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Interpreters—Enslaving/ Enslaved/Runagate

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The colonial world is a Manichean world.
—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Big Jim Todd was a slick black buck
Laying low in the mud and muck
Of Pondy Woods when the sun went down
In gold, and the buzzards tilted down
A windless vortex to the black-gum trees
To sit along the quiet boughs,
Devout and swollen, at their ease.
. . . . . .
Past midnight, when the moccasin
Slipped from the log and, trailing in
Its obscured waters, broke
The dark algae, one lean bird spoke.
. . . . . .
"Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical."
The buzzard coughed. His words fell
In the darkness, mystic and ambrosial.

"But we maintain our ancient rite,
Eat the gods by day and prophesy by night.
We swing against the sky and wait;
You seize the hour, more passionate
Than strong, and strive with time to die—
With Time, the beak-ed tribe's astute ally.
. . . . . .

> Nigger, regard the circumstance of breath:
> 'Non omnis moriar,' the poet saith."
> Pedantic, the bird clacked its gray beak,
> With a Tennessee accent to the classic phrase;
> Jim understood, and was about to speak,
> But the buzzard drooped one wing and filmed the eyes.
> . . . . . .
>
> —Robert Penn Warren, "Pondy Woods"

> Negro folklore . . . [was] not . . . a new experience for me. . . . But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was . . . away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. . . .
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*

I am not unaware that on occasions such as this references to the personal and even embodiment are quite rare. Yet I can hardly avoid transgressing in this and likely other regards before the end of this address. In spite of what may be the testimonies of my remaining parent and other elders, and notwithstanding the certifications the state may present, my beginnings are not here in this city in the sixth decade of the twentieth century. In respects more profound and disturbing and poignantly ramifying for professional interpreters, my beginnings should be understood to be in that more expansive period and fraught situations of the North Atlantic worlds between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, moments and situations in which "the West" and "the rest" were coming into fateful first contact. With such contact many social and political formations, sentiments and orientations of "the West" were (re-)forged and (re-)defined. "Contact" is of course studied euphemy, rhetorical repression meant to veil the violence and hegemony of the West's large-scale triangular Atlantic slave trading in dark peoples.

This is the time and situation of my beginning and the framework for the consciousness that I bring to this podium. And almost all of you have beginnings like my own. The dynamics of this period now still largely determine, even haunt, our sometimes different but also often common positionalities and orientations, practices and discourses, ideologies and politics and social formations. Included in the haunting are the profound shifts in the understandings of the self, including ideas about freedom and slavery of the self that mark the period.

Although differently named and tweaked from decade to decade since 1880, those practices and discourses that define this professional Society have always been and are even now still fully imbricated in the general politics and emergent discourses of the larger period to which I refer. And the cultivated obliviousness to or silence about—if not also the ideological reflection and validation of—the larger prevailing sociopolitical currents and dynamics marks the beginning and ongoing history of this Society (among other learned and professional societies, to be sure).

With its fetishization of the rituals and games involving books and THE BOOK, its politics of feigning apolitical ideology, its still all too simple historicist agenda (masking in too many instances unacknowledged theological-apologetic interests), its commitment to "sticking to the text," its orientation in reality has always contributed to and reflected a participation in "sticking it" to the gendered and racialized Others. The fragility of the fiction of the apolitical big tent holding us together is all too evident in the still mind-numbingly general and vapid language we use to describe our varied practices and ideologies and orientations.

Of course, there have been challenges to the Society and its orientations in some periods of our history.[1] You know what they have been. And you will not be surprised if I suggest that the challenges have been too few and too tepid—and always belated. The fact that we cannot document the membership and participation of a single African American in this Society before the fifth decade of the twentieth century, the fact that the most recent history of the Society (in observance of the centennial)[2] does not even mention black folks, the fact that we cannot point to the official regularly scheduled gathering of two or three African Americans in discourse before the eighth decade of the last century, is shocking. Only with the initiatives of Thomas Hoyt, Jr., and John W. Waters, which led to the *Stony the Road We Trod* discussion and book project in the late 1980s, which in turn led to the establishment of the first honestly ethnically marked program unit, which paved the way for all such units today—only with such initiatives do black peoples and other peoples of color appear in numbers to make a point at all about diversity in the Society. This is the period of my initiation and participation in the Society. This suggests much about the timing of someone of my tribe standing before you today.

Perhaps, it could not have been otherwise. I do not presume that such folk were between the 1880s and the 1980s always and everywhere barred from membership and participation in the meetings of the Society. I do not imagine the chairs of the Synoptic Gospels or the Prophetic Texts units standing at the doors yelling "Whites only!" There is no doubt about the sick views of some; but I think something deeper was and, perhaps, remains even today at issue: given the state of emergency in which they have lived (emergencies that would give Walter Benjamin pause), given the onset of the second slavery in the post–Civil War era when the industrial liberal North threw black folk under the wagon and the South embraced racial violence, the worst practices of Jim Crowism and economic peonage and

[1] I am thinking here of Robert W. Funk (SBL president, 1975) and his colleagues in the 1960s and 1970s; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (SBL president, 1987) and colleagues in the 1980s. Their addresses can be found in *Presidential Voices: The Society of Biblical Literature in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Harold W. Attridge and James C. VanderKam; SBLBSNA 22; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

[2] Ernest W. Saunders, *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880–1980* (SBLBSNA 8; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

slavery,[3] black membership in the decades past would have required the Society, in the vernacular of the folk, to "be talkin' 'bout somethin'." Notwithstanding all the historical and some continuing stumbling blocks in the way, I suggest that the paucity of black membership is due ultimately not to the bad faith and manners of members of the Society in the past but to something more profound—the (unrecognized, unacknowledged) racialized discursive practices and politics that have defined it.

It is imperative that we recognize, even if belatedly, those few black pioneers of the decades before the initiatives of Hoyt and Waters—the likes of Leon Edward Wright; Charles B. Copher; G. Murray Branch; and Joseph A. Johnson.[4] We must inscribe them and a few others into our full organizational consciousness and memory. These few are no longer with us; they have yet to be fully claimed and recognized. They struggled mightily to figure out how to speak to the challenges and pressures of the different worlds they intersected as black male intellectuals on the peripheries of the field. They were not always understood by members of their own tribes. They were severely limited in terms of professional appointments. Because so many parts of society and the academy accepted racial segregation as a given, simply the way things were and were supposed to be, they all worked in black institutions, mostly in Atlanta and Washington. And the Society did not recognize them and did little to support them or resist the polluted status quo. They must surely have exhausted themselves. They surely had stories to tell, lessons for our edification. And, of course, that our sisters of color, who faced even more layered intersecting stumbling blocks to their participation emerged at all only in the 1980s and are here among us in their numbers is tribute to their strength and commitment and further evidence of the Society's fraught and frayed history.

Now after having left "home" in that flatter sense of the term or, in Zora Neale Hurston's terms, having loosened the grip of that hyper-racialized garment I was made to wear, with growing awareness of what I gain from the pioneers listed above,

[3] See the riveting and unsettling book by Atlanta bureau chief of the *Wall Street Journal* Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Establishment of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008). It provides irrefutable evidence of the perduring effects of slavery among black peoples into this century.

[4] Leon Edward Wright (1912–1996), *Alterations in the Words of Jesus, as Quoted in the Literature of the Second Century* (Harvard Historical Monographs 25; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), a revision of his Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1945; Charles B. Copher (1913–2003), "Isaiah's Philosophy of History" (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1947); *Black Biblical Studies: An Anthology of Charles B. Copher. Biblical and Theological Issues on the Black Presence in the Bible* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1993); R. C. Bailey and J. Grant, eds., *Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration. Essays in Honor of Dr. Charles B. Copher* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); G[eorge] Murray Branch (1914–2006), "Malachi: Prophet of Transition" (M.A. thesis, Drew University, 1946); Joseph A. Johnson (1914–1979), "Christianity and Atonement in the Fourth Gospel" (Ph.D. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1958).

and through engagement of that fraught period of contact as an intense excavation of consciousness, I stand before you this evening with yet another challenge, imploring the Society—and by extension, all critical interpreters—to start and to sustain "talkin' 'bout somethin'." Here is the challenge plainly put: there can be no critical interpretation worthy of the name, without coming to terms with the first contact—between the West and the rest, the West and the Others—and its perduring toxic and blinding effects and consequences. The challenge remains for this Society and all collectivities of critical interpreters in general to engage in persistent and protracted struggle, not symbolic or obfuscating games around methods and approaches, to come to terms with the construal of the modern ideologization of language, characterized by the meta-racism[5] that marks the relationship between Europeans and Euro-Americans and peoples of color, especially black peoples. What might it mean to address in explicit terms the nature and consequences of first contact for the unstable and fragile big tent that is our Society? What might it suggest for the ongoing widely differently prioritized and oriented work we do in our widely different settings and contexts with our nonetheless still widely shared absolutist and elitist claims and presumptions about such work? It would make it imperative that we talk about discourse and power, slavery and freedom, life and death.

In addition to the persons quoted at the beginning of this address, I have given myself permission to conjure one of those booming haunting voices from an earlier moment and situation from the period of first contact, a voice belonging to one among those peoples heavily "signified,"[6] one of the "voices from within the veil."[7] Unlike Robert Penn Warren's Big Jim (referred to in his poem used as part of the epigraph above), Frederick Douglass speaks and writes his mind. In his first autobiographical work, his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself,*[8] he looks back on an incident from his youthful years when he was a slave. The incident was seemingly a recurring one, but he makes the reader experience it as a singular, pointed one for narratological effect. It is an incident that Douglass, the recently escaped and young but emerging lion-voiced

[5] See Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

[6] See Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 4.

[7] The subtitle of W. E. B. Du Bois's collection of essays entitled *Darkwater: Voices from the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920). The subtitle represents a theme that is taken up in his most famous work *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903). The essays in *Darkwater* are said to represent Du Bois's most mature, certainly some of his more sharp-edged, writings. See Manning Marable's introduction to the Dover Thrift Edition (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1996).

[8] In *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader* (ed. with introduction by William L. Andrews; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). All subsequent references to Douglass's text, cited as *Narrative,* are from this edition.

abolitionist, remembers and recounts for the (assumed) mostly white abolitionist-minded readers. What he touches upon and opens up in an astonishing display of romanticist and critical-reflexive communication are several issues that likely escaped the review of or were not (or could not be) fully understood by the Garrisonians, the abolitionist patron/izers of the young ex-slave. These were issues that still offer pointed challenge to all moderns, especially those interested and invested in thinking about something—about the enslaved, enslaved thinking, critical and free thinking and interpretation.

> The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves . . . would make the dense woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound; and—as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly . . . words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. . . . I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear.[9]

In this recounting Douglass names many issues for consideration—subjectivity and consciousness, discourse and power, power and knowledge, knowledge and positionality, knowledge and the center, knowledge and centers. He names or at least assumes at least three different categories of persons or groups as different types of knowers or interpreters produced by that world of first contact—first, the slave singers, those who through their songs provide evidence that they have some knowledge and some agency of communication but are nonetheless not allowed to communicate their knowledge and sentiment beyond their own circle; second, those outside the circle (of the slaves), the world associated with the Great House Farm and all that it represents, those who if they hear the slave songs at all hear them only as jargon, as "mumbo jumbo";[10] and third, Douglass himself, the one who although technically at first "within the circle" (who as such did not/could not

[9] Douglass, *Narrative,* 27–38.

[10] This is the title of Ishmael Reed's most famous and challenging and sometimes unfathomable novel (New York: Scribner, 1972). For his purposes, Reed traced "mumbo jumbo" to Mandingo *ma-ma-gyo-mbo,* "magician who makes the troubled spirits go away" (p. 7). This tracing suggests that which has meaning within a larger structure of meaning. Obviously, in the hyperracialized West defining itself over against the black world, the works and discourses of such a magician would be translated as nonsense, so much jumbled mumbling.

know), later, as reflected in his writerly self, outside the circle of slavery, begins to understand not only what the slaves felt and communicated but also something more, something about communicating, knowing.

Using African slaves to think with, Douglass thinks in terms of "site" sanctioning "insight,"[11] that is, in terms of types of consciousness and interpreters who are differently positioned—the enslaving, the enslaved, and the runagate. These categories I submit—and I think Douglass thought—are not always totally mutually exclusive; they can be and in history have been complexly intertwined, yet there is justification for their isolation for the sake of analysis. There is no escape from the consequences set in motion by that contact that was turned into violent conquest for some and long-term subordination for the many others. Douglass's wrenching passage about the black slaves he knew and the types of interpreters and consciousness that could be identified with them challenges all interpreters to seek a way out, a way to run. His analysis begins—complexly, emotionally—with those whose very identity as human agents was questioned and denied; he begins with physical black enslavement as a way to the problematization of the "black (w)hole,"[12] to a profound understanding of the larger complex of slavery and freedom that defines and marks black peoples to be sure, but nearly all of us in more general terms. To the three categories of interpreters I briefly turn.

First, the enslaving. Those participating in and profiting from the structure of dominance generated by the Great House Farm were understood by Douglass to be oblivious to the plight of others. They are imagined to be those who, like Warren's buzzard, lifted their wings so as to avoid seeing and hearing the others. They were also characterized, according to Fanon, as those who had fallen prey to a Manichaean psychology and epistemics: the world was understood to be black and white, the latter signifying light and purity and life, the former dirt and pollution.[13] Of course, we now know more about what subtends such psychology and epistemics. Since Melville and other raging mad sensitive souls, we know now that it represents a horrific splitting of the self—into the blankness of whiteness and the foreboding threatening overdetermined markedness of blackness—and the hardened essentialization of the parts. The splitting is traumatic; it is not recognized or

[11] See Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 293.

[12] For a fascinating exploration of this term and the phenomenon to which it points, see literary and cultural critic Houston A. Baker, Jr., in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 155, and passim.

[13] See this argument developed by Frantz Fanon in his *Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington; New York: Grove, 1968; French original, 1961), 41. Also see the discussion in Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 59–87.

acknowledged; it is part of the phenomenon of the "hidden brain."[14] It results in, among other things, the meta-racist regime that pollutes all of us, infects our discourses, our work and play, including our philological games.

It was at work in Jefferson's convoluted denial of Phillis Wheatley's brilliant artistry;[15] in Hegel's disavowal of the successful struggle of those black folk in Saint-Domingue-turned-Haiti against their enslavers and the meaning of such struggle as the backdrop for his own theorizing about the dialectics of struggle between master and slave and the further disavowal of the meaning of this struggle for universalism and the turn to modernity;[16] in John Locke's "purification of language" project, part of the "metadiscursive formation" aimed to deny the right to public speech to any one—women; serfs and slaves; sub-aristocrat whites—who could not speak properly.[17] It was at work when Tony Perkins, head of the evangelical and corporatist Family Research Council, declared on CNN in the heat of the last presidential election with great authority and without a whiff of qualification—much like Warren's buzzard—that the jeremiads of the urban black pastor named *Jeremiah* Wright against corporatist and racializing/racist "America" were simply "unscriptural."[18] Can we doubt that Perkins's utterance comes out of the still regnant Manichaean world? Is it hard to see that in Perkins's mind—buried far in that hidden brain where meta-racism thrives—there is an assumption that he and his tribesmen own the Bible and that they are invested with all rights and privileges appertaining thereto, meaning control of the discourses about the Bible? Who cannot see that behind his outburst were exegetical arguments, no doubt legitimized by the scholarship of our membership, that conjure the ancient Near Eastern world as a white world in seamless historical development with the modern white world?

[14] See the compelling development of this concept by Shankar Vedantam in *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

[15] See his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785; ed. with introduction and notes by Frank Shuffelton; New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

[16] Susan Buck-Morss (*Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* [Illuminations; Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009]) and Sibylle Fischer (*Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* [Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2004]), advance compelling arguments concerning Hegel's denial of the universal implication in the Haitians' struggle to be free and to establish the first modern society with aspirations to universal nonracialized freedoms.

[17] For general historical cultural background, focusing mainly on Britain, see Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). For a discussion of John Locke and the dramatic ensuing consequences in many domains and contexts in the twenty-first century in the United States, see Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language 21; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[18] See http://archives.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0803/14/acd.01.html.

These and other such examples of disavowals and tortured silences and twisted arguments and declarations reflect the pollution and veiling of the humanity and consciousness that is the Manichaean psychology and epistemics, infecting all peoples.[19] It is arguable that it is no longer possible for those who are subject to such a construction or regime to argue freely what they see, think, or feel. Having to make black always signify the same thing—always signify the negative—represents a tremendous psychosocial and intellectual commitment and burden.[20]

This mentality of denial and disavowal, the most trenchant reflection of the Manichaean psychology, has been powerfully imaged in the frontispiece to Jesuit scholar Joseph-François Lafitau's 1724 multivolume work *Moeurs des sauvages Ameriquains comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (see next page).[21]

Following Michel de Certeau's interpretive glosses,[22] we see the racialized and gendered but otherwise unmarked writer/inscriber/historian of the world and interpreter of events and truth. She is complexly situated—in relationship to the anthropomorphized Father time and death. She writes within and for the larger framework that is Europe ascendant. But she must write in order to clarify in light of the contact with the Others and the changes in the world how now things must mean. She writes about the truth as Europeans must see it, tell it, know it. So notice along the bottom of the image the objects, trinkets, fetishes, representing the Others. The history, the truth that is to be told about these "savages" and "primitives" must now be told in the terms of the method of bricolage—assembling, choosing this and that part, this or that thing, from this or that world of savagery, in order to place the Others within the canonical framework that reflects Manichaean psychology and epistemics. The "savage" is assumed not to be able to communicate, at least, not in purified language, so deserves no hearing, demands no respectful gaze. But Europeans can and should inscribe the Other into reality and interpret and interpellate them.

Who enslaves whom? Douglass implied that those far outside the circle—those in some respect participating in the ways of the Great House Farm, those who, like the woman in Lafitau's frontispiece representing Euro-America or the West writing up the Rest—can hardly see or hear, much less understand, the Rest represented by the slaves. Like the poignantly named Nehemiah who "writes up" Dessa in

[19] See Camara Jules P. Harrell, *Manichean Psychology: Racism and the Minds of People of African Descent* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1999), for discussion of the way black peoples have been infected.

[20] On this point, see Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 246.

[21] Paris: Saugrain l'aine et Charles Etienne Hochereau, 1724.

[22] See Certeau, "Writing vs. Time: History and Anthropology in the Works of Lafitau," in *Rethinking History: Time, Myth, and Writing* (ed. Marie-Rose Logan and John Frederick Logan; Yale French Studies 59; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

The image that appears on p. 14 of the print edition of *JBL*

Frontispiece to the 1724 edition of Joseph-François Lafitau,
Moeurs de sauvages Ameriquains comparées aux moeurs de premiers temps.
Engraving signed by I. B. Scotin.
Bibliothèque nationale de France

can be viewed at

http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=rbfr&fileName=0013/rbfr0013.db&recNum=7&itemLink=r

Sherley Williams's *Dessa Rose,*[23] the writer makes up a truth, like "science," a writing that represents a kind of violence done to her body.[24] The woman who is Euro-America who writes up the savages actually does not even look at the objects and symbols assumed to represent them. Her gaze redefines what it means to see straight.

Second, the enslaved. Their situation was not romanticized by Douglass, at least not without some resistance or qualification. In his view, they were denied any but overdetermined identification with and participation in the world that was represented by the Great House Farm. They were denied the main currents of communication and social exchange. They were considered chattel, and so it was assumed that they were unable to think, to communicate, except in the way of the "swinish multitude."[25] They were presumed not to be able to read and write—at least, not in canonical/cosmopolitan European languages or modes.[26]

Douglass knew that the black enslaved could make meaning or make things mean, but not beyond their small and rigidly contained circle. Outside their circle they experienced little or no intersubjectivity, which provokes what might be thought of as the "anxiety of ethnicity."[27] This phenomenon was understood to be one of the most important meanings and consequences of enslavement.[28] Slaves' communication was reduced to an "anti-language,"[29] unrecognized and unacknowledged by others. This is what Douglass called "unmeaning jargon." They were

[23] New York: W. Morrow, 1982.

[24] See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven Rendall; Berkeley: University of California, 2002), part 4, ch. 10.

[25] The language of Edmund Burke, found in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France, And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event. In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris* (London: J. Dodsley, 1790). It provoked much reaction in England and beyond. See also Smith, *Politics of Language,* ch. 3.

[26] On this matter of canonical or conventional discourses, see Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). On more conventional history of conventional literacy among blacks, see Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992).

[27] So David Van Leer, "Reading Slavery: The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass's Narrative," in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (ed. Eric J. Sundquist; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 129.

[28] See Orlando Patterson's works on slavery and freedom: *Freedom* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington, DC: Civitas, 1998), among others.

[29] Ann M. Kibbey and Michele Stepto, "The Anti-Language of Slavery: Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative,*" in *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass* (ed. William L. Andrews; Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 166–91.

rendered silent and invisible. Ralph Ellison's character in *Invisible Man* put the phenomenon in riveting terms:

> I am invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass . . . they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.[30]

The evidence of the silencing and rendering invisible the presence of the black Atlantic and contributions is everywhere to be seen. Consider Rebecca Protten, an eighteenth-century pioneer Moravian missionary and evangelist and founder of one of the first African American Protestant congregations in the North Atlantic world.[31] The establishment politics of "church"/"religious" history has contributed to her being largely forgotten. Note the woman known as "sister Francis" or as the "Blackymore maide." Her well-known charismatic leadership in the establishment of the seventeenth-century radical Protestant formation that became the establishment Church of Christ in Broadmead, later Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, England, was erased by Edward Terrill's establishmentarian revisionist history. Her leadership was reduced to overdetermined categories—of appellation and sentimentality. She was by exegetical sleight of hand erased out of her rightful place in history, as founding figure—and then flattened into a black pious maid.[32]

And Douglass's own situation as writer is worth mentioning. The abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison provided the preface to Douglass's 1845 *Narrative.* Whatever may be said about the substantive comments made in it, it is clear that this preface functioned primarily to "translate" Douglass, that is, to provide the metacommentary for all that is to follow. This is an example of enslavement as a kind of "framework."[33] A discerning reader can determine whether Garrison ever really understood Douglass's text. Douglass later severed ties with Garrison and the Garrisonians. He came to understand how slavery could continue to work—way up North—as discursive framing.

Perhaps, the most famous description, if not the final analysis, of the phenomenon of the enslaved as the framed is found in W. E. B. Du Bois's works. In his famous *Souls of Black Folk,* the Manichaean world, the world structured around

[30] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (2nd ed.; New York: Vintage, 1995), 3.

[31] See Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[32] See Edward Terrill, *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640–1687* (Bristol Record Society, 1974). For historical-interpretive context, see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), ch. 3.

[33] On Garrison's persistent liberal-abolitionist paternalism in relationship to Douglass, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 148–49.

what he termed the "veil," is defined by racial division and alienation and ignorance that affects all: "there is almost no community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the other."[34]

As Douglass looks back to the Great House Farm, he does not romanticize the situation of the slaves. He indicates that he has come to understand that the chief dilemma that slaves faced was not the physical domination, as demeaning as it was, but the not being seen, not being heard, not being understood, not being communicated with in broad terms befitting the dignity of humanity, not being able to communicate the complexity of sentiments and feelings, and being cut off from everything—except, ironically, the Great House Farm. Enslavement meant being able to sing, perhaps, but only within the Manichaean-prescribed circle in which black was overdetermined as, among other things, "unmeaning jargon." This was for Douglass intolerable. He would escape it.

Third, runagate. The term is an alternate form of "renegate," from Middle Latin *renegatus,* meaning "fugitive" or "runaway." It has come to carry the meaning of a more transgressive act than mere flight. It is marronage, running away with an attitude and a plan, a taking flight—in body, but even more importantly in terms of consciousness.[35] We know that Douglass literally runs away from enslavement. It is as a runagate that he writes his first autobiography. And in this part of the story about the slaves on their way to the Great House Farm, Douglass distinguishes himself from the others who are slaves. He seems to experience being in and out of solidarity with and consciousness about them. He knows them, but he is also alien to them. That he once occupied a similar psychic position with them but now assumes a different position is excruciatingly painful for him. He registers acute anxiety experienced over the need to step outside the circle, outside the framed experience, the framed consciousness that is slavery. It is a scary place. It is psychosocial and discursive marronage. He is a runagate *before* he runs away.

[34] From "IX. Of the Sons of Master and Man," in *Souls of Black Folk,* in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay; New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 700.

[35] See Jean Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons: Liberty or Death* (trans. A Faulkner Watts; New York: Edward Blyden, 1981); Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2006); Hugo Prosper Learning, *Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas* (Studies in African American History and Culture; New York: Garland, 1995); Mavis Christin Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655–1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration & Betrayal* (Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988); and Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (3rd ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). See also Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s recontextualization arguments in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 71–82.

There is a long history of this phenomenon of the runagate—long before and long after Douglass, among the people who have become and whom we now call African Americans. The runagate not only involved heroic individuals such as Douglass but everyday collective folk who showed themselves to be a people on the run, a marooned people, a people intent on migrating from deserts and fields of enslavement to other psychic places, with high purpose. Taking flight, running away, in the several different respects of meaning and experience, was the watchword. It brought some of my relatives to this city and took some others into other parts of the country. That other philosopher called Locke (as in Alain) in his 1925 edited volume *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* vividly captured the impetus and drama of one of the waves of migration in the twentieth century:

> The wash and rush of this human tide . . . 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. . . . 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 . . . a deliberate flight not only from the countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.[36]

The critical sign of Douglass having already become runagate before reaching the North is his acquisition and critical use of thinking about literacy. Learning to read had to do with more than learning the letters, having been given the "inch," as he called it. No, his reading involved taking the "ell," involving a much more complex phenomenon with profound consequences, including those and more that were feared by the masters. Douglass's command of the text is like Maurice Blanchot's notion of reading as reading past the text to something more or other, a reading of the self—a historicized collective self.[37] This self that Douglass began to read seems to be the result of a splitting of a different sort from, but with great implications and ramifications for, the engagement of the Manichaean psychology.

Du Bois continues to provide perspective. His references in *Souls of Black Folk* to the term "veil" as a metaphor to name the nature of the construction of the Manichaean world and his understanding of the consequences and impact of such include that most famous remark—". . . a peculiar sensation . . . double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the others."[38] This remark is generally assumed to apply simply and universally to all black peoples in the United States. This interpretation is questionable as applied to *Souls:* in the latter he was focused on explaining (to a mixed readership) those black folks who were phys-

[36] Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1999), 6.

[37] See Michael Holland, ed., *The Blanchot Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1995), especially on the concept of "the work."

[38] Du Bois, *Souls,* in Gates and McKay, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 615.

ically and increasingly psychically removed from the world of the Great House Farm and were now facing the negotiation of larger miscegenated worlds and consciousness. Du Bois understood that for such persons—like himself and like Douglass "outside the circle"—what was experienced most acutely is a splitting, an acute self-alienation, dissociation. This was what he termed existence behind the "Veil of Color."[39] Douglass's miscegenated and alienated consciousness led him to wage battle. It was the fight with Covey the infamous "nigger-breaker" that sharply reflected Douglass's struggle with alienation and anxiety. Douglass understood the fight with Covey to be more than physical contact. In Covey, Douglass comes face to face, so to speak, with the more tangible manifestations of meta-racism—the slave system and its imbrication of Christian ideology. But it also occasioned opportunity for Douglass to represent his confrontation with the world of the slave, more specifically, African traditions, in the form of Sandy the root doctor. Like Jacob's wrestling with the angel, Douglass fights an existential battle: he fights against aspects of himself that have been forced to split on account of Manichaean meta-racism; he fights the white side of himself represented by Covey and his absent father, which derides and demeans and denies him and his blackness; and he fights the black side of himself, represented by Sandy, with his limited agency and communication skills and timidity if not also perfidy. He shows himself to be conscious of the tightly coiled constructedness of both worlds. In the end, his fight results in his becoming a subjectivity that was miscegenated, not merely a blending in literal/physical terms, but an independent self that is unstable, fluid, protean, embattled, split from the violent framing.

It was this splitting and the anxiety over it that Du Bois considered a paradox, an opportunity and a gift to the black subjects and through them to the world. The forced splitting provides opportunity for cultivation of heightened critical consciousness: "Once in a while," he indicated, noting that the phenomenon was not guaranteed but had to be cultivated and exploited, "through all of us"—that is, those forced behind the veil, that "thick sheet of invisible . . . horribly tangible plate glass" limning "a dark cave" within which black folks are "entombed souls . . . hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development"[40]—"there flashes some

[39] Of course, the debate about what this means or when and how this was experienced and what should be the response to it rages on. Although it was not Du Bois's proposed analysis of or proposed solution to the problem, many critics of black existence have argued that enslavement has meant above all alienation to the point of the loss of a ("sense of") past and that only the future remained as basis for organization and orientation. For informative discussion, see Frank M. Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93): 136–65; and Orlando Patterson, "Toward a Future That Has No Past: Reflections on the Fate of Blacks in the Americas," *Public Interest* no. 27 (Spring 1972): 25–62.

[40] See Du Bois's mature, somewhat autobiographical work *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 130–31; see esp. ch. 5, "The Concept of Race." For larger historical and political-discursive context, see Thomas C. Holt,

clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that America can not."[41] In learning to read—not merely texts but texture and the world, including what Covey represented in the world and in the same larger scene, what Sandy represented in the world—Douglass had escaped. He had escaped from the cave, from the tight circle.

What might these arguments and perspectives mean for this Society? How could its discourses and practices not be fully implicated in and reflective of the Manichaean ideology and epistemics? In what respect is its epistemics different from that of Tony Perkins or Thomas Jefferson? How can the ever more sophisticated methods and approaches of the operations of its diverse members focused on a single text tradition or, at most, two complexly related text traditions, avoid functioning as apologetics—for the nation or empire and satellite orders? How can the Society avoid making and keeping the Scriptures and all characters in them white like Ahab's whale, like Perkins's white Euro-American Protestant/Catholic ancient Near Eastern world?

Douglass hints at a way out. His reflection on his own life story continues to be instructive. He argues that the critical interpreter must seek to escape, must run, must be oriented "outside the circle." His own experience as a Scripture-reader is a direct challenge to us. Before he escaped he started a secret seminary/religious studies program—a "Sabbath school"—for groups of slaves from various plantations. Douglass indicated—in somewhat veiled terms—that his motive had to do with more than teaching letters—"we were trying to learn how to read the will of God," that is, read life and death, slavery and freedom. He helped establish a safe zone within which the students could learn, think for and talk among themselves apart from the slavers. In direct opposition to the expectations and interests of the masters and as a practice reflecting "mimetic excess,"[42] this Scripture-reading practice reflected self-reflexivity, a heightened consciousness of imitation of the other—with a difference. He knew that the reading of the Scriptures was hardly ever mere reading about the ancient Near East, about the life and times of Jesus or the prophets, that the reading of Scriptures in the modern world was a reading of the world as constructed by the splitting that made "black" signify in an ever tighter circle of reference. So having psychosocially positioned himself "outside the circle" of the world of slave culture and outside the Great House Farm, Douglass positioned himself to "read"—and help others read—the world as it had been and might be ordered. He was a runagate.

"Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903–1940," *American Quarterly* 42 (1990): 308–9.

[41] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290–97. Printed in Gates and McKay, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* 753.

[42] Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 233, 246, 249, 252–55.

Can the members of this Society claim such consciousness? Douglass was not so much reading Scriptures as he was signifying on scripturalization, on the regime that creates and enforces uses of Scriptures for the sake of domination. Like Kafka's ape ape-ing high-minded humans,[43] he showed his thinking about thinking. He showed his understanding of the political constructedness of Scripture-reading and that such reading ought to result in talking and thinking about life and death, slavery and freedom. Surely, here is a challenge to a different critical orientation—an orientation to Scripture study as part of the human sciences with investment in critical histories that aim to make sense of what subtends the practices, the forms of expressivity, the relations of discourse and power.

It makes sense, according to Du Bois, with all the pain and trauma involved, for the black self to want to run, to let go: there is no advantage, no life, in not running. Such sentiment and conviction regarding the relationship between alienation and freedom was powerfully expressed by Richard Wright: "I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I'm obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I'm free. I have only the future."[44]

But the impetus to run away, to let go, is not very strong for those strongly positioned within or benefitting from the Manichaean order. Such "hidden brain" fundamentalism around which the Euro-American world is built is so deeply buried, so tightly coiled, so persistent, that nothing less than shock can dislodge it. Although a renegade member of a different academic professional society, Michael Taussig makes of himself a poignant and painful example and lesson for consideration of members of this Society. He accepts himself as a white man from the world of the Great House Farm who looks and listens to the other as the other constructs and projects an image of the white man. Note his reaction to such an image created by those associated with the Mabari shrine in Nigeria (see next page):

> He frightens me, this African white man. He unsettles. He makes me wonder without end. Was the world historical power of whiteness achieved through its being a sacred as well as profane power? It makes me wonder about the constitution of whiteness as global colonial work and also as a minutely psychic one involving psychic powers invisible to my senses but all too obvious, as reflected to me, now, by this strange artifact . . . it is . . . the . . . West now face to face with its-self . . . the white man . . . facing himself. . . . Such face-to-faceness no doubt brings its quotient of self-congratulation. "They think we are gods." But being a god is okay as long as it isn't excessive. After all, who knows—in imagining us as gods, might they not take our power?[45]

[43] Ibid., xiv, xvii, 254–55.

[44] Richard Wright, *Pagan Spain* (New York: Harper, 1957; repr., 2008), 21.

[45] Taussig, *Mimesis,* 237–38. Image originally from Julia Blackburn, *The White Men: The First Responses of Aboriginal Peoples to the White Man* (London: Orbis, 1979; New York: New York Times Books, 1979).

Photograph: Herbert M. Cole, 1966.

Douglass's insurgent seminary sessions and Taussig's training in an African school of arts and social criticism suggest for the Society the imperative of seeing Scripture-reading as part of mimetic systems. The critic should see his or her own critical practices as part of such systems and remain open to influences toward greater self-reflexivity and the destabilization and vacancy of identity.

How could the Society not be so oriented in the twenty-first century? How can we be students of Scriptures in this century at this moment without making our agenda a radically humanistic science or art, excavating human politics, discourse, performances, power relations, the mimetic systems of knowing we may call scripturalization? How can we remain a Society *only* of *Biblical* Literature and

not of comparative Scriptures? How can we in this big international tent in this century of globalization not include as our focus the problematics of "Scriptures" of all the other major social-cultural systems of the world as well the older dynamic systems of scripturalizing of the so-called smaller societies? How exciting and compelling and renegade would be a Society of interpreters that excavates all representations of Scriptures in terms of discourse and power!

Such orientation requires letting go—of unmarked or blank whiteness and of forced essential blackness. It means running away from all—the white text, the black essential—that has sought for several centuries to bind us. Clearly, the claim need not be made that only African America shows the way out. But African America certainly offers the gift of challenge, the model of the imperative of running for life to a zone of discursive and ideological marronage. On account of forced placement in a zone of nonsubjectivity, this tribe, after all, has given birth to artists/poets/shamans/diviners who model the runagate and challenge us to imitate them. They show us the way of the double-sighted, the way of those who know that knowing requires occupying a zone where there is "constantly shifting authorial consciousness" and the "piercing" of "cultural authority,"[46] a site on which radical translation and transformation are always to be worked on, a site where according to Ralph Ellison "black is and black a'int," because "black can make you and unmake you."[47] It means letting go of closed systems of cultural authority and of claims to be overseers of texts. Those folk who have been placed behind the veil challenge all of us to run, in fact to run continuously from the cave into the zone of marronage.

In his poem "Runagate, Runagate," Robert Hayden has woven together perhaps the classic expressions and images of the black cultural sentiments regarding the runagate:[48]

> I.
> Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
> and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
> and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
> and the night cold and the night long and the river
> to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
> and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
> morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going
> Runagate
> Runagate
> Runagate
> . . . . . .

[46] Benston, *Performing Blackness,* 292, 294.

[47] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 9–10.

[48] Robert Hayden, "Runagate, Runagate," in Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* 1506–8.

II.
. . . . . .
Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The General
alias Moses Stealer of Slaves

In league with Garrison Alcott Emerson
Garrett Douglas Thoreau John Brown

Armed and known to be Dangerous

Wanted Reward Dead or Alive

. . . . . .

Come ride-a my train
Oh that train, ghost-story train
through swamp and savanna movering movering,
over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish,
Midnight Special on a sabre track movering movering,
. . . . . .

Come ride-a my train

Mean mean mean to be free

The folk who are dark challenge us to run—away from the feigned solid canonical self, onto "the ghost-story train," into a "disrupting blackness,"[49] down into what Howard Thurman called a "luminous darkness"[50] where the process of the hard work of self-criticism can take place. They also warn us that ultimately there is no other way out. That must have been what the song-poets meant when they crafted and sang:

[It's] so high, you can't get over [it],
[It's] so low, you can't get under [it],
So round, you can't get around [it],
You must go right through the door.

We may not, need not, all "talk that talk" or "talk like dat," but we all, for the sake of being a compelling force as a learned society—focused on the ultimate problematics of discourse and power—must start and sustain "talkin' about somethin'"—about slavery and freedom, about life and death.

[49] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 91.

[50] See Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (1965; repr., Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1999).