continent or from another Atlanta neighborhood. I know it may have been for a few of you rather costly in more than one respect to get here and to make sure that the meeting would be successfully convened. I am also very much aware of and very moved by the presence of some among the “originals”—those who were present and involved in some way from the very beginning, stretching back to the mid-1990s in terms of the work of different subfield collectivities of the larger funded research project and culminating in the 1999 conference in NYC. (The latter was only the beginning of the enormous editorial work to make sure the collection of essays would become the published volume now recognized as *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* [2000]). Your presence greatly touches and inspires me. I am flooded with memories as well as the informed and somewhat cautious hope that memories bring.

I must also express appreciation to those who have brought to us (via recordings) felicitations on behalf of institutions and learned societies, including the Executive Directors of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. With these organizations we continue to have long and intimate and complex relationships. I am especially appreciative of the physical presence of Velma Love, one of our originals, as she brings felicitations on behalf of the Interdenominational Theological Center; and Associate Dean Teresa Fry Brown, Candler School, of Emory University. I currently find myself with the opportunity to teach this spring term 2024 at Candler where Dr. Fry Brown holds forth. It is also my fortune to get to know there this term a few students and a few new colleagues, faculty of a generation removed from the arc of my fulltime teaching career. There is poignancy—

personal and professional—in my current affiliation—limited as it is—with Emory.

(My now deceased mother for many years reminded me that there was some sort of theology school at Emory where she was employed at the Children’s Hospital for years. After my departure from home to sojourn through the world, including graduate study and the beginning of full-time employment as professor, my mother for several years implored me to make “those people at Emory” aware of who I was so that I might “come home.” In her imploring was such poignancy, such a combination of wisdom and refreshing unknowing about the folly of and not a little irony about the illogics of the academic world all of which of course now beg critical analysis. My repeated response to my mother that neither party would necessarily see me as a good fit made no sense to her. Alas. She is no longer with me/us; but in thinking of her basic wisdom and questioning I can now only shake my head into wistfulness and cause the furrowing of the brow: my sense of not fitting in at Emory’s Candler School of Theology corresponded in those years in complex respects that could not always be brought into language: those years were the years of the makings of what has turned out to be AFAMBIB-turned-into-ISS, in anticipation of and in ongoing reflection of my and the ISS sense of intellectual and psychic unhomeliness. And to add to the irony if not strangeness of the whole development, the course I teach this term at Candler/Emory—a course entitled “African Americans and the Bible”(!)—I taught first in the 1990s. The course I have taught this term with gripping nostalgia for me personally, but with what success with students I cannot yet tell. They have found it hard to believe that the course as I have conceptualized had not been and could not have been taught—in “the field” and by a “field” specialist at almost any “respected” graduate school—at the beginning of my career. The beginning of my career, I felt I had to remind students this term, was in the 1980s, not the 1780s! The course was not and could not have been offered in the program in Christian Origins section of The Study of Religion Program or at the Divinity School

at Harvard University during my years there as a Ph.D. student, from the late 1970s through the early 1980s. The orientation and structure of the programs, the assumptions made by faculty in the field, left no room for, made no open gesture for, thinking out loud about anything having to do with the worlds I had come from. There was even multiple field-specific layered ironies and paradoxes in the un-self-reflexive references to Egypt and its neighbors to the south. I am not aware of serious changes over the ensuing years pertaining to this problem there or in other places or programs ranked high in the field of scriptural studies. Such programs are still Europeanist or European-colonialist in orientation. The poignancy of the point and the history behind it is powerful. These observations and registrations of experiences represent a whole complex history begging to be unfolded.)

II

For the sake of those who are just now being made aware of us or are only now tuning in, my focus in this Address this morning is on helping make as clearly as possible my understanding of the import of what has become ISS. Others no doubt in the past have understood—even now do understand, and in the future will understand—what is called ISS on terms quite differently or slightly differently from me; that is fine; I cannot and should not have control over such interpretations. But on this occasion, I feel it especially incumbent upon me to weigh in, to try to have some influence, on such matters. So, I should like to make this effort at this special time in this special gathering to communicate as best I can how I see things, what I understand to be the import of ISS. The latter is provocative shorthand for the strangely and provocatively named Institute for Signifying Scriptures. With such a moniker, it is not merely another strange little academic guild group. It is that; but it is also more: it is a type of project and movement—the

project or movement of the collaborative practices of transgressive, intervening, interruptive, questioning discourse. Hyperaware, so to speak, of itself as a transgressive collective of thoughtful persons, across fields and belong to no fields per se. ISS has always been conscious of its unhomeliness—in terms academic-field or academic-discipline(arity), or, in terms institutional, and in regard to the broader western-civilizationalist and primarily U.S.-nationalist social-cultural and psychic-discursive agenda (including and using as a baseline or starting point, but going far beyond, to think with the artificially separate domain of “religion”). ISS has from the beginning been seen as some sort of unusual movement or force—I think I should name it so in response to the name-calling of one among you and in anticipation of an argument to be developed here in short order this morning. It has been thought about as a type of “exquisite loneliness,” to make use of language in the title of the book *This Exquisite Loneliness: What Loners, Outcasts, and the Misunderstood Can Teach Us About Creativity* (2023), recently published by poet and social critic Richard Deming. The book is provocative, opening the reader to so many fascinating concerns, even if it is not consistently illuminating. Yes, I think it appropriate for us to claim that we are a somewhat “exquisite” collective in search of discursive homes or stages for the representations or performances of our unhomelinesses, our migrations, our marronages—of meaning. And my claim that this was the original and, I want to argue, ongoing emphasis, makes this year’s theme (“Marronage”) rather powerful and poignant. Without aiming to undermine or deflect away from the clearly enormous capaciousness and scope and layeredness of the concept of “migration” as registered in our very useful and interesting centering text *Migrations: A History of Where We All Come From* (2022), this year’s ISS meeting seminar theme has to do precisely with what ISS has in different capacities and communications of vision and orientation always been about. I state most emphatically that at this special anniversary meeting we absolutely *should* be discussing migration *and* as part of this capacious concept marronage. And as

we do so we are describing and analyzing with more intentionality the arena in which ISS has always been operating; and we are also assessing whether it has done work befitting its being always “out of place,” its operations and performances reflecting its “nowhere”-ness. At the same time—with the intentional placing of the weight of memory on our seminar table this year we are discussing whether the agenda and operations and programming have been and are still compelling enough to warrant continuation and, if so, in what forms.

III

You should not be surprised that I have this year found it rather difficult to write and present to you the research-laden and analytical paper with which I would like to think I am usually associated. There is simply too much emotion packed into this weekend meeting. So many memories—of so much: the institutional agreements made and unmade; the friendships won and lost; the collaborations enjoyed and reneged on; the high moments; the low moments; the breakthroughs, the disappointments, the perfidy, the losses personal and professional; the failures; the mistakes made; the complex academic and field-specific and general popular (non) responses; but also—and these are moments most precious and searing—the occasional unprompted or surprise testimonies from those who recall a line or a moment in conversation or in a publication, in a program, or project that made a big difference, that offered the argument, clarified the urgency, inspired or provoked movement in thinking.

So, I decided to make of this special moment an opportunity not so much to attempt to focus on arguments to convince you or others of the way to affirm or castigate this or that writer vis-à-vis the theme of the year. What I want to try to do is ruminate, even meditate on, and thereby refocus the big picture, the several sets of images, the haunting tunes along the way. Then I would

like to arrogate to myself the right to raise—and challenge you all to raise—the big issue, the big question, to be taken up before we end this meeting. This I should like to do by asking you to indulge my indulgence, in the mold of the synaesthetics (not merely the transdisciplinarity) that mark our work and gathering over the years. This I shall attempt to do with a few of the haunting words that have become images and sounds for me as ISS has been made compelling for me.

This is, of course, my transference, my projection—of my great need—onto you; this I own. This is as it should be: it is my invitation to you to allow yourselves to be spoken to in a certain key on this day. Acknowledging and owning some of the workings of a ritual in my subcultural protestant tradition, what follows is my contemporary translation of it a ritual bath, into what, following poet-essayist Aimé Césaire, I would call, if not a “science” of, perhaps, a ritual bathing by, the word(s). (See in re: African diaspora religious ritual, my recognition of and identification with what is described in the Foreword to Walter F. Pitts, *Old Ship of Zion: the Afro-Baptist Ritual in the African Diaspora* [1996]; also: Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* [1978]; and Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* [1979]. And see Césaire’s “Poetry and Knowledge,” in his *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry: 1946–82* [1990].) I suggest we need rituals by or through which we experience this weekend. This address is only one of them—the Devotional before the main worship service that we’ll experience together this weekend. This address, even as part ritual, should be considered a re-reading—mostly through a re-hearing—of words as sentiments, arguments as meditations on what I consider our big challenge this weekend. The meditations are not my words but my selections of the words of others; I understand and expect any one of you would have a different set of selections to offer. But I hope my selections for meditations—this is always my hope—will not be offensive and may—as has always been the point of AFAMBIB-turned-into-ISS—inspire, provoke, enable your

own continuing meditation on examples most poignant for you. To put the matter rather bluntly, I have in psychic and intellectual terms traveled too far *not* to begin my thinking about broad issues and problems without “seeing through,” as W. J. Mitchell put it (*Seeing Through Race* [2012]), using as touchstone, my own porous world (of blackness/darkness) with its panoply of expressivities and orientations, including my own somewhat idiosyncratic if not unique personal experiences and expressions. From that starting point because I am quite used to, have been shaped to, and know well how to, pivot conceptually into the rest of the world. I am asking all of you as you listen, or in the wake of respectful listening, to make that kind of pivot.

These selections as part of the Devotional I should like to be experienced by you aurally, with a minimal amount of focus on a big computer screen. (This arrangement I set up so to minimize if not disable distraction). I should like the hearing of the words to help you draw pictures, images, to trip you onto memories, arguments, and sentiments deep and complex, unsettling and inspiring, not unlike the experience of one of those experiences highlighted in Edward R. Carter’s 1888 book *Our Pulpit Illustrated*. (E. R. Carter was a distinguished Atlanta Black cleric from the late 19th through mid-20th century, the longtime pastor of historic Friendship Baptist Church, the church in which Morehouse College held classes for a period, after its move here from Augusta; and in the basement of which Spelman College was founded. An elementary school [now closed, of course], located not far from the Atlanta University Center campuses, was named in his honor. I attended this school for a short period. Carter was for decades a nationally known as civic leader, pastor, community organizer, and writer.)

Carter’s collection in the book referenced includes a story about an enslaved, Black-fleshed personality named (Deacon) Bartley, who had the experience of learning to read letters not through mere visual experience, but through the hearing of an affirming, in this case, “black” voice:

One night, when he had gone to bed and had fallen to sleep, he dreamed that he was in a white room, and its walls were the whitest he ever saw. He dreamed that some one came in and wrote the alphabet on the wall in large printed letters, and began to teach him every letter, and when he awoke he had learned every letter, and as early as he could get a book, he obtained one and went hard to work. One night very late, when he had come from his coal-kiln, he gathered his books as usual and began to try to spell, but it was not long before he came to a word that he could not pronounce. Now, thought he, what must I do? Then, remembering an old man who was on the farm, about fifty yards away, in a little old cabin, who could read a little, he thought he would go and ask him what the word spelt. The word was i-n-k. So he went quietly through the yard, for it was a very late hour of the night to be moving around, and reaching the cabin, he called him softly, Uncle Jesse! Uncle Jesse! Uncle Jesse! (the old man) said...who is that? Bartley. What do you want this time of the night? I want to know what i-n-k spells! The old man hallooed out, ink! He then returned to his cabin saying ink, ink, ink. After that night he never had any more trouble with ink. In 1852 he began to learn how to write well enough to write his own passes [to steal away]. (112-13)

In his article "Rethinking elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and other figures of Speech" (*Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20:4 [2000], 325-341) literary scholar Dwight Conquergood is most perceptive and compelling in his summary analysis of this story:

"Ink!" was the revelatory pronouncement that emptied literacy of whiteness and reinvested it with a distinctive black presence as it signified on the colloquialism, "black as ink." A strong black voice calling out "ink!" to him in the dark of night revealed the blackness that was inside texts all the time, and that he had not been able to recognize [it] in the blinding

whiteness of the enclosed room. I-n-k performatively coalesced into “ink!” through transposition from visual medium of white page to auditory register of Uncle Jesse’s black voice. Through the synaesthesia of recalling printed letters to vocality, first through his oral spelling, i-n-k, and then Uncle Jesse’s robust calling, ‘hallooing out,’ he was able to hear/see the blackness that was inextricable from the material substance of printed letters. “Ink!” became the signifyin(g) password that liberated literacy from the “all white room” and set it loose on the open road in the form of counterfeit freedom passes. . . .

There are powerful lessons in this story—about the importance of coming to terms with the complexities of the world within and the world that provokes the story-telling. Before I turn to the selections for our synaesthetic or senses-overlapping, senses-tripping this morning, I provide my short summary of some of my own haunting memories that have been provoked by the theme for this meeting and extend from such what can be understood to be one of the lessons shared by E. R. Carter regarding reading as or in relation to AFAMBIB-turned-into-ISS interpreted as multiple and complex sensibilities, to movement and meaning, to migration to marronage:

The aim from the beginning of AFAMBIB-turned-into-ISS, from the mid-1990s, I remind all of you—originals and those who are just now discovering us—was to stage interference or model an intervention into the discourses and politics of several academic fields, never the one (religion/theology/biblical studies) to which many would prefer to define or affix, by which to limit the force of, our work. Consider the way the matter was put in that last section (“Sub-Texts”) of what became the 2000 collection of essays that refracted the 1999 proceedings of the African Americans and the Bible project and conference and was published as the book entitled *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Texture* (2000).

I am not sure whether the provocative tags of the comments on the conference in this last section were the creation of then co-editor Rosamond Rodman, or mine; it was likely a daring or provocative joint effort. We followed somewhat faithfully the sentiments if not the literal terms of those we asked to summarize the first of its kind event that was beyond question collaborative, transdisciplinary, and transgressive in style and substance and orientation, placing what I like to call following Hortense Spillers the “flesh,” here the Black-fleshed, as centering/theoretical ground in connection to research on and ongoing practices in relation to the Bible (!). I tried as convener to indicate to all participants and observers what was the point of the discourse or project being created in connection with what we now know as the big historic conference that was convened at Union Seminary NYC in April 1999, as it reflected and summarized at least three prior years of conversation and collaborative research. We editors indicated in that final section of the book, sometimes agreeing, other times disagreeing, with sentiments of those we asked to comment—for example, that “it” was “this” or not “that”: that it was “not just a Black thing”; “not a Christian thing”; “not just an American thing”; it was “how women read their titles clear”; it was “disturbing”; it *should* be [only] a “Black church” thing. (It was decided this not only nearly last but from the point of view of the organizers this misreading or off-track view should not be erased.) And placed in the final position a statement was made that “it”—the entire project—was most profoundly and most provocatively, “not a change of color” thing, “but a whole change-of -subject-kind-of-thing.” In other words, the project represented—in spite of the anxiety it induced among some—most clearly the challenge of a *different academic-intellectual agenda and orientation, with different questions, different starting points and different interests and practices*, different from what had obtained in much academic discourse—including what was registered in theological schools, in religious studies programs and their curricula, including also what was often registered as claims about uniqueness masking uninterrogated

mimetics among self-ascribed “Black folk.” Intervention and interference, indeed.

Take note of the two categories/concepts that named the project and the conference and the book—“African Americans” and “the Bible.” These terms were meant to *raise* problems and issues, not so much settle or reflect presumptions and conclusions. The terms were not meant simply to (dis)affirm some things about some people. (No Black-fleshed persons were to be discovered and affirmed in the white text.) Both categories were of course found to be quite awkward among some, unsettling among others. They reek of the fantastic/the fantasmatic, of construction, masquerade. Although the meeting seemed to most to be a kind of celebration, it seemed clearer over time that many were not at all pleased (as I heard from sources that were second and third hand, hardly ever directly.) (One colleague reports—but without independent evidence—an incident [“Lest We Forget: Chronicling of the Early Years,” *Black Scholars Matter*, ed. G. L. Byron and H. R. Page, Jr., 2022] held on the campus of an historically Black campus in which I was burned in effigy. Supposedly, in connection with the AFAMBIB and/ISS project.)

The project, insofar as I could and obviously at times had to speak for it, certainly did not intend to register, even attempt to settle, the matter about what the two categories mean or might affirm. There was no collective effort, no design, to project the correct meaning of this and that. It was meant only to unsettle and provoke, force more questing and questioning, make matters more complex. African Americans? That was simply the label of the decade. We all know there had been over several centuries several other labels or names, colorful descriptions, for a certain group of persons. Bible? That was simply metonymy, one of the terms for the wall used to limn European and European-diaspora civilization; it stood for Foucault’s “order of things.”

I should prefer to say now and as sharply as is possible that

with my/the move(ment)/migration west/to California in 2003, the second category in the title of the AFAMBIB Project was changed from Bible to “scriptures,” signaling what was deemed more fitting for interest in the fully comparative approach in terms of the major “world religions” traditions and in terms of pointing to and capturing a more capacious set of dynamics and practices across all social-cultural domains—inclusive of, but far beyond, the west, and in going forward turning far beyond the artificially separated domain of “religion.” (There is layered irony here—“scriptures” refers only to things written; fascinating it is that the term has mostly come to be associated with “religion.” There are “scriptures” everywhere and in every domain of modern society and culture. The latter term is needed not only to draw attention to the world-wide, not merely “religious”/“sectarian,” phenomena and dynamics, but also to make sure that in critical theorizing “scriptures” the domain of “religion” and its practices and politics were not left uninterrogated on the terms or to the depths we were focused on in the project. This was the problem I found with the works of philologists and anthologists the likes of the very 19th century Friedrich Max Müller to Jack Miles of the 20th and 21st centuries to the comparativist of religion/phenomenologist of scripture Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Harvard professor whose work— not in or even in conversation with faculty in the field of scriptural studies[!]¹—I found arresting, but ultimately limited and politically naïve, as it was arrested at the point of critical interrogation beyond religious beliefs.)

And, again, since the first category—“African Americans”—had simply marked the times (so many different names for so many different reasons have been used—a sign of issues having to do with power and agency inflections, less with any essential category), it needed to be used to point to black-fleshed peoples so that their experiences and expressions would not only not be left behind but be appropriately seen as nonessential and exploded into a critical theorizing and analytical practice. Thus, the logic of the use of the term and spelling “signifying” (departing from Henry Louis Gates

by leaving the more conventional spelling to signal the universality of the practice and embracing the usage associated with historian of religion Charles H. Long). This was also an issue of forcing the larger universe of peoples and their signs-play and semiotics to be examined, with Black-fleshed peoples being in more respects than one the “ground-zero” of the theoretics. I aimed with the change of title—from African Americans and the Bible to Institute for Signifying Scriptures—nothing less than to signal the imperative of projecting a challenge to several fields and discourses, several different widely shared cultural practices and their politics, theoretically including almost all modern peoples, with no intention of leaving my originary academic field—study of religion/study of scriptures/Christian scriptures—to its historical and ongoing uninterrogated blindnesses. “Scriptures” needed to be signified (on), critically and expansively theorized, played with, not simply because I had been played with or socialized into it, but because the larger culture of the West and elsewhere, had wittingly or not, colluded to (mis)name/(mis)read or project the syndrome—“scripture”/the scriptural—onto the religious domain as the focus and locus of our modern-world problem (with its seeming fantastical otherworldly claims and practices). Modernities would make us all believe that the syndrome, the violent psycho-politics—of scripturalization—was really located only there in that single, separated domain (“religion”) and therefore need not be brought to light, excavated, and problematized. It need not be taken seriously as having larger modern-world ramifications beyond the usual negative but mostly benign or irrelevant ones. AFAMBIB-turned-into-ISS held the promise of making compelling signifying on scriptures as a project in signifying on significations.

I can be more disturbingly specific and direct: During the years of the project in New York City where was located a famous self-ascribed protestant nondenominational “liberal” or progressive seminary—Union, it is still called—that seemed at first like a rather good site for such work. (This was the reason for my 1991 move from California, where I was first appointed in a protestant “establishment”

denominational seminary also of self-ascribed “liberal” cast.) But it turned out as it does in so many cases that the “liberalism” in European and European diaspora modernity was narrow and circumscribed and strategic: being “liberal” or “progressive” or “radical” in protestant worlds and in application to the discourse about scriptures was not what was intended. That discourse and its political project was to be left alone, in its late nineteenth century construction, politics, practices, and sensibilities. Perhaps, it was a type of “liberalism”—relative to medieval and early modern practices and to the others it deemed retarded or savage or belated or.... At any rate, what was in place in high white protestant world as discourse—ironically at a time of advanced cultural and institutional constriction in funding and demographics—near the end of the 20th century and embodied in the school in general and in the “biblical field” in particular, was to be left alone. The facts about the crumbling walls all around be damned. The field seemed to have been defined as a kind of bulwark against cultural and intellectual deterioration that it assumed marked the urban 1960s and upholder of the construction in which late nineteen to mid-twentieth-century “liberalism” meant careful and disciplined engagement (in accordance with the latest, really, only mostly European methods and approaches). The apologetic engagement project was understood to proceed with “liberal” readings, but without touching the fundamental issue of the phenomenology and politics and social psychologies of the canonic, viz, what “the thing” was all about, how it worked or functioned. This was true *even* after the nations and larger cultures and societies housing and nurturing such discourses had dragged the world into the near- apocalyptic conflagration that was World War II. (What more would need to be done for such societies to be rendered toxic and illegitimate?) Perhaps, there was evidence that exotics—other retarded protestants and other others—might be added to it (“the blacks” might try finding themselves somewhere in the canon, for example); but the big arrangement, the order of things, must be left to be what it is. At Union in New York City in the 1990s—not the 1890s!—this meant

the “biblical field,” with its “liberal,” high-protestant-inflected claim to and position of exclusive authority and mandate was to function as foundation on which all other establishment theological discourses would play their games. (I remind all that what has become known as AAR, the American Academy of Religion, early on in its history in the 20th century called itself *NABI*—National Association of Biblical Instructors. Its members were, within the religio-cultural and academic establishment at the time, with these other words, naming themselves the “B” team to the high clerics, the “tribunals of jurists and congresses of gentlemen,” the “biblical scholars.” (See my essay “Tribunals of Jurists and Congresses of Gentlemen: Signifying (on) Biblical Studies as colonial-Bureaucratic Masquerade,” in *Black Scholars Matter* [2022]). All the subfields of theological/religious studies up to the 1960s were understood be the functionaries of biblical refraction—viz, those responsible for the explosion of the implications and ramifications of what the high clerics, what the members of SBL, put forward. In such a situation—at an institution that was the originary hatching and ongoing physical and symbolic home (from the 1880s to the 1970s or so) to such discursive formation—change of the sort that was associated with and thought to be promising in the AFAMBIB project was discovered—perhaps, reflexively so—not to be easy. Celebrations notwithstanding, personal friendships aside, there was no field or institutional response at Union to the 1999 AFAMBIB conference or what the project behind it represented as field-specific challenge or as proposal for a way forward that would be different from the construal of white mainly protestant-defined liberalism. In fact, when the institution next had opportunity to weigh in on the shape of the field closest to my efforts it chose to signal the need (within the framework of the logics of western protestant “liberal-progressive” theology defined by the lines established by biblical studies) for what many understood to be, in relationship to what I had come to represent, a “balance” or complement of a sort: It went (back) to Europe. What was assumed—about the order of things”—that warranted a balancing?

So, in the wake of much international and national turmoil and local anxiety—after 9/11—and institutional drift and in response to another institutional gesture a(nother) move westward was made. It was 2003. Out there on the edge of the desert, the westernmost “translation” of the western world. I accepted a gesture from a weirdly constructed graduate school (in the college town of Claremont), with a traditional graduate program in religion (without the professional ministerial degree program, but in affiliation or co-dependence with a school that has such a program). Of course, individual players out there deemed themselves in their circles and caucuses, their institutes, to be radical, liberal, and so forth. (At least among religion scholars. The now more famous government-, jurisprudential-, political-social-cultural-oriented Claremont Institute registers clearly and without dissimulation as radical right.) But it was from the start clear to me that it was outside grantors, not the new and old colleagues in the Claremont Graduate University Religion (school/program/department), who were the ones who really seemed to understand what was at stake and what was promising in the move and the project with which I was associated.

In the different location I thought a different name, reflecting a sharper, if not different, orientation, was in order. Even to this day I doubt there are more than a few persons if any at all who may see in the renaming of the project—from AFAMBIB to ISS—a signifying act. A signifying, that is, on what was located out there in the early 2000s academic field playpen in Claremont popularly called IAC—the explicitly German-imitating Institute for Antiquity and Christianity. The latter was already associated with what was deemed—mostly by those inside the circle but also by some observers—cutting edge scholarship in certain areas of inquiry, including biblical studies exploded into more wide-ranging studies into ancient Greco-Roman and middle eastern cultures. Yet for all its touting of itself as radical (seeing the fires and smelling the fumes from Robinson’s attention-getting writings and projects—Nag Hammadi, Q, and so forth— including collaboration with German-

born scholar and former teacher of mine, Helmut Koester), and in spite of the attention and notoriety even beyond the small field orbit, the IAC project was still very much embedded in uninterrogated fields of theological and religious studies. For the times—the decades prior to my (re)turn west, in the 1980s to the end of the century—somehow IAC leadership tended to know how to spin for wider publics what it was up to in interesting if not altogether intellectually compelling terms. The popularity and commanding field interest held irrespective of what I or anyone else thought about the scholarly projects.

Although in a smaller circle from that associated with Robinson, this my second tour of the west seemed to promise something different. Alas. Alas. Looking back on the situation, on what IAC was about—perhaps, even more scary because it was likely that most participants never interrogated the project on terms or in ways that had come to matter to me—IAC was within the religious studies arena a rather scary U.S.-inflected imitation of post war German intellectual and cultural and politics in what I understand to be the western civilizational project associated with what is recognized as a project in *translatio studii et imperii*. As I mentioned already in connection with Union and the construction of academic biblical studies in the U.S., it was as though the ideologies advanced in the period leading up to and during World War II—ideologies that contributed to the horrors of the war, bringing much of the world to the brink, built around racialisms and racisms—simply did not matter. It is shocking to me now as I think now about how those of my parents' and teachers' generation could and did simply move on without really addressing the sicknesses that prevailed and brought the world to a standstill. Many scholars of that generation—representing many fields, including theology, and what was developing into history of religions, and critical studies of religion—ran, seemingly as though nothing much had happened, with great speed to Germany and other parts western Europe to pick up on the longstanding and ongoing agenda. (I take note that all

my primary teachers/advisors from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, all those who were affiliated with my doctoral program at Harvard, were European males. This fact forces me to note many others in many of the prestigious programs, the U.S. citizens, all male, had, in the field of biblical studies—like classics, philosophy, etc—run with great speed to be trained in academies European.)

The IAC bulletins/communications across the decades make it clear in statements and historical reflections and descriptions that its aim, in imitation of the German-based civilizational-apologetics research academies, and of one institute in particular (scholar Franz Joseph Dolger's University of Bonn's *Institut für Antike und Christentum*), was to capture and translate accurately the *translatio*/transfer of the modern west out of the fusions of ancient Greek, Roman and Middle Eastern traditions, (again, never quite knowing what to do with Africa, except in a halting naïve fetishizing play with Egypt and southward). (See James M. Robinson, "Founding of the IAC," *IAC Bulletin XVI.2*, June 1989.)

So here I was, a just arrived/returned "stranger"—like Gustavas Vasa/Olaudah Equiano, "a black" (as reference was made in the late eighteenth century and as even one Claremont colleague, in the late twentieth century, conveyed description of me in conversation with another person upon word of my first showing up in discussions about being appointed in Claremont). (See Oludah Equiano's/Gustavas Vasa's *The Interesting Narrative* [1789] and my treatment of the figure and his work in *White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery* [2012].) It was during my first tour in Claremont that I had observed the curious doings (among the "radicals") and had with earnest mimetics tried to find an opening in their practices in regard to the *translatio* project. Interested observers will know to reference and track my participation in IAC through my project on Asceticism (*askesis*). (See my attempt to interpret what I at the time thought I was doing—either to fit into the *translatio* project or seek to escape it, or both—in *Black Flesh Matters: Essays on Runagate Interpretation* [2022], Part I: *Contemptus Mundi*; Or,

HOS ME: Initiation into a Discursive Formation.) How I survived it, how I managed the terrain—from doctoral program through the professorial ranks to senior status with the support of external granting institutions employing what I know was the experience of shutting down half my brain capacity because there was lacking any profound connection to my own world except in terms of deficit or lack—how all of that happened remains still a mystery to me; it too should be the focus of historical and clinical inquiry. There was for me no “Uncle Jesse” who could through a voice help me negotiate the way, through a shout or whisper awaken my other senses and sensibilities.

Yet my critical senses and sensibilities were awakened. I maintain that the (re) naming of ISS was a signifying act in relation to IAC and its orientation; it was signifying on a complex of self-ascribed canonical fields. Was it the hearing of a voice instead of a (newfangled) reading of a text? Was it the recognition and registration of a type of suffocation, of enslavement or conscription? Was it the creation of a “pass”—social-cultural and psychological-intellectual—to allow me to “steal away”? Whose voice did I hear? Or did I make of myself a voice, an unsettling, jolting shouting agent (like Uncle Jesse)—for myself and others? You and others who hear me today and may read me tomorrow may address and throw more light on these questions. But I assert that from the beginning ISS rather boldly aimed to unsettle, interfere with, trouble the grand orientation, the western leaning/defining *translatio*/translation project, obsessed as it has been over origins—of christianisms, of nation, of race, and so forth, consonant with and mimetic of the project of translating ancient Roman and Mediterranean worlds, including Egypt and its southern neighbors, into the west. The IAC project, like so many academic field/intellectual formations, was a project in origins, to be sure, quite frankly and starkly, a project in *white origins/origins of whiteness*. Except where I was provided more direct evidence about them, I assumed that individual members were stuck in the mode of mostly not allowing self-interrogation

of the interests, motives, politics, consequences of the bigger project to surface. But this situation—to be established as a professional mimetic of western *translatio*—was not over time acceptable to me.

“Scriptures,” then, in the renaming, was always meant—as I have learned, translating the minds of Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Henry L. Gates, Houston Baker, Johanna Drucker, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and so forth—to be metonymic of the fantastical/fantasmatic that is writing, discourse, now mediatization, its politics, its power-tripping, its patho-logics and attendant types of violence. “Scriptures” have to do with the “order of things.” So, yes, interference and intervention, mocking—these were and should remain the aims of AFAMBIB-turned-into-ISS. This is because so much in the 1990s needed to be, and, of course, so much yet in the 2020s, remains to be, interfered with. The Tea Party? Birtherism? “Fake news”?!!! The politician who would be president (again) selling Bibles? How then could there not have been/could not still be in place those agenda referenced in the AFAMBIB project and book regarding high academic/high church and cultural playpens and their intellectual field screeners imaged (as I noted, referencing Robert Penn Warren’s poem “Pondy Woods,” in my introduction in *AFAMBIB*) as an abusive clacking “lean bird”? Now such a figure or office can be located ever more broadly, in relation to media and politics and jurisprudence and policing, to economic arrangements, to entertainment and info-tainment arenas, to what is left of the academy, to the challenges of AI. Given all such, how could we not find compelling the agenda of interference and intervention, of signifying on and mocking the ongoing translations of the west?

Perhaps, we have failed? Was the intervention and mocking our burden alone to carry? Has it been our duty alone to blast the horns about the dangers involved in making and wielding scriptures? Have we been too independent? Or not independent enough? Have we been in the struggle too long? Or are we only now just

beginning to understand and communicate and orient ourselves to the enormous task at hand?

These and other issues and questions should be our focus at this meeting. I cannot, I should not, provide any sort of definitive answer or way forward. I stress again that I should like to perform the duty of merely helping us put on the table and frame the issues in conjunction with reactions to the common reading and theme for our defining seminar discussion. What I put forward is through playful and what may prove to be for some unsettling considerations of a motif drawn from both the topic of the common reading—migrations (devolved or advanced into marronage)—and the agenda-item that will be the common our focus before we adjourn, having to do with whether ISS should have a future or should be celebrated and cheerily toasted and then let go. Or both. I should like to bring these two concerns together with a brief focus on movement—the meaning of movement and the movement of meaning and relate such to AFAMBIB-turned-into-ISS as itself a fraught or disturbing, certainly challenging, example of movement as meaning, meaning as movement. I need never argue for the uniqueness of ISS; I argue for it as compelling for our times. I argue ISS to be movement that is a particular practice or psycho-politics in a particular psychic space. And here I think I engage in a justifiable if not always compelling act of looking backward and forward, looking inwardly and outwardly, again, because of, and in association with, movement to and within a particular space. I am thinking of these dynamics in terms of migration *to* marronage, from some movements that seem natural and cyclical to those movements that are responses to physical stresses and needs to those forced upon some for the sake of greed as in land grabs to those who are forced to make perennial moves because their very flesh is stained, tagged, typed, *scripturalized*. Some of these dynamics involve almost all living creatures; some dynamics we may discover and come to understand only if we fathom or leap great distances and differences—in time or in other respects.

IV

So now to my selections—as and for the sake of ruminations/meditations on the theme, making marronage that movement that is connected to (and [un]means) Darkness. You will hear first the story-ing of contemporary Dionne Brand, Afro-Canadian poet and memoirist and essayist; her story-ing should set up the basic issue of Black-fleshed persons of modern times being cast out, thrown away; and her story-telling helps us focus on the different “ways of sensing,” primarily through the aural mood, for the sake of apprehending and naming the big stakes. This apprehension is connected to the different aspects of and relationships between (migration turned into) marronage that I think should be considered by us all.

In response to Brand’s storying and in anticipation of the need to put all other selections in perspective or within a helpful if provocative conceptual framework I provide here up front my schematic of these aspects of marronage, inspired by and focused on the Black-fleshed: 1/ being thrown through the “door of no return” or cast out into (the already universally experienced) Darkness; 2/ “Feeling [our] way through this world”; or groping in Darkness; 3/ playing in/denying/projecting Darkness; and 4/reading Darkness as complexity, thickness, the elusive, ineffable, the no-place. Other sources I propose for our meditations will be identified along the way. As always in my argument and analysis Darkness is a universal experience; but it has provoked some to exploit much of the world, especially including the world of Black-fleshed people, by projecting onto them the burden of being the primary carriers and representatives of Darkness. As *conscripts* (I am with the use of this term here influenced by here the argument made by David Scott in his *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, [2004], as a reading of C. L. R. James’s rereading of Toussaint’s revolution in terms of tragedy), the Black-fleshed have been since “contact” made to carry Darkness for many others, if not all others. This means they are the most problematic and most promising in

terms of learning from, regarding reading, engaging, discerning, seeing through, playing in, where possible, breaking out of, Darkness.

My penultimate “reading” comes close to a proposal for our agenda-setting going forward. Near the end to the ruminations I’ll want to focus on Katherine Kittredge, another Afro-Canadian, so creative in her participating in several academic disciplinary discourses. Her words—influenced by Sylvia Wynter and through Wynter Aimé Césaire, whose “science of the word” proposal, as I indicated earlier, is provocative but left without agenda to wrestle with—I find among the most explicit and challenging in terms of agenda-setting for a collective of intellectual maroons that is ISS. You heard about and from Uncle Jesse. Now listen to a few other voices.

V

1/Cast Out into Darkness

My grandfather said he knew what people we came from. I reeled off all the names I knew. Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandingo? He said no to all of them, saying he would know it if he heard it. I was thirteen. I was anxious for him to remember.

I pestered him for days. He told me to stop bothering him and that he would remember....

Papa never remembered....A small space opened in me.

I carried this space within me.....A name would have comforted a thirteen-year-old.....That moment between my grandfather and [me] several decades ago revealed a tear in the world....But the rupture this exchange...revealed was greater than the need for familial bonds. It was a rupture

in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.

My grandfather and I recognized this, which is why we were mutually disappointed...[H]e too faced this moment of rupture. We were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or we were....[I]t was profoundly disturbing.

Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for the another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names are forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings....

Wishing to search for this door I have sought a book of maps: Charles Briker's Landmarks of Mapmaking...Briker notes [that] Ludolf, the 17th century founder of Ethiopian studies, never visited Abyssinia—but relying on the reports of Portuguese missionaries...he constructed a map of the region in 1693.” Without ever having visited himself. Which proves to me something of which I've had a nagging inkling—that places and those who inhabit them are indeed fictions...in order to draw a map only the skill of listening may be necessary. And the mystery of interpretation.

This skill, this mystery eluded my grandfather and me. The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place....mythic to those of us in scattered in the Americas today. To have one's belonging lodged in a

metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also a self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments ordinariness made like art.

[I] prob[e] the Door of No Return as consciousness. The door casts a haunting spell...in the Diaspora. Africa is therefore a place strictly of the imagination...Many in the Diaspora have visited the Door of No Return...They tell of the overwhelming sense of grief and pain....Art, perhaps music, perhaps poetry, perhaps stories, perhaps aching constant movement—dance and speed—are the only comforts....

Getting to the Door of No Return...needs no physical apparatus except the mind; the body is the prison.

....

...Blacks in the Diaspora carry the Door of No Return in our senses. It is a passport...We are always in the middle of the journey....To live at the Door of No Return is to live self-consciously. To be always aware of your presence as a presence outside of yourself....Every space you occupy is public space, space which is definable by everyone. That is, the image which emerges from the Door of No Return is public property belonging to a public exclusive of the Black bodies which signify it....

My grandfather came from a people whose name he could not remember. His forgetting was understandable...forgetting was urgent...It had been passed on to him by many...It was a gift. Forgetting. The only gift that one, the one bending reluctantly toward the opening, could give.

To travel without a map, to travel without a way. They did, long ago. That misdirection became the way. After the Door of No Return, a map was only a set of impossibilities., a set of changing locations.

A map, then, is only a life of conversations about a forgotten list of irretrievable selves.

—Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*

Hear also about another people's experience of being cast out:

The Trail of Tears

University of Oklahoma Magazine 10 (February 1, 1922):14.

By Ruth Margaret Muskrat

In the night they shriek and moan,
In the dark the tall pines moan
As they guard the dismal trail.
The Cherokees say it is the groan,
Every shriek and echoed groan
Of their forefathers that fell
With broken hopes and bitter fears
On that weary trail of tears.^[1]

Broken hopes and broken hearts,
A quivering mass of broken hearts
Were driven over the trail.

Stifling back the groan that starts
Smothering back the moan that
Full four thousand fell;^[2]
But still the Great Spirit his people
As they travel the trail of tears.

From the homes their fathers made
From the graves the tall trees shade
For the sake of greed and gold,
The Cherokees were forced to go
To a land they did not know;
And Father Time or wisdom old
Cannot erase, through endless years
The memory of the trail of tears.

2/Groping in Darkness

Maroon[s]...throughout the western hemisphere developed extraordinary skills in guerrilla warfare. To the bewilderment of their European enemies, whose rigid and conventional tactics were learned on the open battlefields of Europe, these highly adaptable and mobile warriors took maximum advantage of local environments, striking and withdrawing with great rapidity, making extensive use of ambushes to catch their adversaries in crossfire, fighting only when and where they chose, depending on reliable intelligence networks among nonmaroons (both slaves and white settlers), and often communicating by horns [as “in case of an alarm”].

—Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (1973), 7-8

A main change [in recent years] has been that shifting of the Negro population which has made the Negro problem no longer exclusively or even predominantly Southern. Why should our minds remain sectionalized, when the problem itself no longer is? ...[T]he trend of migration has not only been toward the North and the Central Midwest, but city-ward to the great centers of industry—the problems of adjustment are new, practical, local and not peculiarly racial....

In the process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed.

The tide of Negro migration, northward and city-ward, is not to be fully explained as a blind flood started by the demands of war industry coupled with the shutting off of foreign migration, or by the pressure of poor crops coupled with increased social terrorism in certain sections of the South and Southwest. Neither labor demand, the boll-weevil nor the Ku Klux Klan is a basic factor, however contributory any or all of them may have been. The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.

—*The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (1925)

Jes Grew...is a psychic epidemic...[It] is seeking its words.
Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?...A mighty

influence, Jes Grew infects all that it touches....For some, it's a disease, but in fact it is an anti-plague....

...[D]on't ask me how to catch Jes Grew. Ask Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, your poets, your painters, your musicians, ask them how to catch it. Ask those people who be shaking their tambourines impervious of the ridicule they receive from Black and White Atonists, Europe the ghost rattling its chains down the deserted halls of their brains.... I am saying Open-Up-To-Right-Here....

Jes Grew needed its words to tell its carriers what it was up to. [It] was an influence which sought its text....If it could not find its Text then it would be mistaken for entertainment.... wherever the untampered word exists the Atonists move in. They know that Jew Grew needs its words and steps, or else it becomes merely a flare-up....

Jes Grew has no end and no beginning... .Jes Grew is life... They will try to depress Jew Grew but it will only spring back and prosper. We will make our own future Text.

—Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)

The work of Americo Paredes, man of letters, towering/founding figure of modern Chicano studies resonates with the conviction shared among black-fleshed and perhaps all non-white-fleshed folk who have had to live in borderlands that art—music, dance, writing—enable the work of knowledge, of self-knowledge, of history/memory. Drums are metaphors for history/memory, to stimulate (even if, Brand notwithstanding, they cannot forever make real) the un-forgetting:

Africa! Africa!
Black soul with a song
And a chain.
Africa! Africa!
Black soul with a long
Cry of pain.
Carved piece of jade,
Soft beauty made
In the depths of the jungle's fierce breast
To the music of the drums,
Of the tremulous drums,
Of the live, sobbing drums...
Of the drums!
Of the drums!
Of the drums!!!
That incite such a curious unrest.
Africa! Africa!
Bare back burden-bent,
Choked cry in the night.
Africa! Africa!
Bare back that has felt
The whip of the white.
The song remains,
I can hear it echoing yet
To the rolling of drums,
Of the ominous drums,
Of the live, throbbing drums...
Of the drums!
Of the drums!!
Of the drums!!!
May you never forget.
—Americo Paredes ("Africa," in *Between Two Worlds*, 1935)

3/Playing in the Darkness

No one has captured more vividly the picture of those who must make themselves white/dominant than Joseph Conrad. His words re-present the “heart of darkness” that the would-be white/dominant struggles with, tries to deny and repel by “playing” with it (as Toni Morrison argued (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [1992]), making it the problem of the black-fleshed.

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day... We were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth the wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance.... But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stomping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The streamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy... We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of the first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

...We are accustomed to look upon a shackled monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly....No, they were not inhuman. Well, you

know, that was the worst of it—this suspicious of their not being inhuman....[W]hat thrilled you was just the thought that of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar....that there was in you the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend....

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

In the blackness of the doorway a pair of eyes glimmered white, and big, and staring. Then James Wait's head protruding, became visible, as if suspended between the two hands that grasped a doorpost on each side of the face.... He looked powerful as ever....He seemed to hasten the retreat of departing light by his presence; the setting sun dipped sharply, as though fleeing before our nigger; a black mist emanated from him; a subtle and dismal influence; a something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil.

...He became the tormentor of all our moments; he was worse than a nightmare. You couldn't see that there was anything wrong with him; a nigger does not show.... He was scornful and brooding; he looked upon the sea, and no one could tell what was the meaning of that black man sitting apart in a meditative attitude and motionless as a carving.

...for though at that time we hated him more than ever...we did not want to lose him. We had so far saved him; and it had become a personal matter between us and the sea.

In the magnificence of the phantom rays the ship appeared pure like a vision of ideal beauty, illusive like a tender dream of serene peace. And nothing in her was real, nothing was distinct and solid but the heavy shadows that filled her decks with their unceasing and noiseless stir: the shadows blacker than the night and more restless than the thoughts of men.
—J. Conrad, *Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897)

4/Reading Darkness

To read *Darkness* is to probe it, make it the complexity, the complication that it is and must remain. Katherine Kittredge helps us read, probe Here might be found a compelling present basis for ongoing collaborative work.

These are black geographies (and nonblack geographies, too), but they are not where blackness comes from. There is no from. There is no there, or somewhere, or place that a black from is anchored to. This means that our historically present black geographies—the Africas and the prisons and north stars and 124—are from nowhere. They are inventions, just as we are. The tracking of black impossibility and complexity is not new to black studies, as we know: black is in the break, it is fantastic, it is an absented presence, it is a ghost, a mirror, it is water, air; black is flying and

underground; it is time-traveling, supernatural, inter-planetary, otherworldly; it is in between the lines and it is postcolonial; black is bulletproof and magical and blues; it is negritude, postslave, always enslaved; black is like who/black is like me; black is everywhere and everything; it is make-believe and magic. Black is fantastic, what Richard Iton describes as “the minor key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies with, against, marked as deviant—notions of being that are inevitably aligned within, in conversation with, and articulated beyond the boundaries of the modern” (Iton, 2008, p 16). These black impossibilities are not new: so many of us are too real to be real. The impossibility thus leads to the invention of black nonpersonhood, and the accompanying biocentric codes that naturalize racial hierarchies, all of which are coupled with ongoing black struggles to assert and reinvent black humanity as fantastic. Unjust and inequitable social systems, like racial capitalism, are underwritten by a refusal of black humanity and a refusal to recognize the struggle to assert black humanity; this is a refusal, then, of both black humanness and the praxis of being human

What I have learned...
about black geographies is that we might
be joyous about the impossibility of wholly
institutionalizing black knowledge. This is
not about forgetting black queer, feminist,
trans, or other insurgent voices, it is
about knowing them differently, outside
the institutional
structures that crudely
spatialize
the black body – not black people,
not black humanity – as only usefully
captive and unfree and crudely demarcated
as disconnected to other genres
of being human. Prevailing geographic
systems prop up this logic: there is a reason
a certain
analytics of flesh (rather
than humanity)
is academic currency.
I don't want this anymore. I want to forget
this. Or, I want to know black life differently.
...[The work of] Sylvia Wynter allowed me to think
black life differently. I want to remember
this, and to remember the radical geographic
work of black studies, where the
fantastic nowhere of black life allows us
to puzzle out new and unexpected – and
undisciplined and unacceptable – modes
of being human.

—K. McKittrick, (“Commentary: Worn out,” *Southeastern Geographer*, Volume 57, Number 1, Spring 2017, 97-99)

I end—with a song, befitting the closing of this address as a Devotional for this gathering. In this song the stages and movements referenced in *Migrations* are captured in the figure and movements of the “black butterfly”—from its natural movement in response to natural changes to the movement that is in response to targeted violence based on the superficial and masquerade, provoked by Darkness. Recognized as a survivor of the natural violence and violence born of Darkness, the black butterfly is admonished to “set the skies on fire,” “tell” the story of its struggles, so that others may not so much canonize it, but simply “remember” and “read” it when it is needed. Might there be in this simple story of this simple creature a compelling argument and agenda for “exquisite” loners, magnificent maroons?

Black Butterfly

Morning light, silken dream to flight
As the darkness gave way to dawn
You’ve survived, now your moment has arrived
Now your dream has finally been born
Black butterfly, sailed across the waters
Tell your sons and daughters
What the struggle brings
Black Butterfly, set the skies on fire
Rise up even higher
So the ageless winds of time can catch your wings

...

While you slept, the promise was unkept
But your faith was as sure as the stars

Now you're free, and the world has come to see
Just how proud and beautiful you are

...

Let the current lift your heart and send it soaring
Write the timeless message clear across the sky
So that all of us can read it and remember when we need it
That a dream conceived in truth can never die

...

Black Butterfly, set the skies on fire
Rise up even higher
So the ageless winds of time can catch your wings
Fly
Butterfly

...

Fly

“Black Butterfly”

Written, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, 1982; performed 1984 by
Deniece Williams

Source: [LyricFind](#)

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