SCRIPTURALIZING REVELATION

Society of Biblical Literature

Semeia Studies

Number 80

SCRIPTURALIZING REVELATION

AN AFRICAN AMERICAN POSTCOLONIAL READING OF EMPIRE

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SBL Press
Atlanta

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Darden, Lynne St. Clair.
Scripturalizing Revelation : an African American postcolonial reading of empire / Lynne St. Clair Darden.
p. cm. — (Semeia studies ; Number 80)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-62837-088-1 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-62837-087-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-62837-089-8 (electronic)
1. Bible. Revelation—Postcolonial criticism. 2. Bible. Revelation—Black interpretations. 3. Postcolonial theology. 4. Black theology. 5. Bible. Revelation. I. Title.
BS2825.52.D37 2015
228'.06—dc23 2015005192

Cover photograph:
Harriet Powers, American, 1837–1910
Pictorial quilt (detail)
American (Athens, Georgia), 1895–1898
Cotton plain weave, pieced, appliqued, embroidered, and quilted
175 x 266.7 cm (68 7/8 x 105 in.)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Bequest of Maxim Karolik, 64.619

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper conforming to
ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) and ISO 9706:1994
standards for paper permanence.

St. Clair Elizabeth Darden
(alpha)

and

Ava Sophia LaPene
(omega)

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Acknowledgments

I owe a debt of gratitude to a host of people who have helped me complete this journey. First and foremost, I would like to thank Stephen D. Moore for his keen navigational skills that allowed me to finish this, my first solo passage, safe and sound. He charted a steady course throughout and provided me with a reliable compass that never failed to point me in the right direction. I consider myself very fortunate to have been an apprentice to such an ace helmsman, who taught me how to cast my own sails, to glide with the wind, and to maneuver skillfully over the rough currents. I am extremely grateful to my Semeia Studies editors, Gay Byron and Gerald West, and also to Althea Spencer-Miller, Melanie Johnson-deBaufre, and Abraham Smith for their insightful suggestions that helped me to rechart certain sections of this monograph in order to avoid particularly stony roads.

I thank the staff, my fellow faculty colleagues, and the administration at the Interdenominational Theological Center for their support of my research. I am particularly grateful to Drs. Randall Bailey, Reginaldo Braga, Riggins Earl, Temba Mafico, Beverly Wallace, Henry Whelchel, and Mark Lomax for their support of my research grant proposal that was approved by my institution. I appreciate Eric Thomas, my research assistant, for his impeccable work on my monograph. I am indebted to the Fund of Theological Education for continuing networking support for FTE fellows. I thank Vincent L. Wimbush for his mapping of African Americans and the Bible project and his guidance of my work while at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

I am especially indebted to Dennis Yi-Shin Kuo and Daniel Hunt, who were my lifesavers when I was tossed into the eye of the storm toward the end of my journey. Their steady hands provided me with the opportunity I needed to finish. I could not have completed my travels without their expertise. I am grateful for the assistance and friendship of Kathie Brown, Ernie Rubinstein, and Suzanne Sellinger. I thank them for being

safe havens of solace and will remember fondly my days spent in their offices at Drew University.

Many colleagues and friends supplied me with food and water to nourish both body and soul: Margaret Aymer, Randall Bailey, Reginaldo Braga, Temba Mafico, Vanessa Lovelace, Daniel Shin, Rose Ellen Dunn, Maria Iannuzzi, Sharon Jacob, Jennifer Kaalund, Michelle Mapp, Jea Sophia Oh, Susan Rosario, Alma Tuitt, and Robert Wafula. I cherish the camaraderie and I consider the many gatherings, lunches, and dinners we have shared as sunny, breezy, smooth-sailing days.

Most of all, I thank my family for their love, encouragement, support, patience, and their understanding that sacrifices had to be made in order to complete this project. I thank my brother, Joseph Darden, and my son, Damian LaPene, for carrying some of the load so that I was not too exhausted when approaching the last leg of my journey. I thank my granddaughter, Ava LaPene, for being such a good little traveling companion on those many occasions when she went along with her Na-Na to do research. And I thank my mother, the late St. Clair Darden, who was the light tower that made visible the way home and whose homing pigeons always seemed to find me, no matter where I was. Her keen curiosity and passion to learn new things, her persistent drive and courage to live life to the fullest, and her dedication to serving others are qualities she made sure to instill in me. These qualities provided the fortitude, determination, and stamina I needed to complete this wonderful journey.

Preface

In this reading of the book of Revelation I examine John the Seer's rhetorical strategy, in general, and his use of imperial cult ritual in the heavenly throne room scenes, in particular, through the lens of an African American scripturalization that is framed by the concepts of signifyin(g) and cultural memory, and supplemented by postcolonial theory.[1] The purpose of this scripturalization is to unveil the complex cultural negotiations involved in the construction of a Christian identity. The scripting will propose that John the Seer's signifyin(g) on empire demonstrates that he is well aware of the oppressive nature of Roman imperialism on the lives of provincial Asia Christians. This is made evident throughout the text by his fierce, nonaccommodating stance toward participation in imperial ritual that supports an imperial ideology.

Yet, ironically, John reinscribes imperial processes and practices. Seemingly, no matter how determined he is in his persuasion to disconnect the Christian communities from the religio-political manipulations of empire, his hybrid[2] identity disallows him. John's colonized construction as "almost the same but not quite like" has resulted in the production of a resistance strategy that is a "blurred copy" of the hegemonic tactics of the Roman Empire that entail violent disruption and displacement.

This scripturalization of the book of Revelation fused with postcolonial theory is directed to the contemporary African American community as a cautionary warning of the potential danger of reinscribing the oppressive elements of an American empire. This is not to say that this reading supports a postliberation or postracial sentiment, that the two great beasts of society—racism and sexism—are no longer threats to a holistic and affirming society. What this reading does maintain, however, is that

1. The work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) will frame, in part, the reading strategy.

2. Cultural hybridity is defined as an identity construction formed by the "cross-breeding" of two cultures.

African American biblical scribes must speak to the community's vulnerability to the subtle ways of the beasts by addressing a fuller scope of the complexity of African American identity. By neglecting to reflect on and write about the issues and concerns of a growing segment of African Americans who are carving an upper niche in American politics, economy, education, and finance, African American biblical scribes may find themselves unintentionally feeding the beast.

Abbreviations

AARAS	American Academy of Religion Academy Series
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BR	*Biblical Research*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
EJIL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
Int	*Interpretation*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JITC	*Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
StABH	Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics
SymS	Symposium Series
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Introduction: "At Last"

On January 20, 2009, the day after Martin Luther King Day, the people of this nation witnessed the swearing in of Barack Hussein Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States. This was a momentous day for all Americans, but particularly so for African Americans. I think it is safe to say that many of the African Americans who lined the Washington Mall on that blustery winter day, or watched and/or read about the event, would have never dreamed that, in their lifetime, one of their own would call the White House "home."

The Obama presidential inauguration was the climax of memorial communal events that began with his announcement on February 10, 2007, of his candidacy for president of the United States. His campaign slogan, "Yes We Can!" would resound from African American pulpits, barbershops, beauty salons, restaurants, schools, and street corners. The slogan instilled a sense of unbounded possibility and inspired a people who for generations have wrestled with various forms of displacement and disruption, including enslavement, disenfranchisement, exploitation, segregation, and racism.

Appropriately, the song "At Last," which was the song that Barack and Michelle Obama danced to at the Neighborhood Inauguration Ball, signified a community that had finally found "a dream that they could speak to, a dream that they could finally call their own." The dream was no longer deferred. Despite its fuzziness on a hot, hazy day in August 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. had caught a glimpse of the dream in the distance. Alas, he did not live to see the dream become a clear reality. However, forty-six years later, African Americans were back on the mall en masse, front and center, fully participating in arguably *the* most important civic ritual performance in America—the president's inauguration address and the celebratory festivities that followed.

The inauguration ritual is an important function in American society because it serves to legitimate the authority of the president as leader and as high priest (Fairbanks 1981). As Robert Bellah states,

> The separation of church and state in America has not denied the political realm a religious dimension. Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion. The inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event in this religion. It reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the highest political authority. (1967, 3–4)

The ritual event serves to reaffirm a sacred narration of nation grounded in biblical metaphor that shapes the American ethos. It reiterates a myth of origin that is based on the dual biblical themes of chosenness and conquest, and is informed by the belief that the discovery, founding, and growth of the nation are guided by divine providence. The presidential inauguration ceremony is the prime moment to reinforce the notion of being that monumental "city on the hill" that God has ordained to be the beacon of light for the entire world.

Since the interweaving of the biblical text with social meaning serves to justify institutionalized power and the differentiation of groups based on class, gender, and race, American civic ritual, prior to Obama's advent, marginalized the majority of African Americans. Instead of merely participating on the periphery, African Americans developed and performed practices that reflected their particular version of the nation's narration.[1] For example, the public celebration speeches by blacks in the nineteenth century recycled the biblical narratives to challenge the system of chattel slavery, not to depict America as "the beacon of light to the nations." The recontextualization of America's sacred narration relied on a Euro-American calendar of events, yet transformed and reordered the civic rituals in both function and meaning.

1. Performative practice is defined as a repetitious, recursive strategy in which people, not necessarily unified in their beliefs or by their willingness to be represented by the national identity, take part in producing national culture differently through the integration with, or the enunciation of, the national story or identity. See Bhaba 1994. Also see Runions 2002.

Therefore, the African American sacred narration is a counternarration to a racist ethos that is also grounded in biblical imagery and was first articulated by the enslaved and free descendants of Africans as a means for "talking back." The mimicking or copying of the rhetorical tools of their oppressors thoroughly mocked the Euro-American self-construction. By learning to speak the alien tongue, they were able to claim a level of power within the context of domination. In possessing a shared language, a shared culture, they were able to construct new cultural identities and find a means to create political and communal solidarity (hooks 1994, 170). Through the strategic use of this rhetorical device, the community slowly morphed into ambivalent African Americans, inaugurating a double-consciousness construct that would be the hallmark of their cultural identity—a cultural identity that simultaneously adopts and adapts, embraces and resists, mimics and mocks, the dominant American ethos.

The African American sacred narration has been revised and retold in various ways and dimensions in response to significant communal events that have occurred throughout the centuries. This particular watershed moment in history, in which there is a mass participation of African Americans in the civic ritual performance of the status quo, signals: (1) a key point for renarration and thus reshaping communal identity, and (2) a shift in the dominant social paradigm. Barack Obama's rise as president of the United States signifies that a growing segment of the African American community is weaving a niche in the inner fabric of American sociopolitical and economic structures.

New Challenges for the African American Community

The Scripture verse that Obama alluded to in his 2009 inaugural address, 1 Cor 13:11, served to re-present the nation's sacred narration. He said:

> We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness. (Obama 2009)

Of course, the idea of transformation must inevitably be orated in light of such a major development in American political history. He continued on,

> For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a *new era of peace*.[2]

Here Obama signifies the African American counternarration that challenged the Euro-American myth of origin, provoking and challenging America into realizing the potential of an American dream that benefits all. Yet he also transformed the tradition by extending it past the narrow confines of simply a black and white America. His narration included voices that have been excluded, but have always influenced the story in extremely important ways. Obama's narration of nation pointed to a new direction that America is moving toward: it alluded to the fact that the African American and other communities will continue to make great strides in the future.

However, with this shift in the paradigm that provides such potential for increasingly larger numbers of African Americans to play important roles in forging a more equal and just society for a greater number of citizens, there also is the potential for increasingly large numbers of African Americans to get caught up in the prevalent status quo and to neglect the need to continue to challenge an ethos that is founded on hierarchical racial, ethnic, class, and gender categories. At this pivotal moment, when, the narrative has at last reached the twist in the plot, will the new story line be a disappointing repetition of the old? Will the community comply with the dominant ethos and simply construct another group as the epitome "other" in order to fill the void that has been made by their advancement? Will the counternarration eventually collapse into a myth of origin that no longer mocks the dominant narration, but instead mimics it by affirming social stratification resulting in inequality, economic exploitation and injustice?[3]

2. Obama 2009, emphasis added. The last two lines echo the sentiment of the Pax Romana, except the world is getting smaller in Obama's rhetorical spin and with Augustus the world was expanding.

3. I posit that Barack Obama's second inauguration speech (2013) hints at the

In order to avoid this potential peril, I suggest that African American biblical scribes must continue to expose the community to what lurks in the darkness by challenging and provoking the dominant system, and to become more diligent in cautioning the community to the subtle adherence of the oppressive elements of the dominant culture. In this way, scholars will better represent the inherent ambivalence of African American identity. The task of the African American biblical scribe in the twenty-first century and beyond is to open the eyes of the community to the challenges and pitfalls involved in accommodating to a social, political, and economic system that is founded on social inequality, exploitation, and an unfair distribution of wealth.

It is this potential danger inherent in the shift in the African American matrix that serves as the motivation to produce an African American reading of the book of Revelation that addresses the broader issues, concerns, and challenges that the African American community must encounter and overcome in the twenty-first century.

I will attempt to take on this challenge in my implementation of an African American scripturalization of Revelation that is undergirded by the theoretical concepts of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s signifyin(g) (Gates 1988), cultural memory (Halbwachs 1975; Nora 1989), and postcolonial theory (Bhabha 1994) to suggest that John's colonized, hybridized construction as "almost the same but not quite like" the colonizer (Roman Empire) has resulted in a blurred copy of the colonizer that is made evident by his mimicry of certain aspects of imperial culture, behavior, and manners.

An important aspect of John's signifyin(g) strategy relies on shaping the cultural memory of his community as he connects the past with the present and the future. Thus the images he conjures both allude to and signify on the various power structures of the ancient past, as well as the axis of power in his day, the Roman Empire. However, I will argue that John's signifyin(g) is a contradiction because he seemed to have simply reconfigured and reenacted imperial policy/propaganda to establish his future Christian empire called the new Jerusalem. His signifyin(g) remained fixated on constructing

collapsing of a narrative that no longer mocks the dominant narration but accommodates or mimics the prevalent American ethos. His rhetorical strategy for the second inauguration speech places emphasis on a people who once existed as half slave and half free (or black and white), who are now unified as "We, the People," and who are committed to a sacred narration of manifest destiny that presents the United States as the leader of the free world. See ch. 3 below for the fleshing out of this argument.

an ethos established by cycles of war, conquest, and revolt; and paralleled by cycles of worship, ritual, and mythmaking.

I argue that John's mimicry of the ideological assumptions and methods of constructing empire is due, to a certain degree, to his being a member of a society that demanded participation in the rituals of empire. Ritual performance caused participants to connect with imperial codes, implicitly and explicitly, that, in turn, modified their behavior. In addition, I suggest that John's denial of his own ambivalent, hybrid construction, his repression or nonrealization of his own fragmentation, his own double-consciousness, may be the cause for his contradictory stance toward empire.

I hope that this volume will also contribute generally to a New Testament scholarship that is presently preoccupied with negotiating the meaning of the biblical texts in relation to the context of imperial Rome as, for example, the numerous works by Richard Horsley on Paul and empire, and the relatively new discipline of postcolonial biblical criticism attest.[4] These works have been extremely important in highlighting the imperial ideology embedded in the texts, aptly illustrating similar resistant strategies employed by ancient and modern colonized communities, and persuasively positing the texts as a subversion of the imperial agenda. However, there is a significant lack in the scholarship that explicitly investigates the intricacies involved in the construction of a colonized, or "double-consciousness," identity that is the result of the contact between unequal political powers. Therefore, in this volume I attempt to respond to that need by analyzing how John the Seer's colonized identity is constructed by images of empire in the book of Revelation through the lens of an African American scripturalization supplemented by postcolonial theory.

Mapping the Project

In chapter 1 I discuss the academic interpretive task known as African American biblical hermeneutics that emerged as a subfield in biblical studies as a result of the black power/black liberation movements in the 1970s (Brown 2004, 16–17). Although the methodological approaches of

4. See, e.g., Horsley 1997, 2003, 2006; Carter 2001, 2008; Runions 2002; Moore and Segovia 2007. See ch. 2 below for a fuller discussion.

African American biblical exegetes are diverse and vary from the modern method of historical criticism and all that the approach entails—source criticism, redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism—to the postmodern methods of reader-response, deconstruction, ideological criticism, and so on, their point of departure is set in a particular hermeneutical key. African American biblical hermeneuts are mainly interpreters of liberation whose overall objectives are: (1) to expose and confront Eurocentric ideological interpretations, (2) to recover the presence of blackness in the biblical texts, and (3) to articulate liberation from a history of dominant interpretations that have been instrumental in the oppression/suppression of African Americans (Brown 2004, 20–22).

However, many African American biblical scholars, particularly womanist biblical scholars, do not adopt a homogeneous articulation of liberation from an overtly oppressive sociopolitical system since (1) greater numbers of African Americans are moving into positions of political and economic power, and (2) overt oppression is becoming much more subtle as it moves more and more underground. Because of these shifts in the sociopolitical ethos, more complex enunciations of the biblical story must be produced in order to better address the intricacy of an entangled cultural identity. Therefore, in this chapter I will discuss the need for a reconfiguration of African American biblical hermeneutics that addresses the broader dimensions of identity formation.

Thus the second section of chapter 1 situates African American scholars in a global community of cultural-critical scholars who emphasize the importance of contemporary social location in the production of meaning. A comprehensive examination of the cultural-critical paradigm is made in juxtaposition to the historical-critical paradigm, analyzing and critiquing the dominant approach to biblical scholarship. I will then propose a renaming of African American biblical hermeneutics/interpretation to that of "African American scripturalization." The change in name signifies a shift in the discipline's approach that allows for a fuller representation of the diversity and complexity of African American identities. In this chapter I introduce the concept of cultural memory to the proposal as being useful in moving past the understanding of a homogeneous or monolithic communal identity formation because the remembrance of the distant past as held by a people depends on a given social and historical context (see Halbwachs 1975; Nora 1989). Thus I develop the idea of African American scripturalization as a site of memory, both a receptacle and carrier of cultural memory.

The third section of the chapter discusses the theorization of an African American reading strategy as suggested by Vincent Wimbush that is influenced by Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s articulation of "signifyin(g)." Although the concept can take on a broad dimension, signifyin(g), according to Gates, is rhetorical indirection, doubling, figuration, pastiche, parody, and irony that is made evident when one speaker or writer repeats another's structure by a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure. (For example, the African American sacred narration can be said to be "signifyin[g]" on the American narration of nation. This example will be fully fleshed out in ch. 3.) The notion of signifyin(g) is particularly applicable to the reading of Revelation as it is obvious that all of the above rhetorical devices can be clearly illustrated throughout this text.

The last section of the chapter revisits the work of four African American biblical scribes—Charles Copher, Cain Hope Felder, Vincent Wimbush, and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan—whose approaches represent the versatility of African American scripturalization, which ranges from corrective historical criticism to a contemporary cultural engagement with the biblical narratives.

In chapter 2 I examine the development of postcolonial studies, discuss its potential as a supplementation to African American scripturalization, and provide an overview of postcolonial theory as concepturalized by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Bhabha's postcolonial theoretical concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry will set the hermeneutical key for the African American scripturalization of Revelation. His theoretical gestures will serve to articulate a cultural location of the in-between space, which refers to the site of conflict, interaction, and mutual assimilation that involves every encounter between cultures. According to Bhabha, this is a site of negotiation that can be either "consensual or conflictual as it confounds our definition of tradition and estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received tradition'" (1994, 3). Therefore, I will illustrate that cultures can never be defined independently because of this continual exchange that produces mutual representation of cultural difference. Supplementing postcolonial theory with the African American engagement with the Bible reveals that domination never involves the simple imposition of one culture onto another, but is a constantly shifting space that creates possibilities for subversion and collusion (Bhabha 1994, 5). Bhabha's theoretical language will aid in displacing the notion of a homogenized communal identity and assist in evincing the complexity of identity construction. I will argue that

the fusion of postcolonial theory with African American scripturalization blends smoothly in ironing out the knotty dimensions of a double-consciousness hermeneutical tradition. Both disciplines are interested in: (1) attempting to explore issues of re-presentation, essentialism, and nationalism; (2) providing alternative enunciations of the myth of origin; (3) critiquing how the West uses the concept of the Other and vice versa in the construction of identity; and (4), with reference to womanists and postcolonial feminists, critiquing patriarchy as it aligns with the imperial agenda, including white feminist ideology. Both disciplines enhance one another. Whereas postcolonial theory contributes to African American scripturalization by resituating it out of its local cultural context and placing it into a broader global conversation, African American scripturalization is ideally situated to address issues in relation to the (neo)imperial practices of the United States that postcolonial theory presently does but rarely, choosing instead to limit the discipline mainly to aspects of British imperialism/colonization.

In chapter 3 I provide a comprehensive cartography of the development of the African American narration of nation, which is presented as an emancipatory act of double-consciousness, a bifocal vision that revolves around a countermemory. I will suggest that the praxis is, paradoxically, an ambivalent yet sustaining praxis that constructs a positive identity while enunciating a dissent with the American ethos. I will illustrate that this communal tradition began in early colonial and antebellum periods when the enslaved and disenfranchised African's appropriation of Christian Scripture was used to carve out the creation of an internal space of value and order while simultaneously creating a suitable outlet of protest and indignation toward an external, chaotic world. While the early Euro-Americans' identification with the exodus story focused on the success of freedom of the Israelites from Egyptian rule, the enslaved African, being a few pages back in the story, focused on the hope of freedom from a cruel oppression. As the early Euro-Americans have escaped from Egypt and are now on an errand of destiny to (control) the "promised" land, the enslaved Africans' construction countered with the Joseph story, accusing the early Euro-Americans of selling their fellow brothers and sisters into a destiny of chattel slavery. Biblical rhetoric and allusion, whether expressed in song, sermon, or speech, served to sustain human dignity and to protect the honor of the enslaved Africans as they denounced an inhumane sociopolitical system. I maintain that the African American hermeneutical tradition is a hybrid hermeneutic that simultaneously mimics and mocks

the Euro-American hermeneutical tradition. It is a signifyin(g) tradition that is produced as a result of an ambivalent identity construction that, in turn, narrates a national myth that differs from the dominant version. Whereas Euro-Americans view the American myth as being realized, the African American's narration of nation provokes and challenges America into realizing the potential of an American myth that benefits all.

In chapter 4 I apply the concepts of African American scripturalization to the general observations on the book of Revelation to illustrate how this approach opens the text to a broader analysis. This is a vital step because the standard scholarship on Revelation that is based on the historical-critical paradigm must be deconstructed. I adamantly maintain that if this is not done, standard scholarship will muffle the perspective of an African American scriptualization. Therefore, in this chapter, using a call-and-response format (with the call being the standard scholarship perspective and the response being that of an African American scripturalization approach), I examine the text in order to illustrate that John's signifyin(g) on the Roman Empire attempts to construct a narration of nation as a response to a people's cultural memory that has been traumatized during years of bondage and continued discrimination. However, John's hybrid construction disallows him from disconnecting from an oppressive ethos that has become part of his identity construction. John seemingly is split between an urge toward Christianity—conceived in cultural terms—and the continued presence of imperial ideas. John is affected by the complexities of identity construction in the ancient world that are produced by the double movement of shifting away from "Roman" constructions while simultaneously shifting toward (re)appropriating the ideological, theological, linguistic, and textual forms of Roman imperial power. The chapter will examine John's mimicry of the ideological processes of empire, in spite of his fierce nonaccommodating stance toward the participation in the imperial cult, the religio-political system that divinely sanctioned the Roman Empire.

In chapter 5 I will attempt to illustrate the more complex dimensions of a marginalized identity by analyzing the images of the heavenly throne room scenes throughout the text in general, and in Revelation 4 and 5 in particular, to argue that John's reinscription of imperial ideology is evident by his mere transference of imperial ritual to the heavenly sphere. John's reuse of imperial rituals that have supported an oppressive imperial ideology results in continued marginalization. Therefore, I contend that the exploitative sociopolitical tactics of empire are transferred into yet another

symbolic order sustained by ritual performance. I compare the work of Brian Blount and Clarice Martin on Revelation to my approach in order to highlight the difference between an African American interpretation driven by the concepts of black liberation theology and an African American scripturalization underscored by postcolonial theory. Blount's work applies African American religious and sociopolitical circumstances to the reading of Revelation (2005a, 2009a). His reading contends that Revelation was written out of the context of a suffering community that is forced to assimilate into an oppressive society. Martin (2005) performs a womanist critique of ancient Roman slavery and imperial ideology through the lens of the African American experience and compares the seer's fierce rhetorical responses to those of the Signifying Monkey, who uses language tropes with defiance in order to subvert the domination of the Lion's hegemonic claims to powers. However, to date, few African American scholars have yet to apply a sustained postcolonial theoretical analysis to their interpretive task that will allow for a broader engagement of the Bible from multifaceted communal locations (S. Smith 2014).

In chapter 6 I conclude the work by discussing the implications of this African American scripturalization of Revelation.