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Shouting for God: Resistance and Liberation in Early African American Evangelical Autobiography

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SHOUTING FOR GOD: RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION IN EARLY AFRICAN

AMERICAN EVANGELICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
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Title: Shouting for God: Resistance and Liberation in Early African American
        Evangelical Autobiography

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This dissertation focuses on the autobiographical narratives of John Marrant, George White, and John Jea as expressions of black radical evangelicalism. The study argues that their narratives articulate and extend a black identity-politics, largely through a religious/Christian discourse, in ways that subvert, challenge, and revise hegemonic conceptions of religion, race, and subjectivity circulating in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In addition to revealing the political efficacy of evangelical religion for these figures and the black communities they represented, the study also examines their uses of rhetoric and language more broadly and argues that they each construct texts, reference the bible and other religious tropes, and inscribe narrative voices of "mastery," which, like their uses and understandings of evangelical Christian discourse, work to undercut, critique, and condemn white authority. Further, the study interrogates how the rhetorical strategies and ideological imperatives deployed and pursued by Marrant, White, and Jea constitute more than defensive responses to white authority, but simultaneously recover and construct anew a black identity-politics (individual, group, institutional) that is culturally specific, historically steeped, and politically engaged. Finally, this study argues that Marrant, White, and Jea drew upon and extended a "black radical evangelical tradition," informed by an ideology of Black Radicalism (as defined by Cedric Robinson), West

African cultural and expressive sources, and the diasporic contexts, what Paul Gilroy calls the "black Atlantic world," that African peoples occupied and shaped in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The study offers close readings of Marrant, White, and Jea and attends to the cultural embeddedness of their narratives or to the imbrications between their texts and contexts. The study draws upon a variety of theoretical-critical positions in order to illuminate the identity-politics, theologies, and ideological imperatives implied or operating in implicit and overt ways in their texts: for example, Critical Race Theory, Discourse Analysis, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Theory, and New Historicism.

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INTRODUCTION

I

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois authenticated his argument for

African American political and cultural enfranchisement in post-Reconstruction

America by pointing to the political and cultural tradition, what he calls "a peculiar

dynasty," of black leadership, traceable to the seventeenth century and forged as a

result of African experiences with forced dispersal and slavery:

> Before 1750, while the fire of African freedom still burned in the veins
>
> of the slaves, there was in all leadership or attempted leadership but the
>
> one motive of revolt and revenge—typified in the terrible Maroons, the
>
> Danish blacks, and Cato of Stono, and veiling all the Americas in fear of
>
> insurrection. The liberalizing tendencies of the latter half of the
>
> eighteenth century brought, along with kindlier relations between black
>
> and white, thoughts of ultimate adjustment and assimilation. Such
>
> aspiration was especially voiced in the earnest songs of Phyllis [sic], in
>
> the martyrdom of Attucks, the fighting of Salem and Poor, the
>
> intellectual accomplishments of Banneker and Derham, and the political
>
> demands of the Cuffes. (65)

These revolutionaries, literati, and political activists are representative of a historical

tradition and an ideological consciousness informed by physical and philosophical

resistance to and engagement with the colonial and racialized context of slavery. The

tradition DuBois references here is, he implies, a product of the material and social

environments shaped by forced dispersal and colonization and the responses of the

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colonized and enslaved to those contexts. Environment and response are indexed by DuBois to mark epochal moments in the historical development of African American consciousness: initial encounters between Africans and European slavers and "revolt and revenge"; the institution of slavery, gradual emancipation, and the "adjustment" of "all thought and action to the will of the greater group"; and post-Reconstruction America and "a determined effort at self-realization and self-development" (65). By linking consciousness and historical progression, DuBois counters what Fanon called in 1967 "a zone of nonbeing" (8), the ideological site of black subjectivity produced by Enlightenment racism and theories of African subjectivity as "historyless," and, therefore, subject to slavery and the "burdened individuality" of Jim Crow (Hartman 117). Put another way, DuBois's tradition of black leadership and the responses of diasporic black peoples to their material and social conditions indicate an evolving political consciousness reflective, in some ways, of the "Black radical" tradition identified by Cedric Robinson. Unlike, however, the stress DuBois gives to an elite black leadership, necessary, in his view, to encourage a black population to pursue political suffrage and to cultivate an efficacious cultural identity, Robinson's theory of black radicalism rejects the DuBoisian emphasis on an elite black leadership or "peculiar dynasty," and argues instead that a tradition of black resistance emerged from the black collective. The radical tradition Robinson identifies is sited within and determined in part by the "social cauldron [of] Western society" and Enlightenment ideology, but is ultimately produced by mass black resistance, activism, and agency (*Black Marxism* 72).

I revisit DuBois's insights about a tradition of black leadership and Robinson's arguments for the emergence of a black political consciousness and ideological tradition of black radicalism, because the "radicalism" of a colonial and early national black political and intellectual tradition remains a contested issue. This is particularly apparent in considerations of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century figures like those who are the focus of this study: the black evangelical preachers John Marrant, George White, and John Jea. On the surface, their published writings (autobiographies, sermons, journals, and hymns), which are largely informed by a protestant Christian ethic and ideology, seem to offer an identity politics aligned with a Western European tradition and religious value system. Hence, their narrative constructions signify a DuBoisian "double-consciousness": the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (38). But, as I demonstrate in my interrogations of their texts and contexts, these preachers, theologians, and leaders pursued their ministries and produced texts also informed by the "second sight" that, according to DuBois, attends "double-consciousness" (38). That is, their evangelicalism is translated through their perspectives of and experiences with and within slavery, the "black Atlantic world" (Gilroy 3), and the black religious and social communities they led and represented.

These last sources of influence, black communities and discourse, on their narratives and their roles in the production of what I argue in this study is Marrant's, White's, and Jea's black radical evangelicalism, indicate a second problematic in discerning a black radical politics, one akin to that which Robinson describes, at work

in their evangelical autobiographies. While Marrant, White, and Jea all imagine themselves as specially chosen by God to lead and preach, and are, arguably, early examples of the elite black leadership DuBois saw as crucial for cultivating a psychologically and culturally efficacious black consciousness, the respective identity politics and theologies they construct are ultimately products of the cultural, political, and social expressions of diasporic Africans. Thus, the black radical evangelicalism central to their autobiographical performances and to their ministries is not external to the black communities in which they lived and worked. Their writings, evangelicalism, and ministries originate from within and represent the black collective: the diasporic communities and separatist institutions constructed by black people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their negotiations with dominant values and categories, and their expressions and enactments of a historical-social tradition of black resistance. The black radical evangelical tradition Marrant, White, and Jea draw upon and extend accesses and reflects hegemonic forms and values, but always re-shapes those in light of the collective experiences of black people.

Hence, the radical tradition Marrant, White, and Jea articulate is not traceable to some imagined source of cultural or national purity, or simply the product of a select group of black leaders. As both DuBois and Robinson argue, in different ways and for different reasons, a black radical consciousness is historically produced, the dialectical product of black peoples' engagements with their diasporic contexts and the immediate circumstances of their lives. This is precisely why the invocation of "tradition" in discussions of early black expressivity and identity politics continues to be problematic and contested. Tradition suggests linearity, stability, and coherence, notions that

enable, as Paul Gilroy argues in his penetrating book *The Black Atlantic*, the myth of "black particularity," constructed in efforts to legitimate an autonomous black culture (188). But the use of "tradition" in this sense reflects a Eurocentric deployment of the concept, inverts the terms, and leaves undisturbed "[t]he logic and categories of racial metaphysics . . ." (Gilroy 191). Black subjectivity and culture is privileged over white and the two traditions are reified as racially (whether of the biological or cultural variety) opposed. Thus, the notion of integrating or reconciling the doubled-self to which DuBois refers would require, in this paradigm, either the adoption of American and the erasure of African, or an Afrocentric and black identity politics and tradition that trumps Eurocentric claims of cultural and political superiority. My interrogations of the narratives and black radical evangelicalism of Marrant, White, and Jea are informed by Robinson's theories of black radicalism as much as by DuBois's investment in a "dynasty" of black leadership and "double-consciousness." I argue that Marrant's, White's, and Jea's autobiographical performances and theologies are dialectical products constructed from multiple and often contradictory sources that are, however, rooted in and routed through black culture and communities.

Reading their narratives as culturally embedded productions and interventions—of and in black communities and the interactions of those communities with hegemonic cultural-social models—enables the deconstruction of the oppositional theories of tradition and black subjectivity that were, in some ways, entrenched as a result of the work of early twentieth-century scholars and culture critics (like DuBois) who stressed cultural integration and synthesis to empower an African American citizenry and to re-define an American social and cultural landscape. The overtly

separatist and black nationalist aesthetics and politics of the Black Arts generation that followed rejected outright the "white thing" (Neal 64), assimilation, or reconciliation, and advocated instead sustained resistance and valorized a black expressive culture and tradition. As a result, however, a narrow black identity politics was potentially re-entrenched, and, what continues to be an influential model of black radicalism constructed.

The "integrationist poetics" of an early twentieth-century African Americanist intelligentsia envisioned, Houston Baker argues, the development of African American expressive forms "that would signal democratic pluralism in American life" and produce a "philosophical orientation" that would help to usher in a "raceless, classless society of men and women in America" (*Blues* 69). In an "integrationist" paradigm, an early black intellectual and creative tradition was often theorized as a series of responses or reactions to the various social and ideological crises faced by peoples of African descent in the New World and the efforts of early black thinkers and writers to confront and transcend those critical moments in a progressive move toward assimilation and acculturation. In other words, the philosophies, texts, and ideologies of an eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century black literati and intelligentsia were interpreted as a series of "little traditions" moving inexorably and "unceasingly toward unity with Anglo-American culture," and signaled, according to Baker, "the vanishing of Afro-American expression qua *Afro-American* expression" (*Blues* 71).

The theoretical and practical response of the Black Arts generation was to invert the terms of the discourse and call for "an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement

proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (Neal 62). Adamantly opposed to Euro-American cultural ideals and aesthetic models and the ideological work they performed, Black Arts figures like Larry Neal, Hoyt W. Fuller, and Ron Karenga (to name only a few of the leading thinkers and practitioners of the movement) theorized a "black aesthetic" and produced poems, plays, and philosophical works that addressed "the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are," insists Neal, "nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics" (62). The political aesthetic of the BAM rejected the interpretive monopoly "held traditionally by a white minority. . ." (Baker, *Blues* 82) guided by New Critical theories or Arnoldian ideals, and generated cultural-political artifacts that represented and theorized black life and experience and simultaneously deconstructed a Western metaphysic.

Unfortunately, the early black intellectual and creative tradition was often imagined by Black Arts thinkers as too enmeshed in and subsequently jeopardized by the dominant culture, such that many of the colonial and early national textual expressions by black figures were read as apologetic and capitulatory, products of mimicry overly conditioned by the positions and values of the "master class." As Adam David Miller asserts in "Some Observations on a Black Aesthetic," "the job of conditioning had been so thorough, the intimidation, forced breeding, dispersal, warping, brutalization, so complete, that the values of our former legal owners had become our own, so complete that we saw ourselves as our 'masters' saw us [. . .]" (399). Consequently, when considered through the aesthetic and political prisms of the

Black Arts Movement, many of the texts narrated or written by blacks in the eighteenth and early- nineteenth centuries were understood as muted black voices in too-prescriptive white envelopes (to use John Sekora's metaphor). The result, for Miller and other Black Arts figures, was to valorize primarily black spirituals and a folk tradition as evidence of early and distinct black expressive cultural productions. This focus came at the expense, however, of the many other autobiographies, conversion narratives, sermons, and hymns narrated or written by black figures in colonial America and the early Republic.

As a result, black evangelical autobiography, like John Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785); George White's *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, An African* (1810); and John Jea's *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher* (1816) too often remain excluded from discussions of a black radical intellectual tradition. The tendency is to consider them in light of an integrationist poetics, as figures who represented a dimension of black subjectivity in the late colonial and early Republican periods interpellated into the dominant ideologies—religious and secular—of their day. Thus their stories and beliefs, the narrative identities they each construct, stand for some scholars, as examples of assimilation and integration, not expressions of an early black nationalism or radical resistance. Their narrative visions and legacies seem to emphasize only one side of DuBois's dyad: that "which yields no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (38). I argue in this dissertation, however, that their narrative constructions, ministries, and theologies are representative

examples of an early black radical intellectual tradition produced and articulated not as mimetic or assimilatory expressions of the values, beliefs, and practices of the dominant culture, but as creative, rational, and strategic discourses of black resistance and empowerment. Moreover, their discursive and religio-political resistance was not merely reactive or defensive, but representative also of the generative efforts and work of black communities and a black intelligentsia to fashion anew an identity and cultural politics—individual and collective—informed and vitalized by the traces and memories of an African cultural heritage, as well as by the specific historical circumstances and contexts of forced dispersal, slavery, and the historical experiences and social ideology of diasporic Africans.

Because their identity politics and religious beliefs were forged from the cultural forms and practices produced and enacted within black communities, which were themselves performed in a dialectical give and take with dominant modes and values (religious and secular), approaching the narratives of Marrant, White, and Jea through the narrow paradigms of an integrationist poetics or the black nationalist poetics articulated by the Black Arts generation occludes their complexity and risks eliding their radicalism. Instead, their narratives have to be engaged as imbricated within their respective historical and social contexts and interrogated as negotiations with those contexts. This dissertation privileges neither text nor context, but accounts for their interrelationship. In doing so, the normative ideological assumptions and values circulating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Marrant's, White's, and Jea's narratives and theologies reflect and revise, often in implicit ways, are brought to light. More importantly, the assumptions and values—counter ideologies

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and their sources—circulating in the black diasporic communities that informed their narrative constructions and ministries are revealed. The identity politics that emerge by attending to the imbrication of text and context requires, therefore, a reformulation of black radicalism and subjectivity in the colonial and early national periods, one that accounts for both integrationist and separatist impulses in black engagements with evangelical Christianity and dominant political and civic discourses. Because Marrant, White, and Jea were evangelical preachers in the early national period when oral expression and the sermonic mode were forms of discourse with a legitimacy that rivaled print discourse, interrogations of their narratives and contexts also require a re-consideration of the different and often competing modes of cultural production and expressions of selfhood—like oratorical performance and printed texts—and the ways in which diasporic Africans manipulated these to signify selfhood and community.

To facilitate the contextual readings of Marrant, White, and Jea that I pursue in the following chapters, the remaining sections of this introduction provide an overview of the cultural and political currents that are especially germane to the structure and content of their narrative constructions and to the development of their black radical evangelicalism. I consider black participation in the public and counter-public spheres and the roles of print and oral expression therein, as forms of self-expression, community membership, and national belonging. I briefly outline the rise of evangelical Christianity produced by the Great Awakenings, and, examine in particular, the reasons significant numbers of enslaved Africans and free black people became evangelical Christians. Because early Methodism is the evangelical sect that Marrant, White, and Jea affiliated with, and, to which many diasporic black people converted, I

consider as well early Methodism's political stance and organizational shape as significant elements which likely contributed to black participation. Finally, I argue that the black radical evangelicalism of Marrant, White, and Jea is an expression both of "unisonance" and "dissonance"—belonging and resistance—within and apart from the colonizing cultural and political bodies of early America and Great Britain.

II

Marrant, White, and Jea wrote, published, and preached during a period that, as Joanna Brooks points out, "was a time of significant and vigorous literary production among English speaking blacks of the diaspora," whose printed texts demonstrate "the emergence . . . of a distinctly black tradition of publication informed by black experiences of slavery and post-slavery, premised on principles of self-determination and structured by black criticisms of white political and economic dominance" ("The Early American Public" 68). These published writings are also evidence of an emerging black radical evangelicalism, discernable in both the print tradition to which Brooks refers and in oral modes of expression circulating in counterpublic spheres. These black counterpublics articulated a discourse and identity politics alternative to those being articulated in the public sphere, which, as Michael Warner has shown, began to take shape in the early republic and was mediated primarily through printed texts that relied on an understanding of writing as no longer dependent on "personal presence" (*Letters* 43). Instead, public-sphere discussions of the structure of civil society, political and cultural institutions, and the habits of civic life, emphasized a "depersonalized" or disembodied voice and presented a discourse with, ostensibly, "abstract and universal" norms that expressed a "rational and disinterested concern for

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the public good" (Warner, *Letters* 42). Participation in this "depersonalized" public discourse was available, as Warner suggests, "only to those . . . whose social role allows such negation (that is, to persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital)" (*Letters* 42). Counterpublics, by contrast,

> are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. (Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* 56)

A discourse of black radical evangelicalism and the publics and counterpublics in which it circulated drew primarily on scripture and evangelical Christianity to define identity and membership in the larger body-politic and in communities of fellow believers. In the Revolutionary and early national periods, this was a largely recognized and shared lingua franca, a source of moral and ethical codes and a teleology with which to explain historical progress and cultural development. In part, this accounts for its circulation in the black Atlantic world and in black discourse communities. But a black radical evangelical tradition's appropriation of the "symbolic instruments" (Patterson 101), beliefs, and discourse of evangelical Christianity entailed much more than the simple adoption of recognizable norms and mores and their expression in a commonly understood language.

The uses to which Marrant, White, and Jea put the "sacred" text and an "authoritative" religious discourse were, first, a product and extension of a black

Atlantic discourse community. The textual productions of black diasporic poets like Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley; the constructions of selfhood in the autobiographical narratives of Briton Hammon, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Olaudah Equiano; and the political arguments in Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's 1787 antislavery jeremiad, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, all relied on, to varying degrees, evangelical Christian discourse to challenge and condemn the slave trade, the institution of slavery, and the racist ideologies that defined African peoples as divine victims and natural slaves. The radical evangelicalism deployed by Marrant, White, and Jea authorized their respective critiques of racialized slavery and justified alternative subject positions for people of African descent within providential and human history.

Their radical evangelicalism was also a product and extension of early national evangelical counterpublics and public-spheres, including the nascent African separatist churches and lodges being established in the late eighteenth century in Northern cities like Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. These spheres relied, as Brooks suggests, on printed texts to inculcate and disseminate a black religio-political consciousness, but they were also sites wherein oral modes of discourse, such as sermons, hymns, and "testifying" were prevalent and valued, and helped to transform evangelical Christianity into "Afro-Protestantism." Francis Smith Foster argues that the transformation of evangelical Christianity into Afro-Protestantism was motivated by "the desire to create a positive and purposeful self-identified African America . . ." (718). Rather than "one of a very limited range of instruments," to use Baker's terms ("Autobiographical Acts"

249), with which to construct an efficacious identity-politics, Afro-Protestantism offered a radical discourse and ideology to address and re-shape the circumscribed material circumstances of black life and potential in the diasporic New World (Karenga 286). Its focus was on the stories of liberation in the bible and on the redemptive work of Christ—exodus and deliverance, resurrection and new life—a Christology in which spiritual transformation and renewal led to and included the transformation of material conditions and social relations.

Indeed, a black radical evangelical tradition and early Afro-Protestant Christology partake of the "more liberating symbolic interpretation of the crucifixion" that Orlando Patterson explains offered a "new" and more radical way to account for "the behavior and death of Jesus," as opposed to other understandings and uses of the story and symbol of Christ's death (139). "One explanation" for Christ's sacrificial life and death, writes Patterson, "which has profoundly conservative spiritual and social implications, held that Christ saved his followers by paying with his own life for the sin that led to their spiritual enslavement. The sinner, strictly speaking, was not emancipated, but died anew in Christ, who became his new master. Spiritual freedom was divine enslavement" (139). This was precisely the theology and Christology that buttressed Southern slavocracy and white religious paternalism, positioning slave owners, the institution of slavery, and white religious institutions as intermediaries "with white authority functioning as the only door to God" (Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over* 86). This rendered the conversion of African peoples as a continued enslavement to Christ, as well as to the white authority that stood in his place. But a black radical evangelical tradition interpreted Christ's redemptive work in the following way: "Jesus

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did not redeem mankind by making mankind his slave . . . . Rather, he annulled the condition of slavery in which man existed by returning to the original point of enslavement and, on behalf of the sinner about to fall, gave his own life so that the sinner might live and be free" (Patterson 139). By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Marrant, White, and Jea were preaching and writing, this liberatory Christology had become a linchpin in black radical evangelicalism and Afro-Protestant discourse communities.

Liberationist Christology was one of a number of evangelical tenets that, in part, resulted from the profound changes occurring in American religious and political culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The "awakenings" and religious revivals that swept across colonial America starting in 1740 continued to rumble and erupt after 1760 (the end date of The First Great Awakening) before exploding with new force in 1800 and the beginning of The Second Great Awakening, which caused and facilitated a number of significant social and cultural disruptions that challenged "Old Light" orthodoxy, the institution of the church, and redefined the roles of religious leader and worshipper alike. Brooks reminds us in *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (2003) that the Great Awakenings were watershed moments "in American intellectual and social history, which forever reformulated notions of experience, learning, authority, textuality, and religion" (23). Especially significant for an early black radical evangelical tradition was the value and agency that "New Light" theologies, revivalist evangelicalism, and "democratized" Christianity ascribed to "the impulses of popular religion, dreams and visions, ecstasy, unrestrained emotional release, preaching by blacks, by women, by

anyone who felt the call" (Hatch, "Puzzle" 28-29). The egalitarian ethos informing

evangelicalism and its valorization of extemporaneous and affective oral expression

drew from the larger social and political culture of the early republic and its valuation

of oratory and uses of "the performance semiotic to stage forms of power," which, as

Sandra M. Gustafson notes, "rang[ed] from spiritual insight and its attendant social

privileges to intercultural conflicts and allegiances, to imperial and national order" (xx).

During the early republican period, neither written nor oral discourse was envisioned as

superior to or as more authentic than the other. Instead, "the meanings of literacy

technologies were ambiguous and conflicted" (Gustafson xv). In certain contexts,

facility with and knowledge of written texts was imagined as a sign of cultural stability

and superiority, while in other contexts—like preaching and response in evangelical

and revivalist worship—improvisatory and extemporaneous speaking was "taken to

signify authentic inspiration and true power" (Gustafson xv-xvi). What Gustafson calls

a "performance semiotic" depended on the speaker's embodied oral performance,

which could either be reliant on or independent from written texts (or both); and the

verbal performance—whether extemporaneous speech or dramatized reading—in

implicit and overt ways, played out, according to Gustafson, competing discursive

strategies and expressive modes for constructing and authenticating individual and

social identities.

The revivals, evangelical religious "societies," and practice of itinerant

preaching created religious counterpublics for a welter of diverse voices. Often, oral

performance was privileged as the more authentic expressive mode in these discourse

communities and counterpublics, in part because "the speaker's emotional authenticity"

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was considered (consciously or unconsciously) the most accurate measure of his or her faith and relationship with God (Gustafson xxi). For example, the Reverend W. Aldridge, who transcribed Marrant's narrative and wrote the "Preface," asserts that Marrant's story is believable because "[h]e *appeared* to me *to feel most sensibly*, when he related those parts of his Narrative, which describe his happiest moments with God, or the most remarkable interpositions of Divine Providence for him; and *I have no reason to believe it was counterfeited*" (49, emphasis mine). But, as Gustafson points out, the performance semiotic was "flexible," and, especially those who were positioned by the dominant culture as "textless" or who were denied educations, relied on both orality and the manipulation of "textual technologies" in their performances of individual and group identity (xxii). Marrant, White, and Jea often figure orality as the more authentic mode of expression, but they also valorize the printed word as an authoritative source of truth (this is especially apparent in their references to and uses of scripture), and in both cases, their counterpublic expressions articulate an identity politics both of and apart from, and, indeed, often openly critical of established social and religious institutions and the discourses that informed them.

Just prior to the Revolutionary War and certainly in its wake, traditional sources of authority—social, political, and ecclesiastical—were called into question by an American populace and leadership more and more at odds with the political and cultural sovereignty of Great Britain and the absolute authority seemingly embodied in the social institutions at the center of colonial and early American life. Primary among these was the church and a theology rooted in a Puritan tradition that, despite its initial separatist energies, still resembled, in doctrine and polity, the Anglican Church. The

Great Awakenings and in particular the evangelical Christianity and revivals that flourished after the Revolution during The Second Great Awakening "flowed from, and contributed to, the cultural ethos of the early republic, and allowed evangelical Christianity to become a far more vital force than it had been before the revolution" (Wigger 168-69). Arguably, evangelicalism gained the foothold it did in an American imaginary because it shared the values and language of the early republic and emphasized Christianity as a liberating force, one that offered a language and ideology that privileged the ability (and indeed the right) of especially the middling, poor, and marginalized to express and evaluate the legitimacy of their faith—without recourse to "learned theologians and traditional orthodoxies" as arbiters of belief and practice (Hatch, *The Democratization* 9-10), and often in counterpublic and informal settings wherein worship and the respective roles of preacher and congregation were not dependent on the liturgical structure of institutionalized churches.

Instead, evangelical worship stressed "felt" preaching and testifying that could be and often was led by those without formal theological training, or indeed, any education at all. In these settings the authenticity of sermons, conversion testimonials, and other verbal expressions of faith "derive[d] from the speaker's relationship to divine authority [independent of] learning and status" (Gustafson xxi). For those who were semi-literate or unable to read at all, oral expression was an empowering alternate literacy to perform and authorize selfhood and social belonging. The "doctrine of enthusiasm which stressed direct inspiration from God rather than the revelation contained in the pages of the Bible" (Raboteau, *Slave Religion* 242) was especially powerful for enslaved Africans and free black citizens who could not read or write, but

not simply because it offered an alternative literacy. As Albert J. Raboteau explains, "enthusiasm" was invested in the notion of God's immediacy and presence in the lives of believers. For a black population denied (*de facto* and *de jure*) education, for whom the bible was a "sealed book" that was often used to justify their slavery, "the belief that God revealed everything that pertained to their salvation, without reference to the Bible or its teaching" (*Slave Religion* 242) was psychologically and politically empowering. First, belief in God's immediacy and intervention in the lives of believers indicated both that in matters of the spirit God was no respecter of persons and demonstrated their status as chosen. Second, it distinguished "their own experiential Christianity from the 'Bible Christianity' of their masters" (*Slave Religion* 242). Both are elements in black radical evangelicalism and early Afro-Protestant discourse communities, and both helped to foster what Eddie S. Glaude calls "we-ness" (79), a sense of social and cultural solidarity or black *communitas*.

III

Communitas is enabled and, to a degree, dependent on "tradition." Although Gilroy's interrogation of "tradition" and its uses to construct a black cultural identity politics is primarily directed at deconstructing this concept, he also recognizes that "tradition gets understandably invoked to underscore the historical continuities, subcultural conversations, intertextual and intercultural cross-fertilisations which make the notion of a distinctive and self-conscious black culture appear plausible." Tradition referenced in this way "is important and inescapable," writes Gilroy, "because racisms work insidiously and consistently to deny both historicity and cultural integrity to the artistic and cultural fruits of black life" (188). Independent African churches,

evangelical "societies," benevolent organizations, and the African Masonic Lodge are examples of public and counterpublic spheres established by an eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century black intelligentsia and population, which fostered social and political cohesion for a black population, a sense of solidarity and shared identity partly facilitated by "tradition." A black historical and cultural narrative was shaped and expressed in these discourse communities and textured by an evangelical Christian tradition translated through the contemporary experiences and conditions of black life. The language, signs, and worship practices of evangelicalism helped to create what Benedict Anderson has called "a contemporaneous community," one "which language alone suggests" (145), and which contributes to *communitas*—a sense of membership in a historical, cultural, and "national" tradition and community. In the oft-quoted words of E. Franklin Frazier, these religious black publics and counterpublics and the language that informed them constituted a "nation within a nation" (35). Of the various evangelical sects that grew out of the Great Awakenings and revivalism in early America, Methodism was perhaps the most significant for an early black radical evangelical tradition and for the public and counterpublic institutions and discourse communities that enabled and sustained black *communitas* in the diaspora and early American republic.

All of the figures central to this study, like many of the other black narrators and writers whose texts were published in the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries, were affiliated, either directly or indirectly, with forms of early Methodist belief and practice. John Marrant was converted after hearing a sermon by the Anglican Methodist itinerant George Whitefield in 1769 or 1770, just before Whitefield

died. After an early career as a folk minister evangelizing in the South Carolina wilderness and service in the British navy during the Revolution, Marrant was ordained by the dissident Anglican Methodist Seminary, Trevecca College in Bath, England. George White, following his manumission in the early 1780s, traveled to New York where he became a member of a Methodist society, helped to found the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and attained (after a long struggle) the position of licensed local preacher in 1807. In 1815 he became a deacon, the sixth African American to hold this office in the early American Methodist Church; and in 1822, Richard Allen ordained White as a deacon in his African Methodist Episcopal Church (Hodges, "Introduction" 16 and 18). John Jea's first exposure to Christianity was through the Dutch Reformed faith of his owners—a conservative sect that even after a series of post-Revolution reforms continued to espouse a "staunch opposition to slave baptism, church membership, and emancipation" (Hodges, *Root & Branch* 124). After his manumission, Jea itinerated as an independent preacher in New York and New Jersey in the late 1790s, a decade after the Methodist Episcopal Church was officially organized in America, and at precisely the time when black church leaders, like George White, were forming separatist African Methodist churches. His ministry and theology are informed by evangelical tenets, likely derived from Methodist sources and influences. These three figures and the identity politics and theologies they construct and express are representative of early black engagements with and appropriations of evangelical Methodism, a discourse that provided languages of transformation and liberation from both spiritual corruption and torpor and from the limited and limiting categories of self and group imposed on black subjectivity by the dominant culture. In

other words, evangelical Methodism offered a language of "unisonance" (Anderson 145), or a shared vocabulary and syntax that expressed membership in the black publics and counterpublics within and apart from the larger American and British national bodies.

Indeed, evangelical Methodism was a prevalent and pervasive language of unisonance circulating throughout the early republic. "Between 1770 and 1820," according to historian John H. Wigger, "American Methodism achieved a virtual miracle of growth, rising from fewer than 1,000 members to over 250,000. In 1775, fewer than one out of every 800 Americans was a Methodist; by 1812 it was one out of every 36" (167). And the numbers of enslaved Africans and black citizens who became members of Methodist societies and churches were likewise striking. In the Southern slave states, "African Americans were among the charter members of the very first Methodist societ[ies]" (Lincoln and Mamiya 50), and by 1810, "over 20 percent" of American Methodists in the South were black (Hempton 60). A Northern black population (enslaved and free) was also responsive to Methodism. The first separatist African church, Richard Allen's Philadelphia African Methodist Episcopal Church founded in 1787, grew in only two years from 1,000 to almost 7,000 members, and, by 1822, the "original five charges (or church units) had grown to forty-three, encompassing a territory from Washington, D.C., in the South, to Pittsburgh in the West, and New York City in the North" (Lincoln and Mamiya 53). The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (George White's church), which grew out of a separation from the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City in 1796, experienced less rapid but still significant growth between its official incorporation in

1801 and the onset of the Civil War. By 1860, it had 4,600 members and 105 preachers (Lincoln and Mamiya 58). These numbers only account for the black converts whose memberships and affiliations were recorded. Uncounted are the "[s]eekers, children, and hearers," as well as "the many thousands who were not allowed to become members of societies by their white masters" (Hempton 60).

The appeal of Methodism for Marrant, White, and Jea and for many other African peoples, was likely due to its antislavery political stance. Methodist opposition to slavery "was expressed officially in the original *General Rules* set for forth . . . in 1743 and in the rules adopted at the 1784 Christmas Conference. This antislavery sentiment was reaffirmed repeatedly on many intervening occasions and it enhanced significantly Methodism's attractiveness to African Americans, both slaves and free" (Lincoln and Mamiya 50). Black converts to evangelical Methodism continued through the early decades of the nineteenth century even though the Methodist Church's antislavery politics softened after 1785. The original policies, which called for the removal of slaveholders from church membership and clerical orders, were excised from the *General Rules* in concession to proslavery pressure (Gravely 311). Nonetheless, the original antislavery stance and its echoes probably account, in part, for the large numbers of black converts to evangelical Methodism.

Another, and, in my view, more significant reason for Methodism's wide appeal, and a central reason that figures like Marrant, White, and Jea became preachers and leaders within formal and informal Methodist churches and religious societies, and, even more important, in black publics and counterpublics, was due to what William McLoughlin calls Methodism's "magnificent organizational structure" (95).

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McLoughlin argues that the early success of the Methodist movement set in motion by John Wesley was a result of "his use of itinerant evangelists, lay preaching, and the formation of small 'classes' or groups of converts to form pietistic nuclei within each parish" (95). While these classes or societies were often initially established and overseen by a licensed Methodist preacher or bishop, they functioned largely as autonomous groups. The itinerating preacher or bishop in charge of a particular circuit was constantly on the move, visiting, preaching, and performing the rites of communion, baptism, and marriage for multiple societies. In order that these societies sustain themselves and continue to grow in faith and numbers, lay preachers close to the people and able to preach in compelling and colloquial ways were recruited and charged with leading the societies to which they belonged. Often, "even the most unlearned and inexperienced" were invited "to respond to a call to preach" (Hatch, *The Democratization* 57), and, as a result, evangelical Methodist societies were led and shaped on a day-to-day basis by individuals without the credentials or training necessary in more orthodox churches. Thus, societies with black members could be and often were led by lay-preachers and exhorters from black communities (enslaved and free). Further, Methodist organizational structure allowed for popular expressions and interpretations of faith and scripture. This is especially significant for an early black radical evangelical tradition, as these expressions of faith and interpretations of the bible reflected the experiences, interests, and needs specific to peoples of African descent in the diaspora and America, and syncretized West African religious beliefs and practices alongside and in combination with biblical Christianity.

IV

The relative autonomy of the informal Methodist societies, and, later, of the independent African Methodist churches and lodges, their openness to populist expressions of faith and individual interpretations of scripture, and the leadership of black preachers all helped to create and foster black *communitas* in these public and counterpublic spheres. The ritualized and reciprocal expressions of faith, self, and group that occurred in these spaces entailed the re-imaging of the whole community of like-minded believers and participants. In part, it was a re-imaging of the self and group as being made over in the image of God (*imago dei*), a transformation initiated during the conversion experience, one in which the convert believes him or herself to be inhabited by and remade in the image of divinity. For example, Marrant, White, and Jea describe their conversion experiences as moments when they are inhabited by or confronted with what they understand to be the literal presence of God and his power. Marrant remembers that, after hearing a sermon by George Whitefield, who pointed his finger at him and preached, "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel," he was "struck to the ground" and rendered "speechless and senseless for near half an hour" because "[t]he Lord accompanied the word with such power" (51). George White experienced his conversion at a Methodist camp-meeting in 1804, where he claims that "the Lord, in a more powerful manner than ever, made known his salvation to me, by the influences and witnesses of his Holy Spirit; so that, when the exercises were over, I left the hallowed place with a glow of heavenly joy, which none but God himself can inspire" (54). John Jea writes that his conversion occurred after weeks of prayer and spiritual wrestling with God, at the end of which "it pleased God to hear my supplications and

cries, and came down in his Spirit's power and blessed my soul, and showed me the clear fountain of living water, which proceeded from the throne of God" (99). God as active and present is a primary trope in the lives Marrant, White, and Jea recount in their respective narratives, a force and authority that enters their temporal lives at the moment of conversion and continues as a real and immediate presence and authority in their subsequent lives as chosen and sanctified believers.

Conversion as a wholly transformative experience that entailed the direct and immediate presence and interaction of the supernatural with the believer was common to evangelical belief and practice more broadly, but, for a black radical evangelical tradition and within black religious publics and counterpublics, it was part of a repertory with existential and political implications specific to black communities. The supernatural as an integral and inseparable part of everyday life and experience was a belief central to West African cosmologies. As a number of scholars of African traditional religion and culture, including Marimba Ani, have argued,

> The African universe is conceived as a unified spiritual totality. We speak of the universe as 'cosmos' and we mean that all being within it is organically interrelated and interdependent . . . . That is its fundamental nature, its primary essence. But realities are not conceived of as being in an irreconcilable opposition . . . and spirit is not separate from matter. (5)

Consequently, "African spiritual philosophy does not distinguish sharply between sacred and mundane experience" (Ani 25). Early evangelicalism's articulation of "a more interactive faith in which the believer and God actively work together to meet

life's daily challenges and in which God communicates directly with the believer or community of believers" (Wigger 173) blurred the boundary between the secular and sacred and posited one's transformed spiritual identity as foundational for definitions and understandings of self in social and political realms in and apart from the institution of the church or even formal worship contexts. This notion would not have been foreign to the black converts to evangelicalism because the memories and traces of the West African religious beliefs and expressive modes that enslaved Africans brought with them to the New World continued to circulate in the discourse and social communities formed by peoples of African descent.

Indeed, many of the early African diasporic narrators and writers who produced texts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had an immediate connection to an African cultural heritage. Phillis Wheatley, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Oulaudah Equiano, and John Jea were born or claimed to have been born in Africa. John Marrant and George White, both born in colonial America, lived in regions heavily populated and constantly re-infused with African natives. Marrant grew up in the Charlestown area when it was the largest transatlantic slave market in colonial North America, and White was enslaved in Virginia and Maryland from the mid-eighteenth century until he was manumitted in about 1790. He was born in 1764 in Accomack, Virginia, part of the Chesapeake region that, since 1700, had been actively, even voraciously, involved in the importation of slaves from the African Coast and interior. The African-born slave population in the Chesapeake region constituted ninety percent of the slave population by 1700 and throughout the eighteenth century African imports continued to arrive (Berlin 55-60). By the time White was born and during his formative years as a

boy and young man, Virginia and Maryland plantations were populated by a diverse group of African peoples—from the coast, the Nigerian hinterland, Angola, and Senegambia. "Africa," as Ira Berlin forcefully notes, "had come to the Chesapeake" (56), and these African peoples brought with them their languages, social customs, and religious beliefs, which, despite the best efforts of slavers to erase them, continued to circulate and inform their lives. Marrant's South Carolina region had an African population similar to that of the Chesapeake in terms of numbers and diversity in the eighteenth century. Moreover, all of the figures central to this study and many African diasporic narrators and writers from the 1760s through the early decades of the nineteenth century lived mobile lives. George White itinerated up and down the Eastern seaboard and in the South, and both Marrant and Jea traveled as preachers, sailors, and soldiers in North America and in a transatlantic context. In their travels they came into contact with other African slaves, free black citizens, laborers, and sailors, and, as a result, encountered the variety of African cultural forms and expressive modes circulating in these discourse communities. Their narratives and theologies include African beliefs and practices—like the "ring shout," spirit possession, and "travelling"—and these are syncretized with Euro-American and evangelical Christian beliefs and tenets.

The various African beliefs and practices that texture the narrative constructions of Marrant, White, and Jea and that informed the Afro-Protestant publics and counterpublics of which they were each a part, were altered and revised due to the exigencies of forced dispersal, slavery, and intersections with evangelical practice and theology. The result was a discourse and belief system with and through which to re-

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image the self and group as members of a black historical-cultural community. These communities were bound together, in part, by a shared sense of experience and social position in the context of colonization and racialized slavery, wherein subjectivity was defined by phenotype rather than by ethnicity or region. While slavery, as Robinson demonstrates, and the racist ideologies faced by "freed" black citizens, "altered the conditions of their being, [these] could not negate their being" (125). Indeed, one method of resistance engaged by African peoples was to construct and enact an ontology of blackness, the production of a new subjectivity that probably first occurred during the Middle Passage. On the decks and in the holds of slave ships, on the auction blocks, and in the crucible of slavery, African peoples "learned that other people identified them by terms descriptive of their pigmentation, words such as 'Black' or 'Negro,' and by the generalized geographical term 'African'" (Foster 716). In response, Foster asserts, enslaved Africans "began to conceive new ideas of community based upon these new notions of 'race' and continental origins. They revised ideas of kinship to include affinity bonds with their fellow sufferers." Foster explains further that

> individuals, most of whom had been kidnapped and removed from their
> ancestral homes, determined that adjusting or reconstructing their
> allegiances and self-identities from a particular tribe, religion, or region
> toward the more inclusive ideas of 'African,' 'Black,' or 'Negro' was
> necessary for their physical survival and spiritual well-being. (716)

Black radical evangelicalism partakes of and extends an ideology of black radicalism or the "collective consciousness" that, as Robinson theorizes, was "informed by the

historical struggles for liberation motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality" (171). This is apparent in their uses of the signifiers "Black" and "African" (all three self-identify as either or both "African" or "Black"), in the "repertory of biblically formed . . . configurations" (Smith 311-12) they utilize, like their rhetorical uses of the Exodus story, which remade "Afro-Americans in the image of Hebrew slaves crying out under Egyptian bondage" (Smith 313-14), and their deployments of the Lazarus trope, an emblem "of rebirth," and, therefore, a biblical story referenced as "the basis for new identities and new communities" (Brooks, "Working Definitions" 315). These signs and biblical tropes were also common in the enclaves and communities of free blacks in England, the British colonies, and America. They were used to identify the public-spheres established by black citizens and leaders, like the independent African Methodist churches and the African Masonic Lodge, and they circulated in counterpublic spheres, like the black freedom celebrations and parades, which, as Glaude explains, often featured orations and sermons—ritualized re-tellings of biblical stories like the Exodus account—that "projected" members of the black community "into a collective narrative," and, indeed, "enabled the construction of 'the black community'" (79). Further, a sense of shared identity and purpose was also produced by the conversion experiences, testimonials, and sermons enacted and spoken in the evangelical societies, revivals, and worship services—enactments and recitations that were both "profoundly personal [and that] defined and validated . . . a community of church folk" (Raboteau, *A Fire* 155). These black publics and counterpublics articulated a shared black historical-cultural identity politics through evangelical Christianity syncretized with African

religio-cultural beliefs and practices, translated through their experiences with slavery and "freedom" in a racist and racialized New World.

Like the conversion experience, which collapsed the boundary between the sacred and secular, these sites and discourse communities did not distinguish between religious expression, a life of faith, and the social-political life of the community. In addition to providing for the religious needs of the black community, they also provided for "social service, mutual aid, and solidarity among 'people of African descent,'" and, thereby, met "the need for cultural unity and solidarity," which included "the protest and resistance of a persecuted people" (Wilmore 107). The independent African churches and lodges, for instance, were actively and publically involved in abolitionist imperatives, property rights and the right of assembly debates, and at the center of the early republic's discussion of the viability of emigration to Africa. Moreover, the counterpublic and "extrapolitical" (Howe 109) celebrations of African culture and the abolition of the slave trade, and black participation in early republican debates about social and moral uplift, integrationism and separatism, and liberal individualism, were voiced and made visible (within the black community and within the larger American or British body politics) in both religious and secular settings. These debates and discussions were often pursued through or figured in evangelical terms. This indicates that black communities in the early national period relied on black radical evangelical language and signs to define (and re-define) their social, cultural, and political life within and apart from American and British polities.

V

The dominant discourses circulating in these counterpublics of early black nationalism were evangelical Christianity and Afro-Protestantism. These discourses drew on a belief system and "ideology of chosenness" akin to that which "provided the religious base for America's political ideology and its national identity" (Glaude 78). Hence, a black radical evangelical tradition articulates an identity politics of unisonance with a British colonial and American national project and place. Evangelical Methodism originated in England and through the itinerancies of theologians and preachers like the Wesley brothers, George Whitefield, John Marrant and John Jea circulated in transatlantic (the black and white Atlantic worlds) and hemispheric contexts. But the discourse of black radical evangelicalism and the black evangelical-Methodist communities that it defined, simultaneously articulate an identity politics of "dissonance" (Looby 6) with American and British nationalisms, institutionalized Methodism, and the ideologies of race and slavery that subjugated and oppressed black subjectivity and peoples.

Rather than a language of ultimate unity with the "imagined political communit[ies]" (Anderson 6) of Great Britain or America, or a discourse that seems to emanate from and point back to stable cultural and political foundations upon which America and England were imagined to be founded, black radical evangelicalism's "dissonance" is akin to those other vocal utterances or figures of orality circulating in the black Atlantic world and early republic that Christopher Looby argues "were a measure of a fearful sense of [America's] foundationless instability and fragile temporality than of its primordial rootedness" (6). Indeed, Marrant, White, Jea, and

their black radical evangelical discourse more generally challenges the political and cultural foundations that inform and supposedly undergird an American place and project, British nationalism, and Western European imperial imperatives and racial ideologies. Alternative historical and cultural origins (like West African sacred beliefs and practices), interpretations and uses of scripture (like the Exodus story or those that privilege renewal and liberation) translated through believers' contemporary experiences with forced dispersal, slavery, racism, and community building in hostile national bodies, and a rejection of white superiority and the re-valuation of blackness in human and providential history are representative of black radical evangelicalism's dissonant discourse. It is also a discourse that simultaneously expresses membership— in America and Great Britain—not founded, however, "in a collective fantasy of an immemorial national past" (Looby 6), but in a shared language of resistance and *communitas* rooted in and routed through black experiences in the diasporic New World. In other words, black radical evangelicalism is a discourse of resistance and belonging—resistance against dominant ideologies that reduced and delimited black subjectivity and potential, and belonging vis-à-vis evangelical beliefs and practices that ostensibly "democratized and equalized the status of all before God" (West, "American Africans" 85). More importantly, it is a discourse of black belonging and community or unisonance, expressed in speech and writing in the black publics and counterpublics within the black Atlantic world, the British colonies, and early America.

To return to DuBois's metaphor of "double-consciousness" with which this introduction began, black radical evangelicalism and early Afro-Protestantism actively engage in re-constructing and sustaining a religio-cultural and political identity

distinctive to black experiences, interests, and concerns while simultaneously articulating and limning an identity politics resonant with a more broadly recognized and shared evangelical ideology and language in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The narrative constructions of Marrant, White, and Jea, their preaching and ministerial careers, and the black communities they led or interacted with, resonate with the same tensions that DuBois ascribes to black subjectivity at the turn of the twentieth century:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. (39)

The ways in which Marrant, White, and Jea deploy their respective evangelical identities and ideologies are always "doubled": significantly shaped by the normative and dominant institutions, theologies, and doctrines of Anglican and early American Methodism and conversant with the secular debates about identity and belonging in especially the early republic. But these are always translated through their experiences as black leaders, preachers, and theologians in the black Atlantic, as well as dependent on their interactions with the African peoples to whom they ministered and the black publics and counterpublics they helped to establish. Thus, their narratives, theologies, and ministries are representative of an early and radical black politics of resistance and

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empowerment. In ways akin to the doubled black self that DuBois so lyrically invokes, Marrant, White, and Jea articulate an identity politics that both maintains black cultural particularity and history and claims membership in the larger social and political bodies of America or England. They do so, however, as a result of their formation by and relationship to the collective interests, values, historical experiences and social ideologies of diasporic Africans, and, thus, articulate and enact a black radical evangelicalism that originates from within black culture and communities.

The following chapters offer, respectively, close readings of John Marrant's 1785 *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, George White's 1810 *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, An African*, and John Jea's 1816 *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*. In each case, I attend to the relationship between their autobiographical performances and the larger historical and social contexts that informed their narrative constructions and theologies, and I demonstrate that the uses of evangelical religion at work in their respective stories of conversion, faith, and ministries are ultimately rooted in a black radical evangelical tradition.

In chapter one, I argue that John Marrant's evangelical theology is shaped in significant ways by an ideology of black radicalism and resistance. I pursue readings of his 1785 *Narrative* and his 1789 "African Lodge" sermon as culturally embedded texts informed by the transatlantic social and cultural milieus Marrant lived and travelled within. Moreover, I assert that Marrant's theology and identity politics were impacted especially by the variety of African peoples and cultural forms that were prevalent in

eighteenth-century South Carolina as well as by a tradition of black revolt and marronage. Finally, I consider both the shape and content of his writings and the ways in which their structure reflects his diasporic experiences and contexts, and how his strategic uses of scripture and a black Masonic mythos counters and re-theorizes Enlightenment ideologies of race, subjectivity, human and providential history.

Chapter two examines the dialectical tensions informing George White's *A Brief Account*, and argues that he engages nineteenth-century discourses of gradual emancipation, self-improvement and moral up-lift, and black identity in the early republic in order to foster the values and interests of his black constituency and the separatist African Zion church. As with my interrogation of Marrant's writings, I attend to the structure of White's narrative, the rhetorical strategies he deploys, linked to his historical and social context in order to demonstrate how his writing and theology are products of his contemporary moment as well as interventions that reveal how black citizens rejected the subject positions and social categories proffered by the dominant culture and re-defined these for themselves.

Chapter three focuses on John Jea's self-reflexive uses of language and intertextuality that inform his autobiographical performance. That is, I argue that Jea's autobiography reveals the role of language in producing the self and how ideology is a product of and relies on the circulation of discourse. Moreover, I suggest that Jea's autobiography makes visible the speaking subject which precedes the inscribed self, and, while Jea is attuned to and relies on the potential for printed language to reify the self, he also recognizes and engages written texts—scripted language—as open subject positions to be inhabited or evacuated. In other words, Jea's text illustrates how the

speaking "I" informs and inhabits the narrative subject but is also always independent from the inscribed self. Finally, I argue that Jea's self-conscious focus on language (as performative and performance) and texts is a product of his black radical evangelicalism and of the many black communities with which he interacted or of which he was aware and their respective discourses of resistance and selfhood.

Black resistance and empowerment and the construction of a black historical and cultural identity politics that re-positions peoples of African descent in providential and human history are imperatives central to the self-fashioning engaged by Marrant, White, and Jea. Their narratives and black radical evangelicalism do not, finally, pursue an "integrationist poetics." Instead, their spiritual autobiographies and ministries are representative black radical religio-political productions and interventions that extend the ideological tradition of black radicalism in the early national era. Their autobiographical performances and theologies contribute to the reproduction of black culture and communities, and enable a revision of black radicalism, its shape and use, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as reveal how diasporic Africans imagined and created subject positions—individual and group—of their own making.

CHAPTER ONE

BLACK PREACHER, BLACK RADICAL: JOHN MARRANT'S THEOLOGY OF
RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION

In 1769, en route to play his French horn for a social gathering in Charlestown, South Carolina, John Marrant entered a "large meeting house" in which he was told a "crazy man was hallooing" (*A Narrative* 51). The "crazy man" was George Whitefield, likely on his final American preaching tour, who seemed to Marrant to be speaking directly to him. Marrant describes this encounter in his 1785 spiritual autobiography, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, in the following way: "Mr. Whitefield was naming his text, and looking round, as I thought, directly upon me, and pointing with his finger, he uttered these words, 'PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD, O ISRAEL'" (51). These words, according to Marrant, were "accompanied" by the power of the Lord and he was "struck to the ground, and lay both speechless and senseless near half an hour" (51), after which he was carried home, where he lay in bed for three days suffering from what he called a "wounded spirit" (52). On the fourth day, another minister visited Marrant and prayed "earnestly" with him three times before "the Lord was pleased to set [his] soul at perfect liberty, and" Marrant records, "being filled with joy I began to praise the Lord immediately; my sorrows were turned into peace, and joy, and love" (52-53).

The "New Birth" or conversion experience Marrant describes was a radically transformative one for him. He abandoned his former life of "vanity and vice" (50), set aside the French horn and the violin, both of which he was proficient enough with to earn a living by the time he was thirteen, and devoted himself to studying scripture and preaching. He was just fourteen years old when the Lord set his soul at "perfect

liberty" and he began his ministry; first as a "folk evangelist" in the South Carolina

wilderness where he missionized Cherokee, Creek, Catawaw, and Housaw Nations, and

later on a South Carolina plantation where he preached to and catechized African

slaves; and, after the American Revolution, as an ordained Anglican-Methodist minister

itinerating in England and Nova Scotia, and, finally, in Boston, where he served as

chaplain for Prince Hall's African Masonic Lodge. Marrant's 1785 *A Wonderful*

Narrative, the journal he kept from 1785-1790, in which he recorded the details of his

ministry in Nova Scotia, and the two sermons he included with the 1790 publication of

his *A Journal of the Rev. John Marrant*, provide a portrait of a dedicated preacher who,

despite a life of almost constant travel, privation, and danger, remained steadfast in

service to the God and Word he believed had transformed his spirit.

Marrant's extant writings also reveal an activist and liberationist theology

shaped partly by his early exposure to the Anglican Methodist and "New Birth"

theology of George Whitefield and the revivalism of The First Great Awakening in the

American colonies, which continued to echo and resonate in the 1760s (Kidd 268), and

by his formal training at the Countess of Huntingdon's seminary, Trevecca College, in

Bath, England. Beyond these overt sources for Marrant's theology, however, that

theology also needs to be understood as a product of his travels in colonial North

America and his engagements with indigenous peoples, as well as his life in colonial

South Carolina, which, during Marrant's formative years in the 1760s, had a black

population which far outnumbered whites, and during which Charlestown became "the

center of the low-land slave trade" as well as "the mainland's largest transatlantic slave

market" (Berlin 69). This was a likely source for the resonances of traditional African

religious beliefs as well as the African American folk sensibility discernable in his theology. Moreover, Marrant's theology took shape within the context of a transatlantic milieu in which he participated directly as a naval soldier for the British during the American Revolution and in the journeys he undertook between England, Nova Scotia, and New England. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Marrant's theology was informed by his ministry to black slaves in South Carolina, the former slaves and Loyalists—referred to collectively as "The Black Poor" (Walker 96-97)— that he likely interacted with and preached to while in London after the war, the repatriated and beleaguered Black Loyalists he lived with and served for three years in Nova Scotia, and the Black Masonic community he was a part of in Boston.

Out of this disparate and transcultural mix, Marrant forged a theology that addresses the spiritual and material conditions and circumstances of black life and experience in a colonial, "New World," and diasporic context. It is a theology that ultimately articulates Marrant's understanding of the "covenanted" black communities he believed would be realized as part of God's grand design, including their providential restoration to an African Zion. His vision of covenanted black communities and African restoration culminates in his 1789 African Lodge sermon in which he offers a compelling cosmogony based on a Black Masonic and Christian mythos. A primary thrust in this sermon is toward a recovery and revaluation of Africa, African peoples, and black subjectivity within a providential discourse and what Marrant understood as divine history. In this sermon, Marrant not only reclaims Africa as the originary site of creation and civilization, he also recovers a history and set of cultural resources from "the hellenomaniacal excision" in Paul Gilroy's memorable

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phrase, "of Africa from the narrative of civilisation's development" (*The Black Atlantic* 59). In doing so he engages here (and in his other writings) in a process of reclamation, resistance, and theorizing that challenged and displaced dominant Enlightenment imaginings and theories—secular and religious—of black subjectivity and history.

Marrant's revisionary and radical theology represents, as Joanna Brooks posits, an early black voice whose work and writings contributed to the articulation of "new social, cultural, religious, and political formations among African-Americans" and therefore helped to construct a "distinctive African-American . . . intellectual histor[y]" (*American Lazarus* 15). In addition to considering Marrant's work, textual representation, and theology as "new," we should also understand him as developing and articulating a theology, a vision of black *communitas*, and alternative theories of history and black subjectivity as endeavors that extend what Cedric Robinson identifies as an ideological and epistemological "historical tradition of Black radicalism" (*Black Marxism* 72). This is an intellectual and radical tradition rooted in and routed through African and African American encounters with and resistance to the economic, social, and political imperatives of a Western Enlightenment tradition, traceable to at least the mid-fifteenth century and the beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade.

In this chapter, I will interrogate, first, the ways in which Marrant's theology and identity politics are expressions of an early black radical tradition and ideology that was "both constitutive of and finally exorbitant to the Western intellectual traditions commonly assumed to be the historical pivot and motor of the modern world system" (Edwards, "The 'Autonomy' of Black Radicalism" 4). Further, I will argue that, in addition to responding to his eighteenth-century milieu, Marrant constructs and

launches his black radical evangelical theology and identity through the ideological imperatives of resistance and liberation that informed African encounters with and responses to European slavers and the institution of slavery. Finally, I will consider how Marrant's theology and identity, informed as it was by the normative and orthodox theology of the Anglican-Methodist church that supported his ministry and the ideology of his cultural and historical moment, is ultimately liberationist, sacralizing and justifying black subjectivity and empowerment.

Considering Marrant's theology as an expression of black radicalism with implications for colonial and early American black identity politics is important because it illuminates the ways in which religion was (and is) a cultural resource of political resistance and agency, with a revolutionary efficacy especially significant for black conceptions of self-worth and purpose defined by their appropriation of and interaction with a Christian mythos and ethic. Second, a tradition of black radicalism provides another heuristic for discerning the distinctive dimensions of Afro-Protestantism and black discourse communities in the Revolutionary and early republican periods. A third advantage of excavating a black radical evangelical heuristic in Marrant is that it facilitates the deconstruction of the European-imperialist project that delimited and circumscribed black subjectivity and potential, as well as the various forms of American exceptionalism and white supremacy operative in the eighteenth century.

Finally, interpreting Marrant as a black leader, preacher, and missionary whose textual identity and theology is constructed, expressed, and enacted through a historical tradition and socio-religious ideology of black radicalism helps to complicate theories

of an early African American textual tradition and aesthetic as "the attempt of blacks to *write themselves into being*" (Gates, *Loose Canons* 57) by mastering and imitating Western discursive modes. The eighteenth-century debate over the status of black humanity and the institution of slavery came to hinge, Henry Louis Gates Jr. has influentially argued, on the capacity of blacks to write and through written discourse to demonstrate their possession of reason. Based on the Cartesian formula so important to Enlightenment conceptions of selfhood and "being," reason became the sine-qua-non index of humanity, civilization, and "culture" and the faculty of reason could best be discerned, so the argument ran, through the production of written texts (Gates, *Loose Canons* 54). Thus a prevailing tendency in analyses of early black textuality (especially apparent in studies of slave narratives) focuses on how the black author, through literacy and textual representation came to possess and express a self and voice, an identity or "being" that takes shape on the page and through language. This voice and its "authenticity" and subversive potential is complicated by both the Western discursive modes appropriated by black writers as well as by the white amanuenses, editors, and "arrangers" to whom the black narrator often told his or her story. Indeed, this is a problematic in Marrant's 1785 *A Wonderful Narrative*, which was "taken down from his own relation, arranged, corrected, and published" by William Aldridge (47).

While the keen insights gained from scholarship on early black writing that have worked to disentangle the black voice or "message" from its "white envelope" (Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope") have revealed much about black agency and expression within and despite the racist "New World" and the institution of slavery,

they also run the risk, however unwittingly, of falling into the "trap" of Enlightenment ideology and white supremacy (Gates, *Loose Canons* 66-67), by minimizing or occluding the black "being" that exists prior to and beyond the discursive boundaries of the Western narrative modes and genres accessed and manipulated by black authors. Interpreting Marrant and the other figures in this study as early black leaders who construct their respective narratives and theologies informed by an ideology of black radical evangelicalism helps to unveil the complex and fraught textual identity they each produced—identities and texts informed by white authority, Enlightenment ideology, and the institutional hegemony of the Anglican and American Methodist churches with which they were associated. Their narrative constructions also reference praxis and theories enacted and linked by the "ideological connectives" (Robinson, *Black Marxism* 72) of black resistance to and liberation from Western ideology and white control, and thus signify black "being" and selfhood within yet not contained or defined by the texts they wrote and the Christian traditions with which they engaged.

Of the four extant texts by Marrant, the two on which I will primarily focus are his 1785 *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* and his 1789 African Masonic Lodge sermon. These are perhaps the most complex and certainly the most challenging of Marrant's surviving writings. Their complexity derives from an astonishing intertextuality that is both cultural and constructed through Marrant's appropriation and revision of multiple narrative modes and genre conventions, which includes his tropological uses of scripture in ways that both reflect and resist eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Christian hegemonies. Moreover, each opens spaces and features moments of rupture and discursive slippage through

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which Marrant's subversive politics and black radicalism can be discerned. Finally, each points toward Marrant's identity politics and theology as influenced by his eighteenth-century colonial and early-republican contexts as well as by his diasporic experiences. Both his narrative and sermon challenge Enlightenment ideology in implicit and explicit ways and deploy evangelical Christian belief to address his circumstances and those of black peoples: transcultural exchange, a valorization of difference and multiplicity, and a revision of Western theories of history and black subjectivity are all parts of Marrant's diasporic identity and black radical evangelicalism.

Marrant's best known text is his 1785 *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*. It was widely read in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By 1835, it had been re-printed at least twenty times and, in its first year of publication, was reissued in four successive editions (Gates, *Signifying* 142). Its popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was likely due to the dramatic descriptions Marrant provided of his "new birth" or spiritual conversion and the even more sensational portrait of his captivity and missionary experience among the Cherokee. Beyond the emotional appeal of Marrant's spiritual transformation and his sentimental and exciting depiction of the colonial frontier and indigenous peoples, contemporary readers probably found in his autobiography images and themes that complemented a burgeoning post-Revolution imagining of an ideal American republic: a frontier no longer menacing and harsh but accessible, populated by "noble savages" rather than the demonic beasts of an earlier Puritan era, and overseen by a providential God who guided the young nation's progress. That Marrant's story resonated with the

political potential to inscribe and re-enforce early American myths about identity and belonging is illustrated by the various alterations editors and publishers made to the many editions of his *Narrative*. Only the fourth edition was authorized by Marrant (Brooks and Saillant 19). The others did not include his references to slavery or the allusion to race in the title—"John Marrant, a Black"—ostensibly to "whiten" his text, evacuate its abolitionist potential, and ensure an uncomplicated mythos of early American identity. While the full and authorized text is more overtly subversive, even the images and themes seemingly in line with an ethos of nascent American exceptionalism have radical and subversive subtexts, which, like the critique of slavery Marrant includes in his *Narrative*, are informed by an ideology of black radical evangelicalism.

Part of the difficulty in reading Marrant's *Narrative* as an early black radical evangelical expression of resistance to an eighteenth-century discourse of secular and religious identity, stems precisely from his use of images and themes amenable to dominant cultural conceptions of an early American place and populace as well as the variety of recognizable narrative and genre conventions Marrant melded together to convey those images and themes. His *Narrative* has been variously categorized as a captivity, slave, and conversion narrative, and, as Cedric May has recently demonstrated in his study "John Marrant and the Narrative Construction of an Early Black Methodist Evangelical," Marrant's *Narrative* originated as his ordination sermon (554). Each of these textual modes and their tropes were well known by the time Marrant's *Narrative* was published, and each, in similar ways, served crucial ends

toward the construction of social, political, and cultural ideals in colonial and early America.

One trope shared by these narrative modes is that of displacement from the normative community, followed by physical, psychic, and spiritual hardships and crises which are resolved through either reintegration or acculturation back into the normative community. Marrant's *Narrative* follows this trajectory, especially in relation to the predestinarian Anglican-Methodist theology that he uses to explain his circumstances and through which he discerns a divine rationale to account for the circumstances of those he interacted with. As a result, his contemporary audience had ample opportunity to appropriate his *Narrative* in service of furthering the myth of an early American national identity. Even modern readers could, as Benilde Montgomery has suggested, interpret Marrant's textual identity as "too 'white'" (113). Henry Louis Gates Jr. gestures toward this potential in his groundbreaking analysis of Marrant's *Narrative* and its revision of "the talking book" trope (an analysis to which I will return) when he states that Marrant "is not concerned in this text at least to speak to the condition of black bondsmen or even the marginally free . . ." (*Signifying* 145). But, as I will demonstrate, Marrant draws on these generic conventions and an evangelical Christian discourse in service of black resistance and empowerment.

The lack of an overt critique of slavery and its abolition in Marrant's *Narrative* perhaps accounts for his absence in critical considerations of early black spiritual autobiographies as expressions of black radical evangelicalism. "Nowhere did the dominant religious denominations develop," according to Black Theologist Dwight N. Hopkins, "a theory or practice that allowed for black workers to possess an authentic,

intellectual interpretation of the Bible and Protestantism" (*Down, Up, and Over* 41).

While Marrant's intertextuality reflects secular and religious orthodoxies, it is short-sighted to interpret his *Narrative* as simply an inscription that illustrates "the acculturation of the black man into established categories of the white social and literary [and religious] order" (Andrews, "The First Fifty Years" 8). Instead, Marrant's expression and deployment of his Anglican Methodism needs to be interpreted as one expressive form that contributes to the intertextual admixture of his *Narrative*. When viewed in its relationship with the other cultural and textual sources that inform his text and theology, a more transgressive voice and the expression of black radical evangelicalism emerges.

In content and structure, Marrant's *Narrative* most closely resembles the generic captivity narrative. A number of critics, notably, Benilde Montgomery, Rafia Zafar, and Phillip Gould, have analyzed the ways in which Marrant accesses a biblical hermeneutic tradition common to seventeenth-century Puritan captivity narratives in which the captive's "journey takes her from the landscape of the familiar and formed into the alien and chaotic, from which she returns enlightened and reborn," with a renewed certainty about her status as a member of God's elect (Montgomery 106). The trope of displacement from the familiar and a return as renewed often cast the Puritan captive typologically as an Old Testament Israelite held in thrall by the "Natives." Indigenous peoples are coded as agents of the devil allowed by God to test and refine the faith of the captive, who is ultimately delivered and returned to the community of believers. Puritan captivity narratives translated captivity and return as part of a cosmic design overseen by the will of a providential God. Like the Puritan accounts, Marrant,

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through his references to a dizzying array of biblical types—John the Baptist, Lazarus, the Prodigal Son, Jonah, and Jesus—and strategic uses of scripture, also casts his life and captivity experience as a palimpsest of the bible.

Thus, his *Narrative* draws on a Puritan captivity narrative tradition, but in his fashioning of a black radical evangelical identity politics, Marrant also accesses and manipulates contemporary forms of the captivity narrative, which by the eighteenth century had become more overtly fictionalized and secular. Rather than tropological renderings of captivity and deliverance intended to transform, in Sacvan Bercovitch's terms, "secular into sacred identity," and "personif[y] the New World as America microchrista" (114), captivity narratives in the mid through the late eighteenth century offered a series of cultural and political myths through which to comprehend the North-American colonies "held in thrall by a distant uncaring foe," with the British taking on the villainous and demonic role formally ascribed to indigenous peoples (Sekora, "Red, White, and Black" 103). In Marrant's post-Revolution context, stories of captivity also worked to inscribe the American frontier as a site of regeneration, one that could be readily entered and transformed by the citizens of the expansionist minded young republic (Nash 44). Indigenous peoples were also rehabilitated in contemporary captivity narratives, re-rendered as "noble savages" who could be effectively Christianized and whose lifestyle and social-political values, sufficiently qualified and "whitened," were imagined as ideals that could be adopted in order to facilitate the young nation's penetration and transformation of the frontier (Slotkin 231-33).

The wilderness and Cherokee people Marrant depicts in his *Narrative* are infused with a Romanticism that an early American imaginary would have found

attractive for furthering and justifying a politics of expansion. Further, Marrant's Puritan hermeneutic could have been handily appropriated and used to buttress this enterprise as divinely sanctioned. But, as Rafia Zafar has argued, the uses to which black writers put the captivity narrative were unlikely to include "the advocacy of a 'white' social and political [and religious] hegemony" (20). Indeed, Marrant constructs a subversive captivity narrative, which, in its deft amalgamation and manipulation of theological and secular—seventeenth-century Puritan and eighteenth-century Romantic—narrative modes is evidence not of "an inadequate mixture," but one which, like the writings of Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano that Paul Gilroy examines, demonstrates his "conspicuous mastery of genre, style, and expressive idiom" and thus requires "from us a sophisticated grasp of cultural syncretism, adaptation, and intermixture" (*Against Race* 117). The interpretive demands of Marrant's admixture necessitates not simply a consideration of his mastery and syncretism of Western narrative modes, but also attention to the African and black cultural forms that inform the content and structure of his *Narrative* and Marrant's black radical evangelicalism.

Perhaps the most well-known African cultural source informing Marrant's narrative is the trope of the "talking book" identified by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Gates compellingly argues that Marrant was the second of five early black writers to utilize and revise a scene which featured an encounter between an illiterate and dispossessed narrator and the bible—a book that appears to "talk" to the white masters and ministers, but not to the black subject. Marrant inverts this scene in his *Narrative*. In the exchange between Marrant and the Cherokee king who holds him captive, it is Marrant

to whom the bible "speaks" and the king's daughter who wishes the book would also speak to her. Without minimizing the importance of this trope in early black writing as a powerful and often fraught signifier for agency and freedom through literacy, more important to my analysis of Marrant and his black radical evangelicalism is the African source to which Gates traces the practice of revision or "signifying" that Marrant engages.

Esu-Elegbara is the Yoruba divine trickster figure (which appears in various forms in many different West African cultures and mythologies) that is the mytho-poetic source accessed and revised by Marrant and the other four early black writers that form what Gates considers the basis for an early black literary tradition. Esu-Elegbara is a figure that signifies the practices of interpretation, translation, and most importantly indeterminacy (Gates, *Signifying* 11). Marrant's use of the "talking book" resonates with these characteristics. Esu-Elegbara's significance as an explicitly African mythological source that informs his *Narrative* and indicates ideological links between Marrant and a community of diasporic black writers and thinkers, takes on a radical import in light of the figure's relationship to expression, language, and how meaning is conveyed.

Indeterminacy characterizes the structure and progression of Marrant's *Narrative*. From beginning to end his *Narrative* revolves around a series of removes and returns that Marrant either describes or presents as inexplicable or unaccountable. "In fact," Benilde Montgomery observes, "there is no clear, linear progression in Marrant's narrative at all. His journey is not a single continuum [as it is in the Puritan captivity narrative] but a pilgrimage interrupted by a series of fortuitous accidents or

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unexpected 'cuts' that on the one hand, literally and consistently return him 'home' but, on the other, leave the actual outcome of his adventure open-ended and unassessed" (112). Montgomery argues further that the open-ended structure of Marrant's text and the "cuts" that inform it evince the distinctive black cultural and aesthetic practice of repetition. Drawing on James A. Snead's essay "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," Montgomery reads Marrant's "cuts" as akin to the phenomenon of repetition and return in jazz, which, like Marrant's *Narrative*, do not offer the "illusion of progress or control" central to Western European culture and discourse (113). These cuts are utilized by Marrant to incorporate occluded or marginalized black and native subjectivities into normative Protestant discourse and teleology.

When the structural "cuts" in Marrant's *Narrative* are considered in light of Esu-Elegbara's signification of indeterminacy and linked to Marrant's diasporic context, Montgomery's argument can be extended by reading the lack of linearity or ultimate resolution in Marrant's narrative as dimensions of his black radical evangelicalism and an ideology of resistance that took shape in part as a result of displacement, dispersal, and discontinuity. The constant removes that were a part of Marrant's life—the multiple moves made by his family when he was a child and the life of almost constant itinerancy that began when he was only fourteen and lasted until his death—could be understood as contributing to the structural techniques Marrant uses to organize his *Narrative*. In other words, the "cuts" and the non-linear, open-ended, unresolved, and indeterminate shape of his text, reflect the "unhomed" (Bhabha 13) status of Marrant in colonial South Carolina and, by extension, of displaced Africans in the diaspora.

Marrant's revision of Esu-Elegbara, a figure that accounts for indeterminacy as a feature of knowledge and existence, provides a rationale and discursive strategy, however latent or attenuated, through which to make sense of the discontinuity of black life in the diaspora. One effect of the black cultural and aesthetic technique of the "cut" is, as James A. Snead points out, to build "'accidents' into its *coverage*, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural *coverage*, this magic of the 'cut' attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself" (220). Rather than being subsumed and redefined by Western European religious beliefs and expressive modes, or by Enlightenment ideologies, the structure of Marrant's *Narrative*, informed as it is by the values embodied in Esu-Elegbara, constitutes a black radical resistance to and redefinition of the value system within which he operated and developed his theology. It is a resistance that accounts for black identity and experience informed by an eighteenth-century diasporic context.

Marrant's diasporic ethos and black radical evangelicalism are likely results of his almost certain exposure to African cultural ways and values in colonial South Carolina and their collision with an ideology of white control and authority that worked to erase them, as well as with a burgeoning urban black contingent in Charlestown comprised of slaves and free persons who were skilled tradesmen and women with a degree of social mobility and prosperity (Berlin 78-80). As I noted earlier, by the mid-eighteenth century, Charlestown was the largest transatlantic slave market in colonial North America, and, by 1760, "Blacks made up sixty percent of [South Carolina's] population" (Robinson, *Black Marxism* 119). Despite the imaginings and efforts of the

slave traders and master class to envision or transform African slaves into economic

objects, the massive influx of African peoples during the eighteenth century brought

more than a simple injection of laboring bodies and property into South Carolina's

tobacco and rice economies. Instead, "the cargoes of laborers also contained," as

Cedric Robinson reminds us,

> African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought,
>
> of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These
>
> were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargoes, then, did not
>
> consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks—men, women, and
>
> children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought
>
> the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first
>
> elements of consciousness and comprehension. (*Black Marxism* 122)

The persistence of African cultural ways, practices, and artifacts in colonial South

Carolina is born out by archeological evidence: West African architectural techniques

and styles as well as African-style pottery, the oldest of which dates to the mid-

eighteenth century, have been discovered and reconstructed in Charlestown and rural

South Carolina (Ferguson 63-96). The visible signs of African culture, manifested in

the houses African slaves built for themselves or in the potting techniques they brought

with them from Africa, also indicate the persistence of a vital social and cultural ethic

despite their enslavement. Their dwellings were constructed and arranged following

African patterns of living and interaction and privileged communal yards where

"cooking, eating, and socializing" took place (Ferguson 71). Through African

architectural and social practices, the enslaved maintained at least a semblance of

African village life and thereby formed and enacted, albeit in always threatened ways, black communities with values, modes, and an ideology that countered white oppression.

In contrast to the black communities that took shape on the plantations in rural South Carolina, urban slaves and free blacks in places like Charlestown and Savannah capitalized on their numbers and opportunities to pursue and hone artisanal skills and trades, which in conjunction with a modicum of independence gained through numerical superiority, enabled them to "create a society in which white people played little part" (Berlin 81). But, by the mid-eighteenth century, even this modicum of independence was further curtailed and constrained by "deficiency laws" legislated as early as 1712 in South Carolina, which served the interests of the outnumbered white artisans and worked to prevent free enslaved people of African descent from entering the skilled trades (Allen 252-53). This was the transcultural, segregational, social, and economic milieu in which Marrant took part as an adolescent and young man, moving within "an emerging colored elite" society (Berlin 81) as a musician, and later as a carpenter and folk missionary on a South Carolina plantation.

Another important expression of black resistance and community circulating in Marrant's cultural and historical moment was the slave liberation movements—conspiracies, revolts, and maroon communities—that were a feature in North America and especially common to regions like South Carolina, where African peoples constituted a majority. The most well known slave revolt in South Carolina is the Stono Uprising in 1739, and it was preceded and followed by continuous rumors of and actual slave revolts and escapes (Robinson, *Black Marxism* 140-44). Two outcomes of

the rumors and actual revolts and escapes that are important in discerning an ideology of black radical evangelicalism at work in Marrant are, first, the numerous maroon communities established by both blacks and Native Americans. Second, the atmosphere of anxiety that pervaded white society and stemmed from the possibility and reality of slave uprisings contributed to the severe discipline and brutal treatment suffered by slaves on lowland South Carolina plantations (Berlin 73-74). When Marrant's *Narrative* is read with an awareness of this context, a black radical evangelical ideology of resistance is discernable beneath the surface of the Puritan hermeneutical and eighteenth-century Romantic traditions that also inform his text.

While Marrant's *Narrative* is autobiographical, it capitalizes on the "increasing tendency" in eighteenth-century captivity narratives "to substitute imagination for experience" in order to exploit "archetypal situations," even in accounts that were presented as "true" (Slotkin 224). Almost half of Marrant's *Narrative* is devoted to a description of his captivity and evangelizing among the Cherokee he encountered after he left his home, or "the cultivated parts of the country," for the South Carolina wilderness (Marrant, *A Narrative* 56). The extended scenes of Marrant's sojourn in the wilderness and captivity, if not overtly fictionalized, are at least exaggerated. The backcountry he traveled in is presented as part "howling wilderness" where he suffered dangers and privation and part Edenic site where his various wants and needs are miraculously provided for. The description of his captivity is suffused with sentiment and pathos, the Cherokee presented first as threatening exotics, then as noble savages Marrant converts to Christianity.

Rather than jeopardizing Marrant's credibility as a black radical leader and theologian who constructs a subversive identity politics, the exaggerated details and sensational tone in his *Narrative* demonstrate instead his facility with and awareness of a revivalist and Protestant sermonic tradition in the eighteenth century. This tradition "persisted in using captivit[y]" stories and tropes "well beyond the Great Awakening of the 1740s" (Slotkin 96). Marrant's use of the captivity genre also likely met the preaching and theological requirements of the Countess of Huntingdon, his patron, for whom "religion was the seeking out of the most potent emotive experience" (Schlenther, *Queen of the Methodists* 177). More to the point, however, Marrant's conscious manipulation of the captivity tradition in conjunction with the transcultural and diasporic black communities he was a part of in South Carolina is also evidence of a radical subtext in his *Narrative*.

I want to suggest that coded references to the maroon communities constructed by blacks and native peoples (often in cooperation) circulate in Marrant's description of his captivity. Even though Marrant was never a slave, he must have been aware of the "runaways" who were a constant concern to the white population and of the prevailing atmosphere of anxiety regarding organized revolt and attack from slave liberation movements (Robinson, *Black Marxism* 141). It is highly probable that he would have been aware as well of a marronage tradition in South Carolina and the surrounding areas: Robinson's research reveals that there were "references to maroon communities having been established in areas of South Carolina (1765) and Georgia (1771, 1772, 1780s) in the colonial and post-colonial periods" (*Black Marxism* 143). Moreover, he would have had direct experience through his life in Charlestown, and, later on a local

plantation with black communities that re-fashioned themselves in the context of slavery and relied on African social models and cultural forms to do so. In other words, Marrant would have been well aware of an ideology of black resistance, in one form or another, to white control and of the wide variety of African cultural forms that accompanied, were transformed and re-enacted by the Africans who swelled South Carolina's population throughout the eighteenth century.

Marrant's use of the captivity narrative tradition to convey a covert ideology of black resistance, one that resonates with the subversive and liberationist potential represented by a marronage tradition, is revealed in the complex identity he fashions in his description of his captivity experience. He figures himself as a black prophet and biblical antitype who takes on the attributes and appearance of the Natives he lived and interacted with for the better part of a year. Marrant casts himself as a black prophet through his strategic scriptural references, all of which contribute to the theme of prophecy and its fulfillment. Indeed, this rhetorical strategy informs his entire *Narrative*. Marrant includes two messianic Psalms on his title page and even the pivotal moment of his conversion is framed by the Old Testament verse, "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel." This identifies Marrant as an emblem of God's chosen people and alludes as well to the coming of Christ. The trope of messianic prophecy also informs the trial Marrant describes. He writes that he read Isaiah, chapter 53, which foretells the coming of Christ, his suffering, and crucifixion; and Matthew 26, which fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah. Marrant's overt uses of scripture situate his textual identity and captivity within a prophetic biblical hermeneutic and the New Testament types to which Marrant compares himself further legitimate his status as a minister and

prophet. They also begin to illuminate Marrant and his theology as specific to the lives and conditions of blacks in the diasporic New World. Because all of the biblical types that Marrant signifies upon resonate with the pattern of death and rebirth, loss and renewal, prophecy and its fulfillment, he develops what Joanna Brooks characterizes as a "Lazarus Theology." This entails interpretations of scripture which emphasize God as "mindful of the life-and-death struggles that characterized both slave and free black existence" and offers a symbology to "communicate and assign meaning to the discontinuity and impossibility of their lives" (*American Lazarus* 98).

By themselves, however, Marrant's scriptural references and even his construction of himself as a "Lazarus" antitype do not fully unveil his radicalism or a theology specific to the fraught status and condition of a displaced and oppressed people.

Marrant also fashions his prophetic identity by appropriating the cultural attributes and appearance of the Cherokee, and in doing so, offers a potent semiotics of black radicalism and resistance as part of his narrative identity and theology. During his time with the Cherokee, Marrant claims to have learned their language. He achieves a fluency that enables him to pray in "the Indian tongue" (*A Narrative* 59), an ability Marrant implies contributes to his release. After he gains his freedom, Marrant writes that he lived with the king in his "palace" and "learnt to speak their tongue in the highest stile" (64). In addition to learning their language, Marrant also "assumed the habit of the country, and was dressed much like the king," and ultimately returned to his family in Charlestown as a "Native": "My dress was purely in the Indian stile; the skins of wild beasts composed my garments; my head was set out in the savage manner,

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with a long pendant down my back[,] a sash round my middle, without breeches, and a tomohawk [sic] by my side" (65). Marrant's linguistic facility and culturally heterogeneous identity is read by one scholar as an "early embodiment of the fundamental synthesis inside the whole of American experience," representative of the ways in which "his text is neither African nor European, nor Native American, but is a kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*, a gathering of transethnic contacts that manages to retain the powerful stamp of all three" (Montgomery 110 and 113). Another current or subversive stream underneath the surface of Marrant's "transethnic" identity in which he is figured as a black-native prophet flows from an ideology of resistance manifested in a tradition of black and native marronage.

Apart from its normative function within Anglican Methodist or Romanticist discourses, Marrant's penetration of the wilderness and what can be seen as a transcultural exchange with the Cherokee and other indigenous peoples he lived with also resonates with a black radical discourse and ideology that looked to the wilderness as a site of liberation from slavery, white control and authority, and the black and native maroon communities established there as a locus of resistance and empowerment. In his *Narrative*, Marrant presents a visible sign of cooperation and exchange between blacks and native peoples that points to the potential for a coalitional politics through which he can address life and meaning in a diasporic New World context. His multi-faceted and transethnic identity, its signification of the meaning and value of black and native subjectivities, and their potential to resist and redefine a hegemonic identity politics accrues additional potency through Marrant's continued development of his tropological and antitypical rhetoric.

When Marrant returns to his family, he is initially unrecognized. His family believes that he had been "torn in pieces by the wild beasts" after he left home for the wilderness (*A Narrative* 66), and when Marrant is confronted by his brother, "He enquired, who I was, and what I was?" (67), there is a subtle allusion here to the new or different ethnic configuration signified by Marrant's transformed appearance. Marrant does not identify himself, however, until finally his sister embraces and kisses him, and, "looking me in the face, said, 'Are you not my brother John?' I answered yes, and wept. I was then made known to all the family, to my friends, and acquaintances, who received me, and were glad and rejoiced: Thus the dead was brought to life again; thus the lost was found" (67). In this scene of return and recognition, Marrant continues to trope New Testament stories and figures that embody the themes of death and rebirth, loss and renewal. This culminating moment echoes Lazarus, the Prodigal Son, and the resurrected Christ, and in this instance Marrant's prophetic identity and his Lazarus theology are explicitly construed and expressed through the different and radical "what" or complex identity that his brother did not immediately recognize. In other words, Marrant engages in a counter identity politics, reconfigures black and native identities, and invests them (as well as the liberationist maroon communities that contributed to those identities) with an authority derived from a biblical hermeneutic and Christian ethic.

Because Marrant, throughout his *Narrative*, fashions an identity politics and theology that is both radical and orthodox—he negotiates between his Anglican Methodism and his black radicalism, and works to situate black and native subjectivities within a providential discourse in ways not allowed for by the dominant

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Calvinist-infused "New Divinity" theology of the eighteenth century—his radicalism

can be usefully considered as the product of what Anthony Bogues categorizes as a

"Black heretic," an early black radical intellectual required to "make two moves":

> In the first, they typically engage the orthodoxy of a particular theory in
>
> an effort to establish both the conditions and possibilities for radical
>
> action against racial or colonial oppression. They quickly discover,
>
> however, that many of these theories remain opaque or inadequate in
>
> coming to grips with the racial and colonial context. [. . .] This
>
> recognition then pushes black radicals into a form of political thinking
>
> and practice that then refigures elements of the theory. At this point,
>
> ruptures occur and new historical narratives and political discourses
>
> appear, thereby making heresy a constitutive current of the radical black
>
> intellectual tradition. ("Teaching Radical Africana Political Thought"
>
> 149)

Marrant never deviates from the predestinarian orthodoxy of the Anglican Methodism

that was such a significant strain in his theology, despite its accounting for black

identity and subjectivity within providential discourse and divine history as victims

whose enslavement was a divinely sanctioned method by which Africans would be

converted to Christianity. The New Divinity theology prevalent in the eighteenth

century and especially influential after the American Revolution wanted to reconcile

what it understood as "two of the more prominent sins of the day—slavery and the

slave trade" (Saillant, "Slavery and Divine Providence" 584) with a nascent republican

ideology and project in post-Revolution America that claimed allegiance to the natural

and inalienable rights of its citizenry. This incongruity was resolved by a series of convoluted arguments which ultimately asserted that, after conversion, slaves could be sent to Africa to convert their "pagan brethren" in anticipation of what was believed to be an imminent millennium. Despite arguments for the sin of slavery and the divinely sanctioned imperative to Christianize Africa in anticipation of the millennium, the New Divinity theology could never imagine an integrated American republic (Saillant, "Slavery and Divine Providence" 596-97). By fusing an ideology of black radicalism—informed by African cultural forms and practices and the subversive and liberationist ethos of a marronage tradition—with his Anglican Methodism, Marrant refigures the theories and theology of the dominant New Divinity position, and re-theorizes black and native subjectivities.

Rather than a "divine victim" Marrant makes visible in his black-native prophet figuration an identity politics that invests black and native subjectivities with an agency and liberationist potential buttressed and authorized by scripture and a providential God. Because, as I have attempted to demonstrate, this identity politics and theology emerged in relation to Marrant's historical and cultural context, he not only repositions blacks in a counter relationship to the "racial and colonial context" Bogues argues that the black radical intellectual confronted, he also enacts an exegetical strategy central to liberation theologies. Rather than a record of only a transcendent God, liberation theologies interpret the bible as the story of a God both—and always—transcendent and immanent, interpreting scripture as a "witness that says that God is a God of liberation, who speaks to the oppressed and abused, and assures them that divine righteousness will vindicate their suffering" (Cone 33). Marrant's tropological

rendering of his life and captivity emphasizes an interpretation of scripture centered in the Lazarus and Christological themes of death and rebirth, loss and renewal in order to explain his experiences as a black evangelical in an uncertain diasporic context. And God and Christ manifest themselves in Marrant's *Narrative* as active agents in history, literally effecting his liberation from death and captivity, but also figuratively in Marrant's multifaceted and prophetic identity, which speaks to both the temporal and spiritual liberation of blacks and natives.

This black radical and liberationist thrust is extended by Marrant in his brief description of the slaves he evangelizes while working as a carpenter on the "Jenkins Plantation" in South Carolina. Like the dual rhetorical and theoretical moves he makes in the depiction of his captivity, Marrant's critique of slavery and the emancipatory radicalism it contains is deployed through a form of double consciousness. "At the level of discursive practices," writes Bogues, "this means that there is a strange gray area of being master of a set of discursive practices, of thinking in the major categories of these practices while recognizing that the categories themselves negate one's self." But, as Bogues further observes, this "tortuous conundrum is not a static one, and can generate creative deployment of ideas, particularly because those in this position inhabit a space and social location that facilitates radicalism" (*Black Heretics, Black Prophets* 14). As we have seen, Marrant operated in spaces and social locations that offered cultural and ideological alternatives that he brought to bear in the construction of an identity politics and theology that challenges religious and secular hegemonies. While he never openly advocates for the abolition of slavery (either in his *Narrative* or in his more radical African Lodge sermon), Marrant's account of the slaves he interacts

with on the Jenkins Plantation is also infused with an ideology of resistance and relies on a theology fashioned to redress the spiritual and physical bondage of the enslaved.

Marrant's double consciousness or "epistemic displacement" (Bogues, *Black Heretics* 14) in his engagement with the institution of slavery likely stems from his awareness of the politics and theology of his patron and church. Neither the Church of England nor the Anglican Methodism it produced officially took a stance against slavery. Indeed, both the Countess of Huntingdon and her chaplain George Whitefield owned slaves. Whitefield willed his Bethesda Orphanage and approximately fifty slaves to the Countess, who then increased her slave population to 125 before the orphanage burned to the ground (Schlenther, "To Convert the Poor People in America" 244). Marrant's critique also seems cognizant of the New Divinity position that understood the institution of slavery as a divine sin that could best be ameliorated by converting the slaves to the "proper knowledge" of the gospel. Yet, the ostensibly conservative Christian education he provides for the slaves, the Christian society they form, and Marrant's condemnation of slavery and the whites who facilitate it creates ruptures in his *Narrative* and an attendant possibility for new radical and liberationist categories within his Anglican Methodist theology.

On the surface, the description Marrant provides of his ministry to the slave population on the Jenkins Plantation, where he worked as a carpenter, appears primarily concerned with liberating only their souls. Toward this end Marrant catechizes the children. After "three or four months, in which time, by the children acquainting their parents with it, I soon had my society increased to about thirty persons" (*A Narrative* 68). Marrant writes also that he was especially pleased that "one of the negro boys

made very great proficiency in that time, and could exercise in extempory prayer much to my satisfaction" (68). Marrant's references to the Christian "society" established by the slaves and the "extempory" skill of one of the boys, reflects concepts encouraged by his Methodist connection—societies or informal worship groups that typically met at private residences complemented Methodism's emphasis on itinerancy and its continued move away from the institutional and liturgical authority of The Church of England. Early Methodism's challenges to traditional forms of church authority and hierarchy also opened spaces for preachers with limited formal training and valorized extempory preaching and a "felt" relation and response to God's word. But there is a doubled perspective in Marrant's references to the society and preaching facility of the boy, discernable in light of the sub-textual ideology of resistance and liberation Marrant establishes through the description of his captivity and in light of the critique of slavery that follows.

The society formed by the slaves also alludes to the potential, through religion and worship, to establish black communities apart from white authority, in this case, a community led initially by Marrant, a free black preacher, but one that he implies will be led eventually by his precocious student. Even more significant is the extempory preaching, which not only signifies Marrant's rejection of scholastic pietism and privileges "the individual's reading of scripture" (May, "John Marrant and the Narrative Construction" 557), but also heralds an "extemporaneous" orientation to God's word, understood and articulated through black experience and, thus, one that extends the doctrine of spiritual regeneration to include or at least act as a precursor to other forms of liberation. Indeed, Jenkins must have had at least a latent sense of this

possibility as he tells Marrant that he "had spoiled all his Negroes" and that Marrant "should make them so wise that he should not be able to keep them in subjection" (69).

The threat posed by a slave population armed with a liberation theology, coupled with a tradition of black resistance and marronage probably contributed, at least subconsciously, to Mrs. Jenkins's demand that her husband forbid Marrant's evangelizing, disperse the black "society," and punish the slaves,

> which he then very soon did, for a short space; for he, together with his overseer and negro-driver, and some of his neighbors, beset the place wherein we met, while we were at prayers; and as the poor creatures came out they caught them, and tied them together with cords, till the next morning, when all they caught, men, women, and children were strip'd naked and tied, their feet to a stake, their hands to the arm of a tree, and so severely flogg'd that the blood ran from their backs and sides to the floor, to make them promise they would leave off praying, &c. though several of them fainted away with the pain and loss of blood, and lay upon the ground as dead for a considerable time after they were untied. (*A Narrative* 69)

The depiction of the brutal treatment suffered by the slaves, again, speaks to Marrant's doubled narrative construction. It matches a developing abolitionist and New Divinity imperative to render the institution of slavery as sinful, with moral and spiritual consequences for all those actively involved in its maintenance. A whole community is implicated in this scene—Jenkins, his wife, overseer, driver, and neighbors—and their imperiled spiritual condition is reiterated by Marrant when he warns Jenkins "that the

blood of those poor negroes which he had spilt that morning would be required at his

hands" (69). This prophecy is fulfilled when Mrs. Jenkins dies of a "violent fever," a

result, Marrant implies, of God's providential hand and his meting out divine

punishment.

A more radical potential in Marrant's portrait of the brutalized slaves comes

through in his continued tropological rhetoric. Marrant references the New Testament

figure of Christ in this scene and, as Brooks points out, "constructs the slave

worshippers as types of the crucified Christ, 'strip'd naked,' hung arms outstretched on

a 'tree,' 'flogged,' and left for dead" (101). In rendering the slaves as Christ figures,

Marrant shifts attention to "the miseries of the victims of slavery" and away from the

New Divinity antislavery rhetoric that tended to focus on "the wickedness of the

victimizers" (Jordan 297). More importantly, however, he amplifies in this scene, as he

does in his transethnic identity, the *imago dei* in blackness, and here it is a Christology

that symbolizes Christ's sacrificial death on behalf of the persecuted slaves. This is a

potently subversive image resonant also with liberationist theologies that posit the

incarnate Jesus as "the oppressed one who takes on black suffering" (Hopkins,

Introducing 57). And because the New Testament story of Christ's death that Marrant

indexes culminates with his resurrection and its significance for liberation from

oppression and suffering, his portrait renders the enslaved as resurrected and victorious

Christ figures.

The Christ figure referenced by Marrant signifies more than a sentimental

narrative construction of black suffering and therefore an antislavery statement driven

by pathos. It embodies as well a black radical theological emblem of resistance against the institution of slavery, a radicalism adumbrated by Marrant when he writes,

> I afterwards heard that their Mistress continued to persecute them for meeting together as often she discover'd them, and her husband for not being more severe against them; they were then obliged to meet at midnight in different corners of the woods that were about the plantation, and were sure to be flog'd if ever she caught them, they nevertheless continued their meetings though in such imminent danger, and by what I have since heard, I believe it continues to this day [. . .]. (70)

These clandestine meetings are examples of "hush harbors," social and sacred spaces that slaves carved out and claimed from white authority and surveillance in order to worship and practice a form of Christianity that did not relegate them to the status of divine victims (Raboteau, *Slave Religion* 215). These spaces provided room for worship and, just as significantly, represented and worked as spaces, like the maroon communities, in which black *communitas* could be developed and expressed. In the time and space of the "hush harbor" slaves engaged in a "religion of resistance" if not of "revolutionary defiance" (Genovese 254), a resistance that entailed an exegesis of scripture through the lens of their experiences in a violent, oppressive, and unjust institution; a resistance of the atomization of black cultural identity through the creation of black religious and social "societies;" and a resistance that, in Marrant's *Narrative*, alludes to a Christology of and for the oppressed, as well as to a resurrected and insurrectionary Christ. Marrant depicts the slaves first as "crucified," and then as

"risen" in the social and religious "society" that continued in opposition to white authority. Furthermore, because Marrant ends this section of his *Narrative* with a revised taxonomy in which the slave worshippers and their "society" are presented as "the work . . . of God" and the slave masters and the institution of slavery as "the devil" or the devil's servants, black subjectivity and resistance to white oppression is sacralized, given a positive valence within "God's grand design" and providential history. Marrant writes that, because of the continued vitality of the "society," "it appears that the work was of God; therefore neither the devil, nor his servants, could overthrow it; and to our faithful covenant God be all the Glory" (70).

The radically informed categories of identity and community that Marrant articulates through his "doubled" stance and the theology of "covenanted" black communities he begins to develop in his *Narrative* becomes, by the time he delivered his 1789 sermon for Prince Hall's African Masonic Lodge, more overt and progressive. After his ordination, Marrant served as minister to the Black Loyalist communities in Nova Scotia before travelling to Boston where he became chaplain for Prince Hall's Lodge. The three years Marrant spent in Nova Scotia were recorded in his 1790 *A Journal of the Rev. John Marrant*. His tireless work as spiritual guide and political advocate and the "covenanted" black communities he fostered often encountered opposition from Christian sects opposed to his Anglican Methodism, white competition for land, jobs, and resources, and an inefficient and racist British bureaucracy. This is another cultural and social context that influenced Marrant's black radical evangelicalism. When he arrived in Boston he was introduced to Prince Hall and a discourse of black masonry, and was thus provided with another set of theoretical tools

to dismantle and revise a normative religious and secular ideology regarding black subjectivity within human and providential history, as well as buttress his belief in "covenanted" black communities. A black masonic mythos fused with Marrant's providential Anglican Methodism offered a "potent mix" of "biblical and fraternal history" (Maffly-Kipp 31) that he deploys in his sermon to reclaim what he calls the ancient and honorable history of African masonry. In doing so, Marrant revitalizes and legitimates Africa as a geographical and symbolic site of creation and civilization, and revalues African origins as central to the initiation, dissemination, and maintenance of knowledge and culture.

The reclamation of an African past and space in Marrant's sermon is suggestive of the development of his radical thought through a diasporic epistemic that confronted conceptions of identity and origin "in the fragmentation, racialized oppression, and systematic dispossession of the slave trade" as well as in the racialized society faced by free blacks, and the need "to confront or heal that legacy through racial organization itself: through ideologies of a real or symbolic return to Africa" (Edwards, "Uses" 46). The biblical-masonic anthropology that Marrant develops in this sermon locates the Garden of Eden in Africa and the origins of the art of masonry in Adam, traced through Cain, Noah, Nimrod, and Ham. His recoding of the creation story and these Old Testament figures re-theorizes history and its articulation in a Western European tradition and therefore "displaces what had been taught about the progressive universality of the Western intellectual categories" (Bogues, *Black Heretics* 12). Marrant presents a counter-history that invests black colonized identity with cultural and political agency.

Marrant's sermon begins with a retelling of the Genesis account of creation and places particular emphasis on "Man" as the pinnacle of God's creative work. Significantly, Marrant identifies God as "the Grand Architect of the Universe" and characterizes "Man" as different from other creatures because

> into his body was infused a soul of a far more noble nature and make—a rational principle to act according to the designs of his creation; that is, to contemplate the works of God, to admire his perfections, to worship him, to live as becomes one who received his excellent being from him, to converse with his fellow creatures that are of his own order, to maintain mutual love and society, and to serve God in consort. Man is a wonderful creature, and not undeservedly said to be a little world, a world within himself, and containing whatever is found within the creator.—In him is the spiritual and immaterial nature of God, the reasonableness of Angels, the sensative [sic] power of the brutes, the vegetative life of the plants, and the virtue of all the elements he holds converse with in both worlds. (80)

Marrant draws on Enlightenment and Masonic discourses by identifying God as "Grand Architect," and stresses the "rational principle" as an index of "Man's" superiority. In connection to his assertion that the cradle of creation and civilization is Africa and the first humans were therefore Africans, invested with rationality and created in the image of God, Marrant appropriates and re-theorizes Enlightenment ideology that by the late eighteenth century was developing polygenesis theories to account for the creation of different "races." Arguments founded on a theory of monogenesis continued to

circulate, but even these were rooted in hierarchical taxonomies that, at their most benign, insisted on explaining "physical, especially racial, variations [as] always degenerate ones from an ideal state" (West, "A Genealogy" 103). In Marrant's biblical-masonic taxonomy, African peoples are not figured as a different "species," biologically degenerate or corrupt, or as climatically altered, but as products of the "Grand Architect" imbued with rationality and the *imago dei* from the moment of their creation.

Marrant extends and complicates this radical re-theorizing of Enlightenment ideology by recoding the biblical figures of Cain, Noah, Nimrod, and Ham. The stories of Cain and Ham in particular had been and continued to be referenced by pro-and antislavery ideologists alike. Each, for different reasons pointed to the curses God placed on Cain and Ham for their respective sins as a way to explain racial difference, which manifested itself in blackness, supposedly the visible sign of God's punishment. Rather than refute outright this typology, Marrant appropriates and invests it with a different significance: "whence is it but from these that our modern Cains call us Africans the sons of Cain? (We admit it if you please) and we will find from him and his sons Masonry began, after the fall of his father [Adam]" ("A Sermon" 82).

There are at least two ways to interpret Marrant's revision and recoding of the Cain trope, both indicative of his black radical evangelicalism. First, because he identifies whites as "modern Cains," Marrant potentially destabilizes a white/black binary. In place of whiteness or blackness as "natural" signifiers of superiority or inferiority, Marrant points to sin as a defining characteristic of subjectivity—white and black—and characterizes whites "who despise their fellow [African] men, as tho' they

were not of the same species with themselves" as "monsters" that "never came out of the hand of God in such a forlorn condition" (80). Here, Marrant explicitly challenges polygenesis as a natural or divine proof for difference and instead imputes those that "dare to despise or tyrannize over their [African] lives or liberties, or incroach on their lands, or to inslave their bodies" with the sins of envy and pride (81). Marrant implies that the sin of envy on the part of whites emanates from their latent awareness but prideful denial of the cultural superiority of Africa.

Marrant preaches further that dark-skinned peoples initiated the art of masonry and are thus "repositories of sacred wisdom from God" (Maffly-Kipp 34), responsible, through the ages, for the dissemination of the architectural knowledge and textile production that stand as the very signs of civilization. In this case, the binary is perhaps reordered and the ideograph "black" privileged. Here, Marrant's sermon partakes of an eighteenth-century discourse that understood race and culture as synonymous concepts. His presentation of African peoples as the progenitors of masonry and Africa as the cradle of civilization valorizes and, indeed, renders as exemplary, African and black culture, and, hence, black subjectivity. His idealization of African culture and black subjectivity entails an essentialist dimension that we may find problematic. However, because Marrant lived and acted in a historical and cultural context wherein, even though "there was no consensual philosophical theorization, scientific formulation, or literary imagination of race," it was nonetheless a powerful and "major determinant of lived experience" (Brooks, *American Lazarus* 16), one that, if not yet codified in philosophy or science, had been reified in the slave and property laws that were being legislated as early as the seventeenth century (Harris 278-79). And, thanks to figures

like Kant, by the late eighteenth century the Enlightenment project had developed an influential metaphysics of race that associated progress and "maturity" with European culture and whiteness and a "self-imposed" immaturity, "moral weakness, or laziness" with Africa and blackness (Farr 147). Put another way, we have to attend to his writings and identity politics as produced by and as interventions in his historical-cultural moment.

Although Marrant did not abandon race as a construct in his thinking or writing—and, in fact, in line with the ethos of his time, he emphasizes and capitalizes on the culture-race paradigm—his engagement with a politics of race entailed an epistemology that accounted for identity as multidimensional and complex in ways resistant to the rigid and stark racial categories operative in the "normative gaze" of a Western Enlightenment ideology (West, "A Genealogy" 97). The black-native prophet he constructs in his *Narrative* signifies the potential to fashion a cultural and political identity through the exchange and synthesis of different sources and values—African, native, marronage, Protestant, Masonic. The sacralized black subjectivity in his African Lodge sermon also accounts for difference and multiplicity. Creation and the art of masonry have their origins in Africa and African peoples, but Marrant also utilizes a diasporic heuristic in the history of Masonry's dispersal in his sermon. Attending to this dimension in Marrant unveils the ways in which his black radical evangelicalism complicates eighteenth-century definitions of subjectivity rooted in supposedly fixed and pure racial-cultural categories.

In his rendering of the history of Masonry, Marrant locates its beginnings in Old Testament figures and tropes, which he reads as African. But as his intent is also to

convey the presence and impact of Masonry throughout history and the world, he also focuses on its dispersal and in broad strokes traces its circulation in a global context. In addition to Cain, Noah, and Ham, Marrant points to Nimrod's founding of Babylon and his construction of "many splendid cities in Shinar," including the city of Heliopolis in Egypt; and to the other descendants of Noah who carry Masonic wisdom "into the south and east of Asia" and "propagated the science and the art as far as China and Japan" ("A Sermon" 84). Marrant traces Masonry and its arts through the Jewish dispensation and also includes Gentile and Christian epochs, referencing artifacts and skills like the purple glass of Sidon, the linen of Tyre, "skill in working of metals, in hewing of timber and stone; in a word, for their perfect knowledge of what was solid in architecture [. . .]," before finally pointing to "[t]he famous temple of Jupiter Hammon, in Libian Africa," and the exemplary symbol of Masonry, Solomon's Temple ("A Sermon" 85-86). While African history and culture undergird Marrant's review of Masonry, its peregrinations also conjure the concept of routes, movement, and exchange in the dissemination and development of the Masonic arts, and by extension, of cultural identity. Thus, Marrant develops an identity politics that simultaneously privileges African origins and offers also a cultural politics aware of the "intercultural and transcultural processes and forms" (Gilroy, *Against Race* 123) that contributes to identity formation.

Based on the logic that Marrant establishes in his sermon—that Africa and African peoples are central to God's providential plan and design and in possession of a "rational principle," full humanity that reflects God's image, and a historical-cultural lineage foundational to civilization—he indicts the institution of slavery and counters

arguments for the "natural" fittedness of blacks for slavery. He explicitly condemned

the institution and practice, as we have seen, earlier in his sermon when he pointed to

those who colonized African lands and enslaved an African population as unnatural

"monsters" who, Marrant warns, were "displeasing and provoking that God to pour

down his judgments upon them" (81). Later in his sermon, Marrant historicizes

slavery, a practice that "if we search history, we shall not find a nation on earth but has

at some period or other of their existence been in slavery, from the Jews down to the

English nation, under many Emperors, Kings, and Princes [. . .]" (89). On the surface,

Marrant's argument here seems a version of the secular position that held slavery to be

justifiable and even necessary in the founding and maintenance of a nation by pointing

to slave-holding societies from the past that were built, in part, by slave labor and

organized socially and politically by caste. It is also reflective of the New Divinity

theological position, which held slavery to be divinely ordained—a national sin that

needed to be ameliorated, yes, but one that nonetheless served God's "grand design."

However, Marrant frames his commentary on the institution of slavery by

writing that "[a]ncient history will produce some of the Africans who were truly good,

wise, and learned men, and as eloquent as any other nation whatever, though at present

many of them in slavery, which is not a just cause of our being despised" (89). Here he

alludes to African thinkers, philosophers, and theologians like "Tertullian, Cyprian,

Origen, Augustine, Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianen, Arnobius, and many others" (89),

"good, wise, and learned Africans" that Marrant suggests are analogous to those

Africans currently in bondage. This move by Marrant, to offer African examples of

innovative and seminal founders of culture, challenges the ideological racism on the

rise in the eighteenth century, which was developing a series of arguments that would "prove" Africans were "naturally" immature, childlike, barbaric—without culture—and should and could therefore be enslaved (Bay 17-18). And when Marrant writes that bondage is "not a just cause" for despising black people, followed by a reference to a fifth-century story, likely drawn from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Maffly-Kipp 34), about a man named Gregory who encountered white slaves in a Roman marketplace, he undermines an ideology that would yoke slavery and blackness. Gregory laments the condition of the "many young boys with white bodies, fair faces, beautiful countenances, and lovely hair" he sees for sale on the auction block. He asks the merchant where they are from and is told, "Britain, where the inhabitants were generally so beautiful." Gregory is then grief-stricken because their faces and bodies were "under the power of the prince of darkness" and "their souls void of the grace of God" (89).

By historicizing slavery in this way, Marrant undermines the inchoate but rapidly developing ideology that worked to justify slavery vis-à-vis blackness, based on arguments rooted in nature, or that it was justified due to the ostensible absence of culture in Africa. Not only are the slaves Gregory encounters white, they are British, the ostensible cultural ideal in Marrant's eighteenth-century moment. Moreover, Marrant's emphasis in this passage on a white aesthetic of beauty—"white bodies, fair faces, beautiful countenances, and lovely hair"—has an ironic potential when posed against the physical aesthetics reified by Enlightenment thinkers like Carolus Linnaeus, which "implicitly evaluated the observable characteristics of the racial classes of people" as signifiers of more abstract qualities like "character and disposition" and

reflected a "personal preference" premised on "classical aesthetic and cultural ideals" (West, "A Genealogy" 100 and 101). Marrant undercuts an aesthetics and ideology of whiteness premised on a cultural ideal of beauty and the belief that appearance was a transparent signifier for character. It would appear, based on the rationale Marrant develops in his sermon, that the enslavement of African peoples cannot be justified by arguments that rely on phenotypical or cultural differences as natural signs that justify enslavement and privilege.

There is also a potential reassessment by Marrant in this passage of a white masculine ideal that will become especially virulent in the mid-nineteenth century, but which was already part of a post-Revolution American imaginary in the late-eighteenth century, popularized, for instance, in the mytho-historical figure of Daniel Boone. Rather than embodying the Anglo-Saxon masculine ideal of rugged individualism and physical prowess, the white slaves Marrant depicts are feminized. Rhetorically, this could have facilitated what Dan McKanan calls "a sentimental theology" in which abolitionist rhetoric "presented extended portraits of the victims of social injustice, inviting readers to sympathize and identify with them" (5). In this case, white readers are invited to imagine their own "fair," "beautiful," and delicate children in bondage, with the hope that they might then extend their sympathy to enslaved African Americans.

The white slaves in Marrant's sermon also offer a portrait of whiteness absent the "frontier" and masculine vitality and strength in a figure like Daniel Boone, a compelling type for a young America in need of a heroic mythology populated with the Adamic archetypes that R.W.B. Lewis argued were fashioned in the late-eighteenth and

early nineteenth centuries: "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (5). Marrant's presentation of British slaves counters the myth of whiteness as emancipated from history and in possession of a heroic and natural autonomy. He does so in order to demonstrate that slavery "feminizes" and enervates the intellectual, physical, and, worst of all for Marrant, the spiritual capacities and potentials of the self. The source of Gregory's grief when he sees the "beautiful" white boys is "that such fair faces should be under the power of the prince of darkness, and that such bodies should have their souls void of the grace of God" (89). Slavery, not nature or God's will, is the cause of spiritual torpor and darkness, and, Marrant suggests, it impacted white subjectivity in the past just as it impacts black subjectivity in his contemporary moment. This is another implication of his assertion that bondage "is not a just cause of our being despised" (89). Slavery imperils subjectivity and potential, rather than operating, as the New Divinity position held, as God's providential way of ensuring that African peoples gain access to his word. Because Marrant presents it as a practice and institution that constructed identity—white and black—he offers a radical counter-theory of identity formation and racial categories, resistant to an Adamic ideal, Enlightenment naturalism, or cultural imperialism.

Marrant's reclamation of Africa and repositioning of black subjectivity within human and providential history, which entails his overt and covert critiques of Enlightenment, cultural imperialist, and racist ideologies, culminates in his African

Lodge sermon with a call to black Christian Masons to recognize their ancient and divine lineage and to understand their membership in a Masonic tradition through the Christian ethics of service, fraternity, and brotherly love: "remember your obligations you are under to the great God," Marrant preaches, "and to the whole family of mankind in the world—do all that in you lies to relieve the needy, support the weak, mourn with your fellow men in distress, do good to all men as far as God shall give you ability, for they are all your brethren, and stand in need of your help more or less [. . .]" (88). The emphasis on black masonry as a fraternal and social organization under the auspices of God's authority is representative of Marrant's black radical engagement with praxis enacted to transform the material conditions of black life. The black Masonic organization stands as a powerful example of black *communitas* that informs Marrant's theology, and his rhetoric of service on behalf of the "needy" and "weak" make explicit the political and liberationist ethic that also informs his theology.

Marrant offers in this sermon, as he does in his *Narrative* and other writings, a theology not only of spiritual renewal and a final deliverance from oppression and suffering in a future transcendent realm, but one also intended to revitalize black social and political life in a contemporary and temporal realm. The transformed black communities Marrant advocates, his reclamation of Africa and re-theorization of black history and culture are informed by the same African cultural forms and a marronage tradition of black resistance that he relies on to fashion his black-native prophet. All of these are elements of his black radical evangelicalism which he deploys in service of black empowerment and *communitas*. He therefore articulates and enacts a theology infused with a radical politics that simultaneously operates within and revises Western

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European and Enlightenment discursive modes, aesthetic ideals, and ideologies of

subjectivity.

CHAPTER TWO

GEORGE WHITE'S "GOSPEL LABOURS": EVANGELICAL
DOUBLE- CONSCIOUSNESS AND DIALECTICAL
RADICALISM

George White includes the following verse from the book of Paul on the title page of his 1810 spiritual autobiography, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, An African*: "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise: and made base things of the world, and things that are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things that are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence." This passage acts as an effective epigraph to White's narrative, wherein he depicts his life, conversion, and pursuit of recognition and authority within the Methodist church as a licensed preacher in language that positions him as a long-suffering and faithful servant who believes in and relies on God's providential authority to overcome the personal, institutional, and social obstacles with which he was confronted. Yet, the sentiment expressed in the passage is complicated by White's rhetorical skill. The structure and content of his narrative demonstrates White's agency and self-determination—as a writer, thinker, and preacher—in a dialectical tension with the "foolish," "base," and "despised" identity upon and through which God ostensibly acted.

This dialectic is heightened in light of White's identity as an African American who evangelized and itinerated primarily in New York and along the eastern seaboard in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This time period and the social and political milieus in which White travelled and lived was informed by a white northern racism increasingly concerned with a growing population of free blacks.

Some, like White, had gained their freedom from slavery as a result of "benevolent" owners, others as a result of gradual emancipation laws. Northern cities like Philadelphia and New York had significant numbers of African Americans beginning to comprise a petit-bourgeoisie, a working and middle class perceived by many whites as a threat to the moral, social, and economic fabric of the early republic. On the surface the rhetorical link White fashions between himself and "the foolish things of the world" defers to a discourse circulating in the early republic, one that was concerned with, yet uncertain of how to incorporate free blacks into the larger social body. This discourse tended to code black subjectivity as foolish, base, and despised—children in need of white oversight, or infectious and unproductive drains on the economic and social health of the polity. Thus, the epigraph as well as the humble persona White constructs in his narrative would have assuaged white readers and authority figures, an audience and authority of particular concern to White in his dogged pursuit of institutional recognition within the Methodist church. He seems to emphasize a narrative identity whose agency and activity flow only from God's divine will; in other words, he stresses that he is merely a foolish, base, and despised servant of God, rather than a black preacher with a radical message.

White's narrative construction also contains a "trickster" potential reflective of an African American folk tradition that valorized a weak and seemingly powerless figure overcoming, typically through wit and language, a stronger figure (Osofsky 46). The passage from the book of John positions White as a flawed and humble vessel of God's word and authority, and his narrative ostensibly presents a story of conversion, devotion, and loyalty to the truth of scripture and to the institution of the Methodist

church that, even though it is conveyed through and by a black man, never overtly challenges white authority or represents a threat to an ideology of white supremacy. William Andrews has suggested that White "is the first organization man in Afro-American autobiography" (*To Tell a Free Story* 53), and that the primary thrust of his narrative is assimilationist. While Andrews rightly notes the assimilationist impulse in White's narrative, he does not sufficiently attend to the more radical and subversive ideology also at work in White's narrative. Rather than "an extended quest for status and power in the white world" (*To Tell a Free Story* 52), White sought licensure as a member of the first black separatist church in New York, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. While the Zion church was owned and locally governed by "Africans or their descendants," it was still under the jurisdiction of the New York Methodist Episcopal Conference and the Methodist Episcopal Church (Lincoln and Mamiya 56-57) and White likely wanted to protect and bolster the integrity of this fledgling institution. Hence, another way to interpret White's ostensibly assimilationist rhetoric is that it is offered on behalf of this African separatist institution, and the long-suffering, humble, and faithful servant fashioned by White is both a sincere expression of his piety as well as a necessary performance enacted to further the security of the Zion church.

White is, as Andrews suggests, an "organization man," but it is a separatist black organization in which he has a vested interest. In order to protect and extend the Zion church and continue to serve his "African brethren," White fashions a "humble" narrative persona and articulates an apparently conservative theology. He also employs what Houston Baker calls in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, "the mastery of

form" and "the deformation of mastery," expressive strategies that, first, enable White to mask his oppositional purpose, and second, to put on "display" and valorize the distinctive African American cultural and political identity that informs the AMEZC and the black religious and discourse communities that were White's primary concern. Moreover, the structure of White's narrative and the identity politics he articulates are suggestive of how African Americans defined and inhabited the communities they constructed in the "free" North. The dominant discourse may have coded black subjectivity as foolish, base, and despised, but black citizens in the early republic defined their subject and social positions quite differently.

White's ministry took shape during the process of gradual emancipation in the North (a context I return to in more detail below). He was manumitted in about 1790 and experienced conversion at a Methodist revival in 1804 in New York, when the status of a Northern black population was being re-defined by African Americans as well as by the dominant culture. The early nineteenth century was also a period that experienced the rise of an "uplift" ideology which espoused an ethics of self-improvement and morality, necessary for individual and social progress, and, ostensibly, accessible by all regardless of their racial identity. In part, as Frederick Cooper has suggested, figures like George White represent voices of early black leadership that "shared the values and mores of white reformers of their era" (59), values and mores which, if successfully adopted and practiced could lead, however slowly, to social reform and integration. Hard work, temperance, financial responsibility, frugality, and piety could elevate the "degraded" race and ensure a social position on par with white Americans.

The development and pursuit of an ideology of self-improvement on the part of black leaders in the early federal period needs to be understood also, however, as a strategic tactic for black empowerment and social reform, one chosen over other options, like removal to Africa or a British colony, that were either unrealistic or unpalatable to a large segment of a Northern black population (Levesque 127). Several decades before the formation of the American Colonization Society (1816), plans for the expatriation of a free black population to Africa or a British colony like Nova Scotia were already being discussed as effective ways to Christianize Africa. Expatriation was also considered, especially by white advocates of colonization, as the only viable solution to the institution of slavery and white prejudice, thought to be too deeply entrenched in America. While a number of early black leaders either advocated for colonization or actually emigrated, the majority in the first decades of the nineteenth century did not see expatriation as a desirable option. This sentiment only gained currency later in the century, and black spokesmen regularly opposed the ACS and colonization schemes, arguing, according to James Stewart, that "[i]ts true purpose was to perpetuate slavery by driving free African Americans into exile, using guile if possible, but violence if necessary" (227). Instead, an early republican black intelligentsia, like George White, Richard Allen, Daniel Coker, and Absalom Jones, tended to identify as African *and* American, and emphasized in their rhetoric and in the institutions they established, representations of individual and community identity that "contradicted the white vision of America and in its place articulated and lived out an image of the country which could accommodate the dialectic—being black and being American" (Gravely, "The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness" 113).

Rather than simply acquiescing to a white middle-class moral and social ideology, White (and other early black leaders) accessed that ideology and simultaneously worked to revise and redeploy it in ways that were politically and culturally efficacious for black communities. White's awareness and use of an ideology of self-improvement for black empowerment and a retheorization of black identity politics is graphically illustrated by his explicit identification as "African" on the title page of his narrative as well as by the repeated references in his narrative to serving the needs of his "African brethren." "African," "Negro," and "Black," were, by the time White authored his narrative, recognizable signifiers in the developing black print tradition. For example, what critics agree is the earliest "slave narrative," Briton Hammon's 1760 account of his "uncommon sufferings and surprising deliverance," identifies Hammon in the title as both "A Negro Man" and a "Servant" (2). Another early and widely circulated "slave narrative" is the 1770 jeremiad A *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*. Neither of these was self-authored, and in each case the references that emphasize racial identity and station are likely products of and primarily serve the ideological agendas of the white amanuenses who recorded their stories.

Just fifteen years later John Marrant published his narrative, also transcribed by a white amanuensis, its full title *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*. Although written by a white auditor, we know that not only was Marrant literate but also that he intended to self-signify as "Black" (the only edition "authorized" by Marrant includes this descriptor). In rapid succession this trend

continues in narratives that were written and shaped by black authors. For the 1787 publication of his *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano rejects his adopted name, John Stuart, recovers his Ghanaian name, and includes "A Native of Africa" on his title page (2). In 1789, Olaudah Equiano deploys a variation of this rhetorical formulation and signifying practice by including his African and adopted European names on his title page, but, like Cugoano, displays most prominently his African signs: he frames and contains his European name, Gustavus Vassa, with "Olaudah Equiano," and "The African" (29). Hence, White's inclusion of "African" in his title, on the one hand, enacts what had become by the early nineteenth century a convention of black autobiography, one that signified racial solidarity and was emblematic of black communities in the early republic. White's "African" signifier is also suggestive of an early black nationalist impulse circulating in the nineteenth century.

The references that White (and other black leaders during this time) made to Africa as a way to self-identify and to characterize the communities and institutions he represented distinguishes a black national community within and alongside an American body politic. Rather than nostalgic references that gestured toward removal or absolute separation from America and return to a perceived former ideal (although they could and did function in this way), "their primary aim," Eddie S. Glaude Jr. perceptively explains, "was proscriptive. That is, they presupposed certain connections and relations as constitutive of African American experiences and inferred from those experiences . . . standards and norms that could help blacks as they struggled in the future" (100-01). Identification with Africa was a common trope in late colonial and

early republic sermons and speeches delivered at black freedom celebrations, and, significantly, in the names of independent black institutions, like the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church White helped establish. Africa signified, in other words, a distinctive black engagement with a nineteenth-century discourse of uplift and elevation that complicated the dominant culture's designation of blacks as the "degraded" race. It functioned as a psychic and cultural source of pride as well as a "countermemory" or "alternative narrative that directly or indirectly opposes— operating under and against—the master narrative of a nation" (Glaude 83-84). As a strategic signifying practice and subject position for an "alternative narrative," White's self-presentation as "African" also enriches and complicates his trickster ethos.

Rather than misdirection and irony, rhetorical acts that elide and conceal or "mask" the rejections and challenges leveled against the figures and systems of authority that work to exclude and define him, White's "African" designation operates as an emblem of difference and belonging that puts on display a distinctive African American cultural/political identity. Houston Baker characterizes this maneuver as "the deformation of mastery." Unlike what he calls in the same study "the mastery of form," a rhetorical and expressive strategy that relies on the black speaker's or writer's knowledge and use of familiar and sanctioned modes of discourse and performance in ways that "conceal" his or her oppositional purpose, "the deformation of mastery" makes visible signs of difference: "It distinguishes rather than conceals. It secures territorial advantage and heightens a group's survival possibilities" (Baker, *Modernism* 51). I will examine more fully White's "mastery of form" later in this chapter, but want to suggest here that a part of the efficacy of the black cultural "alternative narrative"

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identified by Glaude, to oppose, in one way or another, the "master narrative of a nation," derives from the "allaesthetic" or "phaneric" "masks" or signs, like those White includes in his narrative and that link him (and the black communities he represents) to Africa.

Baker's analysis signifies and draws on zoological/biological studies of gorilla behavior in response to human interlopers who have entered their territory. There are two simultaneous reactions to the intruder's presence crucial in relation to my argument and to Glaude's assertion. The threatened gorilla hoots, rises, runs sideways, tears at the foliage, and slaps the ground with open palms, a display described by Baker's source as "extremely impressive and quite terrifying *except to another gorilla*" (*Modernism* 51, emphasis mine). The impressive and terrifying display is, first, an overt (or phaneric) demonstration of territorial possession and protection, a warning to dissuade and frighten the intruder and, second, to warn the other members of the group of the potential threat.

The effectiveness of the display relies on the gorilla's "superior knowledge of the landscape and the loud assertion of possession that he makes." And, as Baker also points out, it is precisely the sounds and gestures of "assurance that remain incomprehensible to intruders—that produce a notion (in the intruder's mind and vocabulary) of 'deformity'" (*Modernism* 51). The deformation of mastery, or cultural/political "territorial" possession and defense that informs White's African signs, contributes, as Glaude suggests, to an alternative and oppositional narrative tradition, discourse community, and African American subject position. Akin to the gorilla displays Baker uses as metaphors to interrogate the self/cultural expressions of

figures like Olaudah Equiano and W.E.B. DuBois, White signifies his occupation of and work within a culturally distinctive landscape, one interpreted by the dominant culture or "intruder" as "foreign," "alien," "deformed." But, it is the intruder's misinterpretation of the signs circulating in this unfamiliar landscape that invests the display with more than just oppositional potential. I would add to Glaude's analysis of a black cultural-political identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that, in addition to "deforming" or opposing that which alienated and deformed black subjectivity, African tropes simultaneously assured, sustained, and generated a cultural autonomy and political efficacy without reference to white authority or value systems. While the "intruder" misreads those signs and codes, devaluing or deforming them, they are interpreted quite differently by the black citizens who recognize them. Attending to this dimension of deformation and display (in White and in black radical evangelicalism), helps us to see how an early black intelligentsia created and discerned subject positions and ideological sites, the meanings of which originated from within the "vale/veil" and is "indigenous" (Baker, *Modernism* 52), though not static or pure, to members of the community.

In order to interpret White as offering a distinctly black engagement with early nineteenth-century American society and culture and as developing and articulating (even if, at times, in attenuated and ambivalent ways) an ideology of black radical evangelicalism, the following analysis will focus on the structure of his narrative and the rhetorical strategies he enacts, which authenticate his position as a preacher and writer and that complicate and revise values assigned by the dominant culture to particular modes of expression. Because White, like the other figures in this study,

constructs and expresses his revisionary and radical identity politics through a Christian rhetoric and mythos, I will also consider how he offers not simply a "quietist" or "otherworldly" theology, but instead develops a liberationist theology, one concerned with ameliorating and changing the social and political conditions and potentials of black communities in the early republic. Finally, the process of gradual emancipation, the growth of early American Methodism and especially African-separatist Methodism, will be examined as social, political, and cultural sources that impact White's narrative construction and theology, and reveal how White both "masters" and "deforms" hegemonic expressive modes and beliefs.

Unlike John Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black*, which is structured through a series of removes and inexplicable returns and which foregrounds an aesthetics of "indeterminacy," circularity, and a lack of linear progression, White's *A Brief Account* has a discernable structure and narrative order. However, "openness" is also a quality that informs his narrative. These two discursive directions signify, on the one hand, White's facility with the genre of spiritual autobiography, which often features pattern and closure, as well as a sense of relentless motion and movement, the absence of a final destination, and a lack of narrative closure. An aesthetics that resists a uniform linearity and absolute resolution could also signify White's fraught position as a black writer and thinker who models his narrative on popular discursive modes, and, at the same time, finds those modes and their attendant ideology wanting as ways to define black subjectivity in the "social cauldron" (Robinson, *Black Marxism* 72) of a racist culture. In other words, they signify White's double-consciousness, what W.E.B. DuBois referred to as a "sense of

always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (38). White's pursuit of a preaching license, the religio-ideological beliefs and values he expresses, and the structure of his narrative are always cognizant of and often in tension with the "eyes" and "tape" of the other world, the dominant white culture and its assumptions, beliefs, and values.

It is important to realize, though, that the moments in White's narrative that do not seem to fit into his larger organizational structure and which remain unresolved by the narrative's end speak not only to his marginal status as a black man in early America who DuBois would suggest "ever feels his two-ness" (38), they simultaneously critique what Keith Byerman terms a white "system" of power and authority: a system characterized in the slave narratives Byerman analyzes as "arbitrary, fluid, unsystematic" that facilitates rupture and separation (71). For example, White begins his narrative with a description of being separated from his parents—he was sold to another owner when he was an infant. Reunited briefly with his mother (White makes no reference to his father) when he was nineteen, he asks readers to "imagine the affecting nature and circumstances of the scene of the first meeting, of a parent lost, and a child unknown" (52), but does not describe their reunion in any more detail. He writes only that their "joyful interview of mingling anguish, was of but short duration; for my condition, as a slave, would not admit of my prolonging the visit beyond the day appointed for my return: therefore we were obliged to undergo the painful sensations, occasioned by a second parting . . ." (52). Years later, he attempted to find his parents and returned to the South in search of them and to

see "how it fared with those of my own colour, who I left in a state of slavery a number of years before" (71). White was unable, however, to find his parents, who had been manumitted, and encountered only a few "persons [he] had formerly been acquainted with" (72). His description of separation and rupture and the ultimate lack of reconnection with either his family or other slaves that he knew acts both as a sentimental appeal with abolitionist potential and an example of the "disturbingly open" narrative shape common to slave narratives. Raymond Hedin argues this structure highlighted

> the disconnectedness of slave life—the jarring dislocations that resulted from the owner's power to buy and sell at whim, the slave's consequent inability not only to control his movements but even to predict them or to keep track of separated friends and family members—was one of the cruelest and most pervasive aspects of slavery; to expose it accurately was one of the narrator's purposes. The narratives are therefore filled with loose ends, with incidents whose outcomes remain unknown, especially with characters who drop out of the narrator's ken and whose fate we never learn. (29)

The dislocation and irrevocable loss of family and friends that White experienced as a result of slavery are "open" or loose narrative threads in his text that both illustrate the human consequences of chattel slavery on White and underscore the continued suffering, fragmentation, and rupture by those who were still in bondage (Hedin 30).

Juxtaposed against the narrative "openness" in White's text, however, is a predominant emphasis on progression, control, and narrative closure. Between August

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of 1806 and April of 1807, White applied for a preaching license six times. His sixth appeal on April 12, 1807, was successful. The six appeals for licensure constitute the primary pattern White uses to organize his narrative. Because White's autobiography is as much the story of his pursuit of licensure and recognition within the Methodist church as it is about his spiritual awakening, conversion, and work as an itinerant preacher, an implied intent of his narrative is to persuade his critics that he is qualified to hold the office of preacher. In addition to providing narrative structure to White's text, each of the six appeals demonstrate with greater and greater clarity the depth of his faith, his moral fiber, and his efficacy as a preacher. As a result of his description and organization, they also illuminate White's control over his own text and his control over texts more broadly (especially the bible), all of which helps to "authenticate" White as a leader and preacher and provides a means for him to critique the entrenched authorities that opposed him. In other words, White's narrative and its structure are linguistic and metaphoric forms of mastery.

Lucinda H. MacKethan has persuasively argued that there are at least "three different orders of metaphor" at work in many slave narratives, one of which is "the metaphor of narrative order itself, of 'design' as both purpose and pattern through which the arrangement of event and topic becomes a system with which to overpower and enslave the former master" (59). White's narrative control challenges a "master" discourse and opens a space within that discourse in a way that legitimates his endeavors and accomplishments, and, by extension, the endeavors and potentials of the "African brethren" he served.

White's first appeal is preceded by his description of learning to read and write. Offering evidence of his literacy prior to his attempts to become a licensed preacher is an effective tactic on White's part, as the Methodist church had become wary of licensing poorly educated preachers, whether white or black, in order that they "not expose the settled ministry to contempt" (Hall 97). Moreover, due to the continued white control over the Zion church, elders and ministers could only be appointed by the New York Methodist Episcopal Conference and "only white ministers could preach to the black congregations" (Hodges, "Introduction" 12). By referencing his literacy first, White simultaneously demonstrates his fitness to pursue licensure within a hierarchy that had come to value an educated clergy (although Methodism continued to privilege preaching that was colloquial and "felt" rather than scholastic and esoteric) and counters white paternalism in the Methodist church by highlighting his ability to read and write—to interpret and create texts.

Ostensibly, the rationale behind allowing only white ministers to preach to black congregations (apart from racism and white paternalism) was that a white clergy had the prerequisite education and facility with texts, especially *the text*, the bible. When White introduces his appeals for licensure with the story of his literacy—a process he records as "remarkable" because he could "learn nothing from the common spelling book; for my mind was so perfectly taken up with notion of reading the bible, that I could think of nothing else" (59)—he implicitly asserts, first, that he too is qualified to preach because he has the necessary skills, and, therefore, he can and should be licensed to lead and preach. Second, because White's emphasis on only being able to read the bible is reflective of evangelical Methodism's valuation of "direct

inspiration," or God's word and its import revealed to believers, the description of his literacy also suggests that he has a divine call to preach. Rhetorically, the stress White gives to his literacy and divine call further enhances the notion that his identity politics and ministry do not constitute a threat to the white establishment.

The ability to interpret scripture that White alludes to in his recounting of his literacy and elsewhere in his narrative, supports the non-threatening image he fashions. After his third appeal for licensure was denied, White remembers that "[w]hat added much to my happiness now was, that I could read the holy scriptures, and converse with my brethren on the important subjects contained therein, which became a source of great delight to my soul under all my trials and conflicts" (62). After his fifth appeal was rejected, "what seemed very much to urge me in the path of duty, was, reading in the holy scriptures . . ." (65). White's ability to read and interpret the bible—his facility with the sacred text—operates here with a doubled rhetorical effect: it justifies both his pursuit of licensure and provides solace when this is denied. These references to scripture as a source of comfort and a guide that White accesses in the midst of his "trials and conflicts" contribute to the long-suffering and faithful persona he fashions in his narrative and they buttress the notion that White has a divine call from God to lead and preach. For instance, White noted that one reason he pursued licensure, despite the opposition he faced, was because he operated "under [. . .] impressions of mind, that God had called me to preach, which I could not resist . . ." (64). In addition to the conservative persona White fashions, a subversive voice and vision echoes in the ostensibly normative authenticating details he includes in the descriptions of his literacy and facility with texts. For instance, White notes that his pursuit of licensure is also

motivated by his frustration at being "too much circumscribed in my privileges . . ."

(63), and because he "wished to be at liberty to speak from a text" (64). Another effect

of introducing his appeals for licensure with the story of his literacy and of his repeated

references to reading scripture and conversing with fellow believers about its import is

that, despite the lack of institutional sanction for his ministry, he demonstrates that he

already had been "speaking from a text," discerning meaning from and interpreting that

text with or without the imprimatur of the Methodist Church.

There is a subtle critique here of the ecclesial authority that consistently

thwarted White's appeals for licensure as well as of a larger social-political ethos that

often pressed the bible and Christian doctrines into serving a racist ideology. While

White's references to accessing and relying on scripture to sustain him in the face of

opposition are, first, genuine expressions of faith, they also need to be understood as

signifying his control over both his narrative and over the text central to his ministry

and theology, the bible. His is a narrative and textual control indicative of the

"strategic and psychic importance of controlling learning" and language for African

Americans, which, Gilbert Osofsky argues, facilitated "the power to order reality, to

subjugate man himself" (40-41). The structure of White's narrative and its strategic

uses of scripture are, like the passage from John on his title page, reflective of a

trickster maneuver that illuminates his rhetorical control or "mastery of form." Like

Booker T. Washington who, Baker argues, masters the form of minstrelsy and

transforms and re-activates it in his *Up from Slavery*, White demonstrates his mastery

of the sacred text. On the surface, he projects a seemingly conservative and sufficiently

humble narrative persona. But, behind this "mask" is a more radical identity and

ideological imperative. As we shall see, all of the biblical texts that White preaches

from in order to qualify for licensure simultaneously proffer a hermeneutics in line with

Methodist theology and a politically subversive use of the bible. Indeed, White, not

unlike Booker T. Washington, "never tells a story [or utilizes scripture] 'simply for the

sake of telling one.' No, his mind is undoubtedly always fixed on some intended gain,

on a *mastery* of stories and their telling that leads to Afro-American advancement"

(Baker, *Modernism* 31-32). In his narrative, White presents his engagements with the

bible, his literacy, and interpretive skills in a way that illuminates his abilities and faith

and critiques the authority of the clerics and elders who reject his appeals. He does so,

ultimately, to empower the "African brethren" he serves and leads.

The "trial" sermon texts White claims to have preached from for each of his

"appeals" for licensure do not overtly position him as a political antagonist challenging

outright a Methodist hierarchy. Instead, White situates himself in a way that I believe

is suggestive of the "Africana Radical" that, as Anthony Bogues reminds us, often did

not and likely could not oppose in "spectacular" or "extraordinary explosive" ways the

system of domination and oppression the "colonized and racial subject" struggled

within and against (17). If we focus attention, however, on the "ordinary" or seemingly

normative expressions of the colonized subject, "there are" Bogues asserts,

"possibilities of elaboration of ideologies and conceptions which are oppositional to

racism and colonial oppression . . ." (17). The potential for a counter-hegemonic voice

facilitated through White's "mastery" of scripture in relation to what could initially be

interpreted as an "ordinary," normative, and even socially-theologically conservative

belief system is only enhanced if the biblical texts White includes in his narrative were

selected by White, rather than, as his narrative implies, by the auditors who evaluated his appeals. Certainly the sermon texts White references may very well be those he preached from during his appeals, but he could have chosen them when he was writing his narrative for their persuasive and politically subversive potential. As Graham Russell Hodges points out in his "Introduction" to White's narrative, "the Methodist Quarterly Meeting did not record his difficult negotiations. It is probable that none was kept because his application was as an African-American preacher" (15). Whether or not White actually preached from these texts is beside the point; in the context of his narrative they complement his fortitude and progress as a preacher, thus authenticating his qualifications for licensure and leadership, and they simultaneously constitute a series of warnings and condemnations directed towards white authority. Therefore, his trial sermon texts and his use of them draw attention to White's exegetical sophistication, his skill as a writer and preacher, and a narrative voice and stance which pursues a counter-oppressive identity politics and theology.

All of the sermon texts that White references are from the New Testament, and the first three—Acts 3: 19, Galatians 6: 7, and John 11: 44—contain potential critiques of "the brethren in council" that listened to and judged his sermons, as well as allusions to White's preaching and interpretive abilities. The text for his first trial sermon— "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (59)—could have been an imperative directed at White's critics, because, by this time in his narrative, it is clear that "times of refreshing . . . from the presence of the Lord" have already been a part of his ministry. Before seeking licensure, White held the position of exhorter or a

licensed, "religious public speaker," a lower order of licentiates within the Methodist hierarchy that allowed one to itinerate and preach extemporaneously, without, however, authority over a particular parish or the "liberty to speak from a text" (Walls 103). White had been effective as an exhorter. He recalls in the first part of his narrative his preaching at "a place called New-Lots," where "the word so reached the heart of a woman in the congregation, that she cried aloud for mercy, and though opposed and ridiculed by professed deists who were present, she professed to find peace with God" (57). In a Long Island village that he called Babylon, White preached to a congregation of fifty, "among whom a deep solemnity reigned during the exercises; and numbers of them, I have no doubt, are now happy in the Savior, having caught the holy fire at that meeting; which was astonishingly manifested at the time" (58). Moreover, White writes that, in May of 1806 (prior to applying for a preaching license), he was "sanctified," or his soul regenerated and made perfect by the Holy Spirit, a state he verifies by describing what sounds like an out-of-body experience during which he has a vision of heaven. White remembers that while at a "meeting" at his house, he

> fell prostrate upon the floor, like one dead. But while I lay in this
> condition, my mind was vigorous and active; and an increasing scene of
> glory, opened upon my ravished soul; with a spiritual view of the
> heavenly hosts surrounding the eternal throne, giving glory to God and
> the Lamb; with whom, all my ransomed powers seemed to unite, in
> symphonious strains of divine adoration; feeling nothing but perfect
> love, peace, joy, and goodwill to man, pervading all my soul, in a most

happy union with God, my all in all—every doubt, fear and terror of

mind were banished, and heaven opened in my bosom. (58)

White's successes as an exhorter and his own spiritual "refreshing," which results in his

sanctification and from which his "stammering tongue was more than ever loosed, to

declare the truth of God, with greater zeal, and affection" (58), operate rhetorically to

position him as deserving of licensure. His efficacy as an exhorter and his sanctified

state suggest that he is not only a skilled preacher and leader but is also fully inhabited

by the Holy Spirit and preaching with and through God's divine sanction. Even if his

auditors do not recognize his qualifications and grant his license, White implies that a

higher authority already has.

His second and third trial sermons can also be interpreted as pointed critiques,

analogues to his productivity and successes, and as evidence of the divine sanction

which accompanies his preaching and trumps the authority of the officials who judge

his appeals. His second sermon, from Galatians 6: 7, "Be not deceived; God is not

mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," offers a potential

chastisement to his detractors, as well as a warning: continuing to deny White's

legitimacy as a preacher and leader is not only a "mockery," an attempt to thwart God's

will, but could also result in a "harvest" reflective of this opposition. The reference to

reaping what one sows could also indicate White's continued efficacy as an exhorter.

After his second appeal was denied, White notes that he continued to preach "[w]ith

increasing desires to advance the cause of my adorable Master" (60), and he

emphasizes his conversion of children, the elderly, and even "a woman of the

neighborhood" (61), as a result of his exhorting and prayers. This list of converts

functions as a series of effective and persuasive appeals justifying White's requests for licensure, and they lend a potency to the significance of his third trial sermon text: "Loose him and let him go," from John 11: 44. These words refer to Lazarus after Jesus raised him from the dead, and they can also be read as an imperative to White's examiners, one validated by his experiences and effectiveness as a preacher and evangelist who has been reaping what he sows—harvesting new believers, from the young and aged to the outcast.

This pattern continues in the fourth and fifth trial sermon texts White references, and his fifth—Matthew 10: 16: "Behold I send you forth, as sheep, in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves"—is especially suggestive. The metaphors for believers—sheep, serpents, doves—certainly stand for White and his attempts to rise within the Methodist hierarchy (the wolves that oppose his progress). But, because, as I have already suggested, White was also engaged in building up and securing a separatist African institution—the Zion church—which in 1809, when White likely began his narrative, had an attenuated independence and was still under the larger political control and governance of the New York Methodist Episcopal Conference and the Methodist Episcopal Church, the metaphors could also stand for this nascent black institution. White and the separatist black church to which he belonged had to be "wise as serpents," or continue to poke and prod and to look for any opening through which to gain entry—a greater and greater degree of autonomy, political agency, independence—but do so in a way ("harmless as doves") that would not contradict the tenets of their faith or jeopardize the black institution they were establishing.

White's final trial sermon—"Cast not away, therefore, your confidence; which hath great recompense of reward" (Hebrews 10: 35)—is particularly poignant (and has an evangelical power) in light of his narrative and rhetorical architectonics. Because of the previous and well-selected trial sermon texts and the ways in which White supplements them with stories of his literacy, successes, and fortitude, believers and potential converts are positioned to agree with the premise contained in the verse: keep the faith, strive to do the work of God, and divine blessings and rewards will follow. This would have been crucial for White, as one of his stated intents for his narrative is that "whoever reads the following relation, may be blessed of God, and eternally saved in Jesus Christ, is the most affectionate and fervent prayer of their sincere friend and brother . . ." (51). Even White's critics (both the ecclesial authorities he faced and members of the larger culture, skeptical, perhaps anxious, about black leaders and the institutions they were shaping) are positioned to agree with the "president elder" who finally approves White's license, and, in connection to White's evangelical intent, to appreciate more fully God's providential blessings in the lives of believers. But, in a covert and careful way, White constructs a narrative identity and provides a rhetorical formulation that stresses the legitimacy of his pursuit (long delayed by the Methodist hierarchy), his abilities as a preacher and writer, and by extension, the legitimacy of the Zion church and its need for ordained black ministers.

White's manipulation and interpretation of scripture for evangelizing and persuading readers and for legitimating the Zion church is reflective of the importance of controlling language, texts, and their meaning for black citizens in their efforts to refute and re-define the dominant ideological imperatives that subjugated and

oppressed, occluded and erased black identity and potential. Because the bible, especially the stories of exodus and return, rebirth and salvation, and the promise of God's divine judgment against the wicked, was a central text and resource for colonial and early republican blacks—enslaved and free—the desire to read the bible was often a catalyst for becoming literate. As Albert J. Raboteau has shown in his study *Slave Religion*, "[s]tories, characters, and images from both Old and New Testaments pervaded the preaching, praying, and singing of the slaves. Keenly aware of their inability to read the Scriptures, many slaves came to view education with a religious awe and bitterly resented the slaveholders' ban on reading" (239). Apart from wanting to read for themselves stories of liberation, revolution, and God's providential care, enslaved Africans "were distrustful of white folks' interpretation of the Scriptures and wanted to be able to search them for themselves" (Raboteau, *Slave Religion* 239), and discern from them a meaning, import, and validation of their lives, experiences, and humanity. White engages in precisely this critical and interpretive activity by referencing and incorporating scripture in ways that ultimately advocate for the black communities he served.

Another strand in early black engagements with Christianity emphasizes what Raboteau calls "a doctrine of enthusiasm which stressed direct inspiration from God rather than the revelation contained in the pages of the Bible" (*Slave Religion* 242). In part, this was a result of the high rate of illiteracy among slaves (ensured and enforced by legal codes, physical punishment and brutality, and white surveillance), skepticism on the part of some slaves about "white" modes and practices (especially as those had been deployed to denigrate and delimit black subjectivity), and the retention and

valorization of orality and the experiential as elements of an African cultural heritage. It was also facilitated by the evangelicalism which grew out of The First Great Awakening and continued to gain traction in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Many scholars have suggested that one reason so many African Americans were drawn to evangelical Methodism (in addition to Methodism's early but short-lived anti-slavery stance) was because of its emphasis on the felt and the spontaneous as legitimate responses to and expressions of faith, and its privileging of the "folk," which could and should, despite education, class, race, or gender, testify. Hatch, for example, argues, "[m]ore African Americans became Christians in ten years of Methodist preaching than in a century of Anglican influence. Methodism did not suppress the impulses of popular religion, dreams and visions, ecstasy, unrestrained emotional release, preaching by blacks, by women, by anyone who felt the call" (Hatch, "The Puzzle" 28-29).

While perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on evangelical Methodism's "emotionalism" as a draw for an early American black population, the space it allowed for the experiential and affective, for dreams and visions as other or additional "texts" that spoke to the validity and depth of one's faith likely resonated with many black converts. But significant numbers of black people converted to and enacted evangelical Methodist beliefs not simply because evangelicalism provided opportunities for believers and worshippers to emote, or because a black citizenry was somehow naturally disposed to affective expressions and experiences. Instead, opportunities to gather together as a "society," or group of believers with a shared cultural and social background (including shared experiences of oppression) to pray, sing, and worship

would have produced profound feelings of joy and release, *communitas* and empowerment. The Methodist practice of establishing informal "religious societies," which were led by members from the community, facilitated opportunities to worship apart from clerical authority and the formal liturgical structures in institutionalized churches, and, thus, created spaces for affective experiences—with divinity and with fellow believers. To worship and share one's faith in a context that valorized "enthusiasm" and "direct inspiration" in response to and from a source understood by believers to counter and transcend the social and political rules and authority that circumscribed and constrained their lives had profound political implications as well.

When evangelical Methodists, and especially black evangelicals, pointed to dreams or visions as experiences that verified and validated their faith, their calling, their status as converted, sanctified, and redeemed, and that were understood as just as, if not more, reliable than other discourses (even scripture), a fundamental shift in power followed. First, as Donald G. Mathews asserts, evangelical Methodism "rejected or ignored [or revised] those elements so crucial to good order in religion: the Creed, the Covenant, the Confession. Authenticity of the conversion experience, and therefore the legitimacy of the Christian's faith, was essentially established by the individual . . ." (22). Rather than articles of faith and practice—like creeds, confessions, and liturgies, the meanings of which were often determined by ecclesial authority —as authoritative texts that explained and justified one's faith, evangelical Methodism stressed a discourse of immediacy between the individual and God, a discourse that ultimately had to be interpreted and translated by the individual. This is the second important element with implications for the political efficacy of evangelical belief and practice. It

situated the potential and responsibility to discern and interpret the meaning and import of those experiences of direct inspiration or revealed religion with the individuals who had them. For black evangelicals this offered, in conscious and unconscious ways, ideological tools of resistance to white authority and paternalism that had been cloaked in the texts and practices of normative and "orderly" religion.

Finally, an evangelical Methodist discourse offered both cultural and institutional spaces for the survival and revision of African religious beliefs and practices, and was therefore fertile ideological ground for the growth and maintenance of a cultural identity distinct from that proffered by the dominant culture. Dreams, visions, ecstatic trances, forms of spirit possession, "traveling," and "shouting" are common tropes in early black spiritual autobiographies. While some of these, especially dreams and visions that entail encounters with the supernatural—God, Jesus, and angels—often occur in evangelical conversion narratives by whites, those recorded by black narrators and writers resonate with characteristics that scholars have traced to African sources. Indeed, another likely reason that evangelical Methodism appealed to a black population was because it lent itself, in doctrine and practice, to ways of worshipping and believing similar to African beliefs and practices. Early Methodism's "emotionalism," the space it allowed for trances and shouts, and the value it ascribed to orality and the experiential were traits recognizable to enslaved Africans and to subsequent generations of American blacks who created a religiosity "from a convergence of various African cultural patterns, white cultural influence, and the necessities demanded by their environment" (Joyner 201). This resulted in what Mechal Sobel terms an "Afro-Christian worldview" (128), which, through the creative

and generative work of the enslaved and free black citizens, represents African cultural and religious sources syncretized with European Christianity.

Dreams and visions, "enthusiasm" and experiences of "direct inspiration"—discourses of immediacy—are especially potent examples of an evangelical Afro-Christian discourse that White includes in his narrative to authenticate his subjectivity and positionality (as well as that of the nascent Zion church) that contributes to an ideology of resistance and a distinctive black cultural identity also at work in his vision and narrative. White references five moments of "direct inspiration" in his narrative: two he describes as dreams, one as a "wakeful" vision, one (the moment when he was convinced of his sanctification) as a kind of out-of-body or metaphysical event, and the final experience is that of a "sister Mary Henery," a slave White ministered to and attended at the moment of her death.

After his third trial sermon and appeal for licensure was rejected and White experienced doubts about the sincerity of his faith and endeavors, he had a vision in which

> three forms, like doves, presented themselves before my wakeful eyes, who for some minutes looked me full in the face. [. . .] Conceiving them to be angels, I was terrified with fear; but soon disappearing, and leaving the room dark as before, and me to reflect upon what I had seen, my mind was led to embrace the divine promises; and I considered the vision as an omen of good, and that, in due time, I should reap if I fainted not [. . .]. (63)

Other evangelicals or members of the dominant culture skeptical of White's legitimacy as a preacher would have found the above vision persuasive evidence of White's calling. Even more significant, and evidence of the subversive political potential of the black radical evangelical ideology White engages in his narrative, are the careful references he makes to his agency and discernment, which trumps the authority of those who continued to deny his preaching license. During and after the vision, White was "wakeful," he "reflected" upon what he had seen, and he "considered the vision as an omen of good."

Just before his sixth appeal for licensure, White writes, he had a dream about a shepherd who left some of his sheep in White's care; he would not give his name, but told White that it was "enough to know that he was a shepherd" (66). Here White compares his ministry to that of Christ or "the good shepherd," another rhetorical formulation to demonstrate his suitability to lead and preach. When he writes that the dream "encouraged" and "inspired" him to continue his ministerial labors, and "from the exercises of [his] mind," convinced him that "the time was come, for [him] to obtain license to preach" (66), he again emphasizes his own interpretation of the supernatural experiences he has and understands them as authorizing his identity and work as a preacher.

Like his vision of three angels and his dream of the good shepherd, the other experiences of direct inspiration that White includes in his narrative authenticate his calling, and implicitly legitimate and further an Afro-Christian worldview. One of these, his vision of and "travel" to heaven (which convinced White of his sanctification) needs to be read in connection to the "frightful dream, or night vision"

(54) that White remembered having shortly after he attended a Methodist camp-meeting. In this dream White "traveled" to hell, where he was "attended by a guide" who showed him "a lake burning with fire and brimstone" and "an host of evil spirits, continually employed in leading human souls to the place of descent" (54, 55). Taken together with White's "sanctification" vision, these two experiences resonate with traces of an African cosmology syncretized with an evangelical Methodist ethos to create an Afro-Christian religious ideology.

Sobel argues that a feature distinct to black conversion narratives is a consistent reference to "the little me in the big me," a representation of the convert's "irreducible spirit" that "traveled to visit God in heaven during the ecstatic vision experience" (xix). Although White does not specifically reference two distinct selves—a little me that leaves the big me—as do many early black conversion narratives, he describes his descent into hell and, later, his ascent into heaven, in language suggesting he left his physical body behind and another, tangible part of himself made the journeys. This is especially apparent in his "sanctification" vision, wherein he fell to the floor unconscious, "like one dead," or in a trance, yet his "mind was vigorous and active" (58). White also remembers being "attended by a guide" on his journey through hell, another characteristic that Sobel argues is unique to black conversion experiences. "This guide generally is seen as a little white man, who takes the penitent from Hell to Heaven, always traveling to the east" (113). White does not note the color of his guide's skin but, as in other accounts by black authors and narrators, his guide acts in a protective way, revealing the torments of hell without allowing White to suffer.

Because the guide and "the little me" occur only in black conversion narratives, Sobel suggests they represent concepts and tropes with African sources.

The guide is likely a version of the messengers that, according to Sobel, often worked on behalf of African divinities (113). The "little me" is a concept that grew out of the West African belief "that in each object or thing or person is 'the thing in itself,' 'the essential being,' its soul," a reflection of African animism which understood all matter to be imbued with "spirit" and that "man's essential being, is spiritual" (xix). But, as E. Bolaji Idowu has carefully delineated, a widely held belief among West African peoples was that the "spirit" or essence that animated matter and humans originated from a single supreme divinity: "to Africans," he writes, "the material has meaning and purpose only through the spiritual, and that the entire control of the material world is the ultimate prerogative of Deity who at the same time manifests himself through his own works. There is no pantheism [or animism] in the classical or philosophical [or European] sense in Africa" (143-44). This concept, syncretized with Christianity, had a particular cultural and political efficacy for black empowerment and an early black radical evangelical tradition. It defined black identity as always-already imbued with spiritual essence, value, and humanity prior and external to African encounters and confrontations with European ideologies that came to revalue black identity in primarily economic terms.

White makes explicit his "essence" and humanity as inherent elements of his ontology, elements a priori even to his conversion to Christianity. In the opening pages of his narrative White describes his early status as a slave and notes that when he was "about nineteen, the sympathy of nature, awakened in my mind, such a sense of filial

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affection, that the thoughts of my enslaved but loving parents, deprived me of my necessary rest [. . .]" (52). White juxtaposes his inherent and "natural" humanity (his "filial affection") against his owner's inhumanity when he writes "an infinitely wise disposer of all events, called my master to the world of spirits, when I was about twenty-six: and so far *humanized his heart*, that he left me free at his death" (52, emphasis mine). In addition to the pointed critique of an ideology that objectified black identity and denied the potential for an emotional register and depth in the slave that included love and devotion to family members, White indicts his owner (and by extension all slave owners) as inhuman and demonstrates his own humanity as an essential part of his being, apart from his status as chattel, and even apart from his conversion to Christianity. It was only after he gained his physical liberty that he "began to think, that as God in his providence had delivered me from temporal bondage, it was my duty to look to him for deliverance from the slavery of sin . . ." (53). Both before and certainly after his conversion, White references his own essential "internal and external worth" (Sobel 113) in a way that, especially when considered with his ecstatic visions of heaven and hell, echoes with a West African concept of spirit.

The persistence and vitality of the West African religious and cultural sources that inform White's Afro-Christian theology is most apparent in the experience White records having with "sister Mary Henery" at the moment of her death. White describes a scene that includes "traveling" and spirit possession and features "Shouting" as elements of Henery's final moments and last rites. When White was first called to attend Henery he asked her about the state of her soul. After she responded, he writes,

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she sunk into a state of perfect insensibility to every outward object, and

to all appearance lay entirely lifeless for some time. But after so far

recovering as to be able to speak, she broke out in loud shouts of praise

to God, and said, that while she was in that state she saw the gates of

heaven opened, and a beautiful company of shining personages arrayed

in white robes. (74)

Like White's "sanctification," Henery seems to "travel" to heaven, and when she

returned to consciousness, she is able to describe what she saw, and she claims to have

learned the exact moment her soul would leave her physical body for heaven—the

moment her "little me" would be reunited with Spirit or Deity, understood by Henery as

the Christian God.

The states that Henery and White experience—she was "insensible" and White

"fell prostrate upon the floor, like one dead" (58)— sound like ecstatic religious

experiences informed by a West African tradition of spirit possession. "The

phenomenon of spirit possession, one of the most significant features in African

religion [. . .] was," as one religious historian explains, "reinterpreted in Christian terms

to become a central feature in African American Christianity and a necessary part of the

conversion experience" (Joyner 196). Religious ecstasy and spirit possession were also

elements common to funerals and burial ceremonies. Its expression, with theological

meanings certainly different than those in West African forms of ecstasy and

possession, is manifest in the trance-like states of Henery and White, which can also be

facilitated or achieved through the "Shout."

Henery told White that she would give the signal for the moment of her death, or the moment her "little me" would be reunited permanently with Deity, by "shouting" (74). During her final moments she gathered around her death-bed White, her parents, a fellow slave named Jane, and "the rest present" (75), and asked them all to shout together: "are you all ready? are you all ready? Now! now! Here it comes. Glory! Glory! Glory! Shout! Shout! Mother are you shouting? Jane are you shouting? Are you all shouting?" (75). This communal and ritualistic moment could be a version of the "ring shout" that Sterling Stuckey argues originated with West African religious rituals and was especially prominent "during ceremonies honoring the ancestors" (11). The ring-shout was a counterclockwise movement in which "the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of movement," its goal to achieve "oneness" with the ancestors and gods (Stuckey 12), or as this ritual was revised by black evangelicals in early America, to achieve oneness with the Christian divinity. The "shout" was also revised and re-enacted by African slaves, especially in the South, to re-conceive their identities as and become one with the children of Israel. Albert J. Raboteau explains in his absorbing book *A Fire in the Bones*, how the exodus story became literalized for the slaves through the ring-shout, collapsing time and distance in ecstatic rituals of worship that enabled the slaves to walk with the Hebrews, stand with Moses, and cross the Jordan with Joshua (33-34).

This ritual, transported from Africa, revised and redeployed by black evangelicals, was a powerful and pervasive feature of an Afro-Christian theology—so prevalent "that one could argue that it was what gave form and meaning to black

religion and art" (Stuckey 11)—and in White's narrative it signifies a black radical evangelicalism that emphasizes the possibility of oneness not only between the believer and God and biblical heroes, but also between members of the black community. The shout was primarily a communal ritual in which the steps and voices of worshippers worked together in rhythm and cadence in an unbroken circle. While White does not specify that those present at Henery's "shout" are gathered in a circle or shouting and moving in unison, it is easy to imagine that this was the case, and that an effect of this experience on those present was one of profound *communitas*.

Henery's "shout" and the other experiences of "direct inspiration" that White incorporates into his narrative are strategically situated to legitimate his ministry and to articulate a black radical evangelical theology. They also supplement his references to scripture and represent other "texts" experienced, read, and interpreted by White as evidence of his calling, the genuineness of his faith, and, implicitly, his agency and control as an evangelist, a writer, and thinker. But for whom? White's narrative emphasis on pattern and order to figure a contemplative and reflective persona able to read, discern, and apply the import of both the biblical stories and the events White believed were supernatural to his life is a characteristic his white auditors would have valued in a licensed preacher. White must have been acutely aware of needing to demonstrate these criteria in order to convince the white-controlled Methodist hierarchy that finally granted him a preaching license of his abilities to continue to function in this role. He thus simultaneously inscribes a narrative self and articulates a theology, as well as makes visible his qualifications to preach and lead in ways that privilege the cultural background and contemporary concerns of his black constituency.

The Africanist vestiges and practices that texture his narrative and inform his evangelism, and the subversive critiques of white authority contained in his deft and subtle manipulations of scripture, in other words, signify both an oppositional voice and stance and a valuation and legitimizing of a specifically Afro-Christian belief system. To borrow Houston Baker's useful terminology again, this reveals White's "mastery of form." Concealed within and behind the more orthodox presentations are those references and critiques that vibrate with resistance and challenge or that proffer a cultural perspective specific to the worship and faith lives of a black population. When these are linked to his self-identification as an African and his leadership in the Zion church the revised African beliefs and rituals on display in his narrative could also signify White's "deformation of mastery" (Baker, *Modernism* 50).

The phaneric or more obvious references to Africanist sources and practices that vivify White's experiences and theology are either strategically subdued or, at times, likely inform White's expressivity because they were values, practices, and modes widely shared in the slave and free black communities in which he lived and worked. Before coming to New York as a freed person, for instance, White was a slave in Virginia and Maryland, regions heavily populated by and constantly re-infused in the mid-eighteenth century with a wide variety of African-born peoples. Further, White's career as an itinerant exhorter included preaching tours in Delaware, where "he visited the developing African Union Church, which used 'shouts' as a regular part of the service" (Hodges, "Introduction" 14). Thus, his religious ideology and pastoral methodology were infused with a symbology and praxis derived from West African sources and their re-formulation by members of the black communities that White

interacted with and led. I find just as compelling though, that White intentionally tones down the phaneric signs in his narrative on behalf of the separatist African institution he was helping to establish. He would have been motivated to do so by the very real possibility that the preaching license he struggled so hard to obtain could be revoked at the next Quarterly Conference unless, as White records, he could demonstrate his continuing "upright conduct and usefulness, as a preacher . . ." (67).

Moreover, he must have been motivated by an awareness of the tenuous independence that the AMEZC had at this point, and wanted to ensure its continuation and growth as a sanctioned Methodist institution. In the preface to his narrative he writes that he understands his "station" as particularly obligated to serving his "African brethren": "When I consider the station in which I am placed, and the obligations I am under, especially to my African brethren, I rejoice at every opportunity of facilitating their spiritual welfare and happiness" (51). But White, like other early leaders within the Zion church (James Varick, Daniel Coker, Abraham Thompson, William Miller) wanted to "find a way to remain within or attached to the Methodist Episcopal Church" (Gravely, "African Methodisms" 124), while yet maintaining their separatist black church. Their desire to preserve this connection was theological and political. Like Richard Allen and the African Methodist Episcopal Church he founded in 1787 with Absalom Jones, the Zion church understood themselves in matters of doctrine and church polity as Methodists. They perhaps agreed with the sentiments of Allen, who, after being asked by the African Episcopal Church to serve as their pastor, said he could "not be anything else but a Methodist" because "no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of the colored people as well as the Methodist"

(qtd. in Lincoln and Mamiya 51-52). Allen's emphasis on Methodism's efficacy for "the capacity of the colored people" derives in part from its valuation of an Arminianist soteriology of prevenient grace and the exercise of free will rather than the Calvinist doctrine of divine election that informed Episcopalianism. It also likely stems from the anti-slavery stance initially taken by Wesleyan Methodism and the opportunities, however limited or qualified, available from the outset for black participation—initially as worshippers, exhorters, and lay-leaders, but later, due in large part to the work of black leaders like Allen and George White, as licensed ministers, deacons, and bishops leading churches that finally achieved complete economic and political autonomy.

Another potential reason to protect, for as long as possible, the connection with the Methodist Episcopal Church was for social and cultural self-preservation. White and the nascent Zion church must have been aware of the bitter disputes that Allen's Philadelphia church had been engaged in with the Methodist hierarchy, which lasted until Allen and the trustees of his church made a final denominational break and formed, in 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. A perennial issue faced by Allen's church was the unwillingness of the Methodist episcopate to ordain black preachers as deacons or elders. Even though Methodist Bishop, Francis Asbury, was an early advocate for black leadership in the separatist African churches, by the time White was writing his narrative (in 1808-09), he seems to have reversed his position (Gravely, "African Methodisms" 115-16). This likely contributed to the difficulties White faced in his pursuit of a preaching license, and certainly worked to jeopardize the capacity for black leaders to serve and discipline their church bodies, to have a voice in the administrative and political affairs of the larger denomination, and

to foster and extend the culturally and historically specific traditions and practices of Afro-Christian evangelicalism.

Moreover, by 1808, "Zion church had become a community center for free blacks in New York City" (Gravely, "African Methodisms" 123), and, as such, was actively involved in freedom celebrations and public anti-slavery activity. Racists and anti-abolitionists viewed these political demonstrations as evidence of a growing autonomy within a rising black middle class and responded with psychological and physical violence. Freedom celebrations were lampooned and attacked, churches, black businesses, and homes vandalized. But the response to white bigotry and violence was not passive, and, as leaders of their community, the Zion churchmen "complained formally to the Common Council of New York on at least four occasions between 1807 and 1817, charging that the watchmen of the city were neglecting their duties. They asserted their rights to protection of church property and of religious assembly without interruption" (Gravely, "African Methodisms" 123). Because White and the other leaders of the Zion church were first-generation free blacks building their institutions in an uncertain and violent environment, and could not rely on equitable legal representation or recourse, their formal complaints and a guarantee to continue and extend their anti-slavery and social uplift programs (ideological positions and imperatives central to the theological-political identity of independent African churches and black radical evangelicalism) would have benefitted from white influence and a relationship with the parent Methodist denomination.

This should not be seen as African American agreement with or simple capitulation to white power and influence. Rather, maintaining denominational

membership with the Methodist Episcopal Church was a theologically and politically motivated maneuver to protect black interests and burgeoning institutions. And the early African separatist church was the primary antebellum independent black institution formed, governed, and populated by black citizens. As one historian asserts, the early African separatist churches were sources for black leadership, as well as institutions that, in the absence of alternative social networks and programs "expanded their jurisdiction to include political and social, as well as religious concerns" (Lapsansky 106). The early black church was, as another scholar notes, the center of black cultural, economic, social, and political life in the North, from which "beneficial societies," fraternal organizations, and educational programs and imperatives emanated (Lincoln 40-49). As a locus of cultural and material resources and support toward re-defining and re-structuring black identity and life in the early republic, it symbolized and actualized control, order, and support, and made visible or put on display, a distinctive and empowered black identity politics in an otherwise uncertain historical, political, and cultural context.

Ironically, "uncertainty" as a characteristic of black life and identity in the North during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was only exacerbated by political changes—notably gradual emancipation legislation—that should have afforded a black population progressively greater control over their lives and eventually, full and equitable membership in the larger social body politic. But, as Joanne Pope Melish demonstrates in her nuanced analysis, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860*, the statutes changed little, *de facto*, in the material lives of African Americans. Due to a series of *post nati* laws and a variety of

"apprenticeship and indenture contracts that explicitly outlined ways of extending and replicating the conditions of slavery" (Melish 100), "freedom" was a limited subject position and social category for Northern blacks. Indeed, gradual emancipation legislation furthered white interests and privilege and reinforced black subjection.

Paradoxically, once in possession of freedom and all that concept and state signified in the early republic, liberty, citizenship, independence, and self-hood— potentials and subject positions, one imagines, that had a heightened significance for black citizens—black identity and possibility signified an absence, an empty subject position. The dominant culture neither envisioned nor entertained a new, beneficent social category or identity to replace that of "slave." "Slavery," Melish explains, "had provided a fixed role, status, place, and identity in the social structure for persons of color: within the white household and, by that means, in the polity. Emancipation— either gradual or immediate—offered a kind of expulsion from this structure without providing a new place or a new structure to accommodate the new category of free persons" (88). Melish goes on to argue that the "state of being 'emancipated' was an empty category, referential only to the state of being that had preceded it . . ." (88). Thus, white ideology continued to imagine black identity as synonymous with slavery: their apprenticeship and indenture contracts could be, and often were, extended beyond the *post nati* provisions or were bought and sold on the market, potentially guaranteeing a life of servitude; the birth-dates of slaves and free-born African Americans were often kept from them in order to circumvent the *post nati* provisions; indigent laws could result in a free person of color being forced into an indenture contract; trafficking in slaves continued in "free" states—as a result of white visitors bringing across state lines

their "servants," or through the "entrepreneurial" efforts of Northern slave owners selling their slaves to anti-abolitionist states; and the widespread antebellum practice of kidnapping "demonstrates how freeborn and manumitted people of color remained a form of property in the eyes of many if not most whites—everywhere available for transfer and exchange, seizure and sale . . ." (Melish 101). While Melish's study reveals much about white racism and ideology and the ways in which it worked to limit freedom for black people, it does not sufficiently account for how free black citizens inhabited and defined for themselves the social and political categories that were newly and legally available through emancipation legislation.

First, it is crucial to point out, as Saidiya V. Hartman does, that even if circumscribed and ironic, emancipation—gradual or immediate—offered a subject position different from slavery. To suggest otherwise, she pointedly remarks, "would be ridiculous" (116). Second, while the dominant culture may have coded "emancipation" as an empty category, to be filled with the only signifier it could imagine or tolerate for black identity and purpose—"slave"—does not mean that this is how black citizens understood their positions, futures, and freedom. White and other black leaders, preachers, and writers filled that category with alternative signifiers that countered and rejected "empty" and "slave." Indeed, this is another way to appreciate White's narrative control and rhetorical structure; his "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery." Rather than an "emancipated" body or commodity still available for "transfer and exchange, seizure and sale" (Melish 101), White, in trickster fashion, uses Christian discourse and employs scripture and God's authority to challenge, reject, and condemn his white auditors and, ostensibly, the white-controlled

Methodist hierarchy that opposed black leadership in the larger church, enforced segregation during worship, and regulated worship and expression, even in the informal "societies" comprised wholly of African Americans by requiring that these too be led by white ministers. White also presents, in overt ways, a spiritually and intellectually liberated self, one that is persuasive, contemplative, and rational, in control of his text and ministry, and working on behalf of a community and institution that practices and embodies these traits. Moreover, White, the "African brethren" he ministers to and leads, and, by extension, the Zion church he is helping to establish, foster and display an Afro-Christian subjectivity that adapts Africanist belief and practice, draws on the experiences of black believers, and syncretizes those with Christian and Methodist doctrine.

The challenges faced by black leaders and citizens to define for themselves and to represent an alternative identity politics with which to signify "freedom" and "emancipation," were only amplified by the congeries of subject positions and identity categories white ideology constructed to supplement that of "slave." The continued "control and domination of the free black population," was, as Hartman explores in her provocative book, *Scenes of Subjection*, facilitated by "the persistent production of blackness as abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious" (116). Emancipated black citizens, whose value and purpose the dominant culture defined as "slaves" and "property," were, ironically, further objectified as "natural non-worker[s]," disorderly and valueless encumbrances on the social body (Melish 108). Outside the institution of slavery, wherein African peoples were coded as natural workers and as commodities with a market value, "emancipation," by

definition, facilitated the "devaluation" of slaves, contributing to an early republican white ideology that "expected [blacks] to be unproductive, and this tendency would only compound their fundamental dependency and need for external discipline and control . . ." (Melish 108). This more nuanced coding of "freedom" was especially powerful as it complemented what historians have called "the market revolution" and its transformation of "the United States into a liberal, competitive, market-driven society . . ." (Hatch and Wigger 12). The terms and values that informed this "market-driven" ethos—productivity and consumption, buying and selling, profit and loss—as they were brought to bear on conceptions of "emancipated" black subjectivity and social position, were simply extensions of a familiar discourse and ideology. Freed black citizens are still rendered as objects, defined in terms of economics and reified as commodities, now with an uncertain or lost "value."

Again, we need to ask how a freed black population intervened in this discourse, and both repudiated the ideological and social position of "valueless" and "unproductive" object, and defined for themselves what it meant to be "productive" citizens. Another dimension of the narrative identity White constructs, emphasizes his productivity. He makes constant references to those who are converted as a result of his preaching; to the African brethren he tirelessly ministers to using his "utmost endeavors" (60); to the miles he logged as an itinerant who continues to exhort despite the many rejections for licensure; and to the opposition he faces and overcomes from those skeptical of his preaching qualifications and ambition. White's record of his activity and successes positions him as a preacher, black leader, and citizen who is "doing" God's work, the work of the Methodist church, and the work necessary for the

continued development of the Zion church, all of which contributes to the health of the larger social body. Furthermore, because White's work and productivity indexes and often valorizes Africanist and black cultural forms and practices, and privileges his "African brethren," the health, status, and value (and *values*) of the black community, defined through an Afro-Christian ideology, are also on display in his text.

In his narrative White stresses an economy in which productivity and success are measured in terms of spiritual rather than material wealth: number of sermons preached, conversions, and the "melting, refreshing times" when White discerned the presence of the Lord and Spirit (68). White's Afro-Christian theology and ministry, which values the lived experiences of those he evangelizes (like sister Henery), and invests them with a divine import and culturally specific meaning, reveals that his "producerist" ethic addresses "productivity" and "value" in matters spiritual *and* social/political. White's concern with the spiritual and material conditions of those he ministers to, reflect the mission of the Zion church, which, from its inception, was "bi-lateral" (Wilmore 107). In scope and function, the first black separatist churches followed the pattern established by the Free African Societies that preceded them: "a pattern of religious commitment that has a double focus: free and autonomous worship in the African American tradition, and the solidarity and social welfare of the black community" (Wilmore 108).

The imperatives and activities of the early African Methodist churches included an array of social-services endeavors, like mutual aid, beneficial societies, educational support and programs, as well as opportunities that facilitated the growth of black culture. Black fraternal organizations and secret societies like the African Masonic

Lodge grew out of and sustained connections to the independent black church (Frazier 40-47). Moreover, independent black churches, including White's Zion church, were overtly political institutions that stood for and actively pursued social justice. Indeed, the Zion church (also referred to as "The Freedom Church"), like Richard Allen's Philadelphia African Methodist Episcopal Church, was actively and publically involved in abolitionist work. Its constitution "prohibited the retention of slave-holders in membership" (Wilmore 110-11), and it organized anti-slavery demonstrations, parades, and other public displays celebrating black independence and freedom. It was also a covert source of resistance and black empowerment, with "members, pastors," and sister congregations "intensely involved with the Underground Railroad" (Lincoln and Mamiya 58).

In other words, White's Afro-Christian theology and ministry and the religious institution he represents are liberationist. A key characteristic of liberation theology and movements is a commitment to praxis, that is, action in the social, political, and cultural spheres to address and change both the spiritual and material conditions and circumstances of the oppressed. From their beginnings, the separatist black churches were organs of resistance and solidarity, concerned as much with social/political causes and the cultivation of black *communitas*, as they were with preparing believers for eternity. Their rejection of the racist discourses, practices, and laws that limited or effaced the subject position and enactment of "freedom," and their efforts on the ground (and underground) to dismantle the institution of slavery and to construct an institutional and cultural identity fuses the theological and practical, the sacred and secular. God is understood as an authority and active agent working on behalf of the

suffering and oppressed, whose struggles and triumphs are translated through scripture and engaged "to defend, protect, extend, and expand Black freedom" (Gravely, "The Rise of African Churches" 312).

George White's narrative identity and his work for the African Zion Church as an itinerant exhorter, licensed preacher, and later, in 1815, as a deacon counter the limited and uncertain definitions and categories ascribed to black subjectivity by the dominant culture and discourse. He is a preacher, writer, and thinker in the early black church militant and his narrative and the theology that informs it contribute to the early black liberation struggle enacted in a context that foregrounds the dialectical status of black citizens in the early republic. Freedom, liberation, and empowerment—in this world and the next—are central to White's theology and praxis and to the separatist institution and black communities he served.

CHAPTER THREE

JOHN JEA'S SPEAKING SUBJECT, LIBERATED "I," AND
AFRICAN SIGNS

In the penultimate paragraph of his 1816 spiritual autobiography, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*, John Jea apologizes for his inability to write: "My dear reader, I would now inform you, that I have stated this in the best manner I am able, for I cannot write, therefore it is not so correct as if I have been able to have written it myself [. . .]" (159). This confession occurs at the end of a narrative, however, that begins with a declaration of Jea's authorship. The title page features the statement, "Compiled and Written by Himself," which, as so many scholars of early black autobiography have argued, is a crucial inscription that signifies freedom through the mastery of letters. James Olney explains the significance of "Written by Himself" in relation to "the thematic center of all the most important slave narratives," one that helps to demonstrate the overt relationship between "literacy-identity-freedom" (168). Another scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his analysis of Jea's narrative, suggests that its primary significance resides in Jea's emphasis on "literacy as the element that enables the slave to reverse his or her status, from a condition of slave/animal to that of articulate subject" (*Signifying* 159). Indeed, Jea's articulate reading of scripture is figured as the cause of his freedom from slavery. The "magistrates" who hear his appeal for emancipation are persuaded by his ability to read from the bible, and based on this, his request for "liberty" is granted (Jea 114-15). Hence, Gates argues that Jea's narrative demonstrates that "true freedom, in the life of the slave, turns upon the mastery of Western letters, or more properly, upon the mastery inherent in the communion of the subject with the logos . . ." (*Signifying* 165). Yet, the

conclusion of Jea's narrative contradicts the discursive mastery his title page claims and potentially severs the links between literacy-identity-freedom that the description of his manumission establishes.

Perhaps Jea was, as Gates speculates, only semi-literate, able to "speak" scripture through "memorization, rather than by the true mastery of its letters," an instance of "the oral reading and writing and memory" left over from Jea's ostensible African cultural ancestry (*Signifying* 166). Gates's position is compelling as Jea claims his ability to read is a miraculous event and he describes it in a way that privileges orality, the spoken word as a way to produce change and transmit knowledge. After weeks of "faithful and fervent prayer," voiced entreaties spoken by Jea that, finally, "[t]he Lord heard," an angel appears and speaks to Jea: *Thou hast desired to read and understand this book, and to speak the language of it both in English and in Dutch; I will therefore teach thee, and now read*" (112-13). In a few minutes, Jea was able "to read the first chapter of the gospel according to St. John" in English and Dutch, a performance he repeated for his auditors, and, according to his narrative, this produced his freedom. Even the language used to describe the moment when Jea demonstrates his miraculous literacy stresses the quality and sound of his reading: "they said I read very *well and distinct*," and "they were persuaded that no man could read *in such a manner*, unless he was taught of God" (115, emphasis mine). It appears that how Jea sounded counted for as much as his ability to recognize the letters and words on the page.

If Jea's performance relied on memorization and vocalization and, therefore, demonstrates that he was incapable of writing his autobiography, the expected

amanuensis who would have transcribed his story is not identified anywhere in the narrative. Further, his narrative never addresses whether or how he learned to write, or provides any other information regarding his growth as a reader, except that he was unable "to read in any book, nor any reading whatever, but such as contain the word of God" (Jea 115). Unfortunately, there are no other records regarding Jea's education. Thus, resolving absolutely the issue of authorship raised by the competing claims in the narrative is not possible. But close attention to the text itself and to the historical-cultural context that influenced its production suggests alternatives to those offered by Gates.

Two imbrications between text and context that I want to call attention to at the outset and which will inform my analysis of Jea's narrative are, first, the valence given to the spoken word that circulates throughout his text (reflected, for instance, in the story of his miraculous literacy and subsequent emancipation). His valuation of oral expression is suggestive of the period during which he preached and itinerated. The evangelical Christian ethos that informs Jea's theology and narrative and a "conceit" in the larger social and political culture of America in the early nineteenth century both valorized spoken words and "voice" as generative and productive acts (Looby 18). Oral modes and figures of expression (to produce or demonstrate selfhood, group identity, national autonomy) circulated alongside and impacted, in complementary and contestatory ways, the value and primacy of written texts. Second, Jea's narrative voice is unreliable. The claims he makes about his illiteracy become suspect, for instance, when his autobiography is considered along with his songbook, also published in 1816. *A Collection of Hymns* contains more than three hundred hymns that Jea

compiled, including "approximately twenty-nine of his own" (Hodges, "Appendix 1"

165). These texts offer historical evidence of Jea's literacy—that he could both read

and write. Other claims in his text, like the references to his origins and cultural

identity, again, cast doubt on the reliability of his narrative voice when considered in

light of his larger historical-cultural context. There are, in other words, opportunities to

question Jea's apology and compelling reasons to interrogate his unreliable narrative

voice: not in order to prove or disprove the details of Jea's life or to condemn his

narrative as autobiography because it fails to tell the "truth," but in order to consider

how his decisions as a writer open a critical space to interrogate and extend the crucial

relationship between language, self, and freedom that informs his autobiography.

My interrogation of Jea's narrative proceeds from an understanding of

autobiography as a rhetorical act, one reflective of Susan Clair Imbarrato's definition of

autobiography: "To evoke the autobiographical voice, the author then takes up a mask

through which he or she will speak. Whether the masks are spiritual, social, or

political, they have been formed by some degree of self-examination" (2). Imbarrato's

metaphor draws attention to autobiography as a performance intended to convey, for

whatever reason, a particular image of the self. What I especially appreciate about her

definition is her allusion to the speaking voice and self-consciousness that precedes and

is behind the "mask" and inscribed life. Certainly Jea utilizes "masks" in his narrative

construction (a crucial strategy for all of the figures in this study and for early black

expressivity and experience more broadly). His claim of illiteracy is, I believe, one of

them. The inscribed self discernable in his text and the number of texts, spoken and

written, to which Jea refers, quotes, and interpolates—the sermons he or others preach,

the bible, God's "voice," the various languages he learns to speak, etc.—suggests that Jea's autobiography is not just about describing a life and constructing a particular image of the self (however "masked"). The number of "texts" circulating in his text and the self-reflexivity that informs their use and interpretation indicates instead that his autobiography is also about the self as language. That is, a self or consciousness that precedes and speaks language, selects a "mask," and constructs a textual image, but also that language produces consciousness, subjectivity, selfhood. Language as both performative and performance, whether spoken or written, is always on display in his narrative, and while Jea is attuned to and relies on the potential for written and printed language to reify the self, he also recognizes and engages written texts—scripted language—as open subject markers and positions to be inhabited or evacuated. In other words, Jea's text makes visible how the speaking "I" informs and inhabits the narrative subject but is also and always independent from the inscribed self.

Jea's interest in expressing and representing his voice and subjectivity is graphically illustrated by his opening line: "I, John Jea, the subject of this narrative, was born in the town of Old Callabar, in Africa, in the year 1773" (89). The stress Jea gives to his individual self as the primary subject of his autobiography represents an ideological shift in an early black radical evangelical tradition. Unlike the ministries and theologies of John Marrant and George White, which were primarily directed toward establishing and maintaining independent black communities and religious institutions and, therefore, emphasized black *communitas*, Jea was a "religious independent" (Hodges, "Introduction" 18). His narrative never overtly aligns his ministry or theology with the restoration of "covenanted" black communities like those

envisioned by Marrant, or with the separatist imperatives that informed White's pursuit of institutional sanction. Instead, Jea preached and itinerated in New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, and then in a much wider Atlantic context—England, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Ireland, France, and the West Indies— without the material or institutional support of an established church body and without any apparent interest in fostering black *communitas*. Moreover, the obstacles—spiritual and material—that Jea confronts and overcomes successfully always result from the efficacy of his prayers, the strength of his faith, his perseverance, his ability to preach and speak God's word. In other words, an autonomous will and voice operating with agency and control is an overt presence in Jea's narrative, as opposed to the earlier narratives of figures like Marrant and White who elide such autonomy by privileging God's will and voice or by stressing their faiths and experiences as representative of the communities they spoke for.

Jea's evangelicalism is still premised on his belief in God's ultimate authority and divine will, and scripture is still the sacred inscription of that authority and will. But the role and responsibility of the individual in conversion, faith, and receiving God's forgiveness and blessings plays a more prominent role in Jea's theology. The emphasis he places on his individual will and self is a product of the transformation in American religious culture taking place in the early nineteenth century. The Calvinist doctrine of divine election that informed the Puritan and "Old Light" theology of an earlier era was giving way to an ever more progressive Arminianist influence in evangelical Christianity (McLoughlin 113), a transformation complemented by a burgeoning ideology of liberalism in America. Arminianist doctrines of free-grace and

the "core liberal affirmations" (Appleby 1) circulating in the national discourse defined the individual as a self-determining agent, one capable of self and social renovation through rational acts of free-will. Jea's theology and narrative construction participates in what Daniel Walker Howe describes as a culture of self-making in nineteenth-century America, which envisioned "self-construction" as an ideal and a right (9). Thus, the declaration of authorship on Jea's title page, "Written by Himself," and his opening statement, "I, John Jea, the subject of this narrative" are assertions of his selfhood authorized by the theological-political discourses of liberal individualism and natural rights of his day—arguably an empowering claim and radical subject position for an ex-slave and "African preacher" to voice in the early nineteenth century.

One historian's reading of Jea's self-assertion and possession, however, ultimately sees his narrative "I" as a product of false consciousness. In "Traveling in Old and New Worlds with John Jea, the African Preacher, 1773-1816," John Saillant "unmasks" a liberal ideology of self-making and demonstrates how it facilitated the "unrealistic, yet characteristically American, notion of the relationship between slavery and freedom: that anyone who is not a slave is free" (473). Jea's narrative "I," according to Saillant, is blind to the institutionalized racism and classism that defined "freedom" for black citizens and a "free labor" force in ways that produced, to use Saidiya V. Hartman's terms, a "burdened individuality" (117) rather than a fully liberated self. The absence of any overt critique of the contradiction between Jea's lived experiences and a discourse of "freedom" in his narrative—an irony, Saillant writes, that a "black man and ex-slave" should have discerned—"suggests how convincing, yet how false, was new thought about slavery and freedom in the early

nineteenth century" (473). Saillant deconstructs in useful and important ways an American mythos of liberal individualism and unveils in his reading of Jea's *Life* how this ideology contributed to the atomization of communities by positing freedom "as a predominantly individualistic state, not a communal one" (477). For Saillant, Jea's "I" is not empowered and independent but imperiled and constrained, a consequence of his context and the prevalence of liberal individualism, which inhibits his ability to see and explain the actual conditions (and their causes) of his "freed" state. Thus, Saillant's position is that "we should renounce the simplistic uses of the words 'slavery' and 'freedom,'" in critical engagements with early American texts and political culture, and, "be prepared to disbelieve ex-slave narratives and to separate our critical perspective from theirs," because we are positioned to "understand enslavement and liberty in ways they could not" (490).

While Saillant is right to interrogate ideology in an effort to unmask it, an endeavor that can be aided by historical and critical distance, I wonder if his argument gives too much weight to ideology and not enough to those individuals and groups "on the ground" in the early republic, who were, to be sure, produced by and interpellated into dominant ideologies, but who also accepted and rejected, fashioned and revised their own beliefs, values, and identities in a dialectical give and take with prevailing ideals. I want to suggest, because a discourse of "liberal individualism" was ubiquitous in the early nineteenth century and the subject positions "slave" and "free" were oft-discussed concepts, not to mention states of being lived daily, that another way to engage Jea's narrative is to realize that he (and slaves, ex-slaves, and other marginalized peoples) understood enslavement and liberty in ways that we cannot. Jea

(like the other figures in this study and in an early black radical evangelical tradition), understood as well as we do that the meanings of those subject positions and social categories are products of language and its circulation. I do agree, however, that we should "disbelieve ex-slave narratives" as transparent expressions of the narrators' beliefs, ideas, and experiences. Instead, we are better served by focusing on their texts as discourse and by accounting for the effects of ideology on an individual and an individual's response, an "internally persuasive discourse," as Bakhtin puts it, informed by and in tension with the dominant discourse (345).

Engaging Jea's narrative and historical-cultural context in this way reveals how the disempowered conceived of the subject positions defined by the dominant discourse as ideal and available through "natural rights" and "rational self-interest," and underscores how these were adopted and appropriated, revised and rearticulated from their perspectives and places, within or on the margins of the social and national body. This, in turn, enables recognition of the interdependent relationship between the individual self and community. Representations of the individual as "self-made," "self-interested," and "self-possessed," were widely shared and expressed tropes that informed an early national "imagined community" (Anderson 132). Indeed, as Howe explains, "a heightened sense of national community actually accompanied the rise of individualism" (109). Moreover, nineteenth-century expressions of self and national or community membership were not singular and uniform but multiple and often oppositional. Howe points out that those with marginal positions in the larger body-politic with limited or no political suffrage engaged in a liberal discourse of individualism and "self-making" through what he characterizes as the "extrapolitical":

"cultural means," like, "manners, literature, religion, education, and voluntary benevolence" (109). Religion is the primary source for Jea's (and a black radical evangelical tradition's) extrapolitical vocabulary. His evangelical Christian beliefs and the language that informs them—scripture, God's "voice," conversion, redemption, and liberation—are informed, recognized, and shared by other believers and communities: evangelical and Afro-Christian. Even though Jea positions himself as an individual and pursues a ministry of "religious independency," the radical and liberationist potential in his theology and narrative "I" is not absent, as Saillant would have it, because Jea does not offer a discreet social alternative to his liberal society (489). Instead, Jea's autobiographical performance and the tropes and signs he employs to fashion his narrative "I" are drawn from alternate discourse communities, apart from but located within the dominant culture, and resonate with their extrapolitical expressions and the counter-oppressive imperatives they pursued.

Jea's early itinerancy took place in New York and New Jersey, cities with significant free black populations whose extrapolitical expressions of self and community were both audible and visible. Indeed, Jea's preaching career coincided with George White's, and it is likely that he was involved in or aware of the John Street Church separatists and their efforts to establish what would become, in 1801, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. He does not identify the name of the church, but Jea writes in his narrative that "the Lord was pleased to raise up some white friends, who were benevolent and kind to us [. . .] who joined their mites with our's, and purchased a piece of ground, and built upon it a meeting house, in the city of New York, for us poor black Africans to worship in . . ." (119). My point here is not to

establish a speculative link between Jea's ministry and early expressions of religious

black nationalism, but to indicate that Jea was aware of and drew upon the language of

Afro-Christian discourse communities that were busily and vocally engaged in self-

fashioning and "nation" building. Primary tropes circulating in these black discursive

communities that trouble the notion of liberal individualism as a singular national ideal,

readily available to a "free" citizenry, an "imagined" or "contemporaneous community"

articulating self and belonging through "unisonance" (Anderson 145), are its African

signs—signs that Jea deploys in his allusion to a separatist church "for poor black

Africans" (119).

This is one of only a few references Jea makes to his ethno-cultural identity and

background, but they are significant signs for the textual self he fashions, in part

because they keep alive and in circulation the discourses of the Afro-Christian

communities that also inhabit his narrative "I." Moreover, these signs indicate a

"dissonant" tone and "ventriloquist" performance in his narrative "I," a counter

subjectivity and expression that also includes, however, "unisonance." I borrow these

terms from Christopher Looby's welcome and useful revision of Benedict Anderson's

concept of nation language as shared and coherent ("unisonance"). Looby argues that

nineteenth-century "Americans did . . . imagine the nation as 'unisonance'—the 'voice

of the people,' the 'general voice,' the 'popular voice,' and other variations on the

phrase were bywords of the political culture of the time—but they also imagined the

nation frequently as *dissonance*, and sometimes even as muteness, as ventriloquism, or

as stammering" (6). Jea's use of African signs is, first, an expression of unisonance

that aligns his "I" with Afro-Christianity and with other black communities, and,

simultaneously, with the counter-hegemonic discourses and dissonant voices and expressions that informed their understandings of self, group, and national membership.

"African" and "Black" were commonly voiced and inscribed signifiers circulating in and among the black enclaves, neighborhoods, communities, and organizations in the North where Jea itinerated. They were signs often invoked during or associated with black freedom celebrations and holidays which typically included sermons and speeches that translated slavery and freedom through the Exodus story. As Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. demonstrates, Exodus was rendered as "the story of the black sojourn in the United States . . . retold and mobilized as countermemory, a story in which America was not figured as Canaan but instead as the home of Pharaoh" (83). It acted, in other words, as a crucial expression of black unisonance, voiced by "freed" black people from within a nation signified not as the realization of a liberal ideal but as Babylon. Thus, Exodus circulated in Northern black discourse communities as an alternative "nation language." Indeed, Glaude asserts that the ritual re-telling of the Exodus story during the freedom celebrations "served as a crucible for the formation of the [black] nation, portraying it as a unified people moving through history" (84). When Jea self-identifies as a "poor black African" he renders his narrative "I" through an Afro-Christian discourse of "nation," spoken and narrated from within the larger (and hostile) national body. Moreover, with the qualifier "poor," Jea simultaneously draws attention to his abject, disfranchised, and tenuous subject position as a "free" but still "burdened" individual.

The dissonant chord in Jea's use of "poor African" sounds with an even more overt political and ideological resistance when he self-identifies in this way to justify

his refusal to fight against England during The War of 1812. On one of his many transatlantic voyages (Jea worked as a mariner and ship cook in order to support his family and ministry), Jea's British merchant vessel was "taken by a French privateer," and Jea and the rest of the crew were imprisoned. After eighteen months in a Cambrian prison, Jea was offered his freedom if he would sail "on board of a French corvette, under American colours, to go and fight against the English . . ." (Jea 154-55). Jea refused and writes that he "would not enlist under the banner of the tyrants of this world; for far be it from *me* ever to fight against Old England . . ." (155). He supported his conscientious objection and pacifism by claiming an Afro-Christian identity. Jea writes, "The head minister then asked me what I was at, that I would not fight for my country. I told him that I was not an American, but that I was a poor black African, *a preacher of the gospel*" (155). Again, unisonance and dissonance sound simultaneously in Jea's narrative "I" as he locates it, in this instance, in an African British and Afro-Christian "imagined community."

His overt rejection of an American subject position and his rejection of America as site and emblem of tyranny signifies an explicitly oppositional identity-politics and exposes the contradictions in an American discourse of liberal individualism. Jea's "poor black African" posed against America's "tyranny" continues to trope the Exodus story that codes America as Pharaoh's Egypt. By aligning his subjectivity and politics with "Old England," Jea also draws on a discourse informed by and exorbitant to Great Britain's anti-slavery stance before and during the American Revolution and its abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Certainly his expression of loyalty to England

resonates with a British national unisonance, but, it also echoes in ways suggestive of black "national" communities in Great Britain.

Not incidentally, when Jea wrote and published his autobiography he was living and preaching in Portsmouth, England. The anti-American stance and British patriotism in his story of conscientious objection might be a sincere expression of his British citizenship. It was also likely intended to prevent alienating publishers and readers. Indeed, in the opening pages of his narrative, Jea addresses his British audience directly and writes that they should thank "the Wise Disposer of all events" that they "were not born in Africa, and sold for a slave," but "born in Britain, a land of freedom" (93). Rather than just a claim of national filiation with Great Britain, valorized as "a land of freedom," the alternate meanings that attend Jea's political resistance and stance, articulated by a "poor black African," signal other African and black discourse communities that, since 1772 (and earlier), had been voicing and inscribing self and group identities of and apart from the dominant discourses of British nationalism.

A crucial text for these black discourse communities is the *Somerset* case of 1772 and the *de facto* abolition of slavery that followed its successful decision, which was "popularly received as a virtual emancipation proclamation for the approximately fourteen to twenty thousand Blacks living in Britain . . ." (Caretta xiv). Those African peoples already in Britain and those who arrived on English soil as slaves after 1772 quickly added "flight" as a legal means of emancipation to their articulations of individual freedom and group identity, and, once "emancipated," re-positioned themselves, signifying as wage-earners and members of a servant and laboring class

(Caretta xiii). However, the thousands of "free" blacks in Britain and the hundreds of

enslaved Africans who obtained their "freedom" after *Somerset*, who lacked "either the

means or the skills for self-support . . .," and came to be known collectively as "The

Black Poor" (Walker 95), faced the same "double bind of freedom" experienced later

by Jea: "being freed from slavery and free from resources, emancipated and

subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and

encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject" (Hartman 117). It is

reasonable to suggest that these displaced and newly situated African peoples discerned

the "double bind" of their emancipation and its causes and did not simply accept that

because they were no longer enslaved they possessed the ideal of freedom. After all,

they formed communities and voiced their frustrations through extrapolitical means,

like the benevolence organization formed to redress their privation, "The Committee

for the Relief of the Black Poor" (Walker 96). An attenuated form of black collectivity,

to be sure, but it originated from the distressed cries of "the Black Poor" and included

the advocacy and leadership of black spokespersons from their ranks.

The voices of "demobilised sailors and soldiers from the American War and

other Black Loyalists who had been evacuated directly to England" (Walker 96) added

to a growing dissonant discourse of "national" black identity within Great Britain,

including perspectives about individual freedom and natural rights irreconcilable with

the dominant discourse. Black support for emigration to Sierra Leone is one example

of this. Although The Sierra Leone Company grew out of The Committee for the Black

Poor and was, at bottom, motivated by a sense that incorporating Britain's black

population into the national body was both impossible and undesirable, the scheme

received immediate support from Black Loyalists and leaders (John Marrant was one). In addition to the theological arguments for emigration (this was God's plan to Christianize Africa) and the more radical visions of black leaders like Marrant (a return to Africa as the restoration of God's chosen people), an increasing frustration with inequitable treatment and broken contracts, a racist and inefficient British government and bureaucracy, and the continued opposition of anti-abolitionists also convinced Black Loyalists and other black British citizens that emigration was a viable solution to their "burdened freedom" in England. Thus, when Jea aligns his narrative "I" with British nationalism and antislavery politics, his "poor black African" signifies much more than his ready exchange of an American for a British flag based on the "presumed . . . normativeness" of liberal ideals (Saillant, "Traveling" 489). Instead, it resonates with the extrapolitical expressions of empowerment, patriotism, privation, critique, and exodus articulated by Black Loyalists, "The Black Poor," a black labor and servant class, the slaves and ex-slaves who shaped communities—social, political, discursive— in Great Britain during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The most obvious cause of the "burdened freedom" that echoes in Jea's African sign is slavery. The irony in Jea's reminder to British citizens to appreciate their origins and national birth-right is inescapable in the contrast he makes between their inherited freedom and African slavery. In view of all "a poor black African" signifies, the ironic potential of Jea's direct address to his British audience and his ostensible claim of British citizenship and devotion to a liberal ideal of freedom is especially potent. British colonization and the British slave trade were the primary reasons African communities, before and after the Revolution, were in Great Britain without the

"means and skills" to capitalize on their "freedom." This contrast between Britain and Africa, offered from the perspective of his "poor black African," becomes even more allusive in light of the historical and cultural origins Jea records in his narrative.

Jea's opening assertion of self and subjectivity ends with a brief reference to where and when he was born: "the town of Old Callabar, in Africa, in the year 1773" (89). By the mid-eighteenth century, Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra had become one of the most active and "important slave trading regions of the eighteenth century," from which "approximately 85 percent of the 1.2 million slaves exported from the area . . . left on English ships" (Childs pars. 4 and 7). In 1775 (the year Jea claims he and his family were enslaved), Calabar was a well-established city with an intricate social and economic structure premised on the slave-trade. Its African population included artisans, merchants, common laborers, and service providers. Because Calabar's primary industry was the slave-trade and this necessarily entailed interaction and exchange with other African and European traders and merchants, many of its citizens would have been multi-lingual, exposed on a regular basis to various African languages and dialects, Dutch, French, and English, and able to at least negotiate in a "pidgin trade language" (Childs par. 4). Moreover, Calabar was largely controlled by the West African Efik, "elite" slave traders and members of the "Ekpe secret society that governed the commercial relations with Atlantic traders" (Childs par. 4). At least some of these were able to speak, read, and write in English, a linguistic currency used to cultivate (and trade upon) economic and political connections with other "merchants trading in the Atlantic" (Childs par. 6).

The link Jea establishes between his narrative "I" and Calabar indicates yet another ideological thread in the allusions to British colonization, slavery, and oppression his "poor black African" makes visible. When Jea codes Britain as "a land of freedom" by way of its antithesis, Africa, one allusion is to Africa as site and source of those peoples Britain and other European nations enslaved. But, if Calabar represents Africa, as Efik culture represents Jea's narrative "I," the allusion is not just to Africa as source of slaves, but also to African society and culture as itself enmeshed in the slave-trade, actively participating as traders and merchants. Ultimately, Calabar's social and economic structure was produced by the transatlantic markets and economies opened and created by British imperialism. These endeavors were often justified in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with Enlightenment ideologies of rational self-interest and the rise of liberal nationalisms. Calabar is representative of precisely the systemic and interlaced relationships and motives dependent on the liberal ideology that helped to ensure Jea's (and other marginalized individuals' and groups') "burdened individuality," and, for Saillant, his collusion with, rather than discernment of, the causes of his real condition.

Indeed, Saillant argues that Jea fabricated his African origins. He points to the absence of corroborating evidence for Jea's claims and suggests that the specific details Jea included—his precise birth-date, the English names of his parents (Hambleton Robert Jea and Margaret Jea), that he and his whole family survived the horrors of the Middle Passage and were sold intact to the same owner—are exceptional for an ex-slave and foreign to African culture ("Traveling" 482). Even Jea's reference to Calabar, according to Saillant, only increases the likelihood that he exaggerated or

constructed out of whole cloth his African identity. Calabar, as Saillant explains, was

"an unlikely home for a family that was seized by slave-traders, since it was an entrepot

inhabited by slave-traders who traveled, heavily armed, into the hinterlands to kidnap

or purchase slaves, who were taken to Calabar to be sold to European traders"

("Traveling" 482). Saillant's deconstruction of Jea's origins (or African performance)

is convincing, but it is just as possible (and plausible) that Jea was born in Calabar and

the details he recorded about his family are accurate. After all, Calabar was certainly

more than "an entrepot inhabited by slave-traders." The language and culture of the

Dutch and English traders and merchants who dealt with the Efik traders would have

been significant ingredients in Calabar's social milieu. Hence, his parents may have

adopted European names to facilitate their interactions or business relationships with

the Dutch and English. It is also possible that one or both of Jea's grandparents arrived

in Calabar as slaves with their owner's surname, were sold or traded and, in whatever

way, gained their "freedom." They then perhaps found piecemeal work as common or

domestic laborers. Jea's description of "his parents' African families as 'poor but

industrious,'" does, as Saillant points out, suggest an "Anglo-American working class"

ethic ("Traveling" 482). It also suggests the marginal social and economic positions

created by the European slave economies that informed Calabar's social structure.

Even the idea that Jea's entire family was enslaved and made the voyage together is

possible based on what appears to have been a common and important element of slave

trafficking between Efik and European traders: the exchange of favors, honoring

special requests, or, perhaps, filling special orders.

True or not, Jea's African origins contribute to his autobiographical performance, and, more important, they indicate the presence or influence of other discourses and ideological perspectives in his self-construction. If Jea was in fact born in Calabar and raised by his parents, they could have told him about his past, his forebears, and Efik culture. If he invented his origins, it is possible he did so based on his exposure as an American slave to the substantial "influx of saltwater slaves—disproportionately, adult men—[that] made Africans an increasingly visible portion of the slave population and sensitized white northerners to the differences among black people from various parts of the continent. Notions of African nationality emerged as white northerners learned to distinguish between Igbos [or Efik] and Angolans . . ." (Berlin 82-83). I am sure other enslaved Africans and free black citizens learned to make and appreciate, for different reasons, the same distinctions. Indeed, Saillant wonders if Jea fixed on Calabar because it had "a contemporary reputation for fierce men [primarily the Efik and Ibibio] who resisted enslavement so completely that they were not desired as slaves—somewhat like Jea himself" ("Traveling" 482). If this was behind Jea's choice, it reinforces, for Saillant, his myopic vision of freedom and liberal individualism.

The reputation circulating about Efik peoples as undesirable slaves due to their fierce "temperament," to which Saillant seems to be referring, was a product of Euro-American definitions of Africans. One of its effects was to extend an ideology of natural difference between slave and master, African and European, and between different African peoples. European slavers and owners coded Efik "fierceness" as recalcitrance, primitive savagery, naturally war-like and violent, not as an individualism

irreconcilable with slavery. Even if Jea's use of this trope translates "fierce" as independent and self-possessed by drawing on a dominant discourse of liberal individualism, it still operates with a potential efficacy that, again, unveils and opens rather than re-mystifies the causes of one's lived conditions and "free" subjectivity. In this case Jea's African sign partakes of one dominant discourse and, perhaps, destabilizes another. This would mean, however, that Jea's signs continue to be produced by and reproduce the very ideology that masks his "burdened individuality."

But Jea likely heard different descriptions and stories from his parents or fellow-slaves about Calabar, Efik culture and peoples, and their fierce resistance to being enslaved. Even if he did not, Calabar's history and Efik culture still circulates in his sign. Another and alternative locus of the Efik's reputation for "fierce resistance to enslavement" resides in the history of the Efik as enslavers of Africans (including other Efik) and Europeans; and as masters of an empire and transatlantic trade. Not only were Efik traders skilled diplomats and savvy businessmen who cultivated connections with European traders, when necessary they enslaved "British traders . . . until higher prices were agreed upon" (Childs par. 5). Rather than a "naturally" fierce and, therefore, undesirable slave, this alternative discourse codes Efik identity as a competitor and rival, an owner and master. These discursive resonances enable not just a counter expression and ideology of self-fashioning and freedom; they reveal the very causes and drivers of slavery, "burdened individuality," and the "double-bind of freedom" that informed Jea's life and *Life*.

The history of Calabar and Efik traders enables the deconstruction of slavery as a "natural" subject category, one imagined as necessary for the progress of

"civilization" and "culture" (national, religious, enlightened); therefore, a subject category "naturally" occupied by those who were signified as "cultureless," or whose "primitive" culture posed a threat to the progress of "rational self-interest." The elite Efik traders' indiscriminate enslavement of African peoples, regardless of region or cultural affiliation, their strategic enslavement of European traders to ensure higher profit margins, and their willingness to buy, sell, and trade within a transnational marketplace, exposes the economic motor driving the trade and its role in the advance of empire. Nor was "freedom" any more "natural" or fixed a subject position in Calabar society than was slavery. Its class divisions, with an "elite" aristocracy in control of the slave trade at the top, and laborers like those Jea suggested his grandparents were, "industrious" and ostensibly "free," but also "poor," on the bottom, again indicates economic determiners for identity. Based on Jea's claims about his family, it appears that one could readily be transferred from "freedom" to "slavery," a possibility regardless of one's social position. For instance, in order to garner a larger share of the market and control prices, alliances were sometimes formed between African and European traders to kill or capture and sell the elite Efik traders of Calabar (Childs par. 5). "Freedom" and "slavery" were readily interchangeable and graded subject positions, measured and defined through a discourse of economics and power, not exclusively mutual, absolute, or natural.

"Freedom" and "slavery" as subjective categories in the Atlantic slave economy and trade networks are suggestive of how central language facility and the control of discourse appear to have been for the Efik traders. Their control over the Calabar slave trade and mastery over those they enslaved relied on violence, yes, but their mastery of

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language was also crucial to their dominance. The monopoly they held on the Old Calabar slave trade was enabled by their control and protection of Calabar's governing discourse (the "Ekpe secret society"). The networks and relationships they established throughout the Atlantic were possible because of their multicultural, multilingual fluency. This reveals the role and presence of language, its circulation and currency in and behind what made the slave-trade possible. Indeed, European imperialist ideology and the slave economy that drove the trade and institution produced Old Calabar and the Efik slave traders.

Finally, it is language that enables mastery and control, possession of self or of others that also echoes in Jea's African-Efik sign and autobiographical performance. But, in Jea's narrative, language is a method and sign of mastery transformed through the evangelical and Afro-Christian discourse communities and vocabularies that were the primary sources for the self he fashioned. The concept of the liberated self produced by and demonstrated through language—spoken and written—was central to eighteenth and nineteenth-century evangelical and Afro-Christian theology. In part, its efficacy for Jea (and an early black radical evangelical tradition) as an "authoritative discourse" (Bakhtin 342) of liberation, freedom, and selfhood, resides in its valuation of the spoken word to legitimate the inscribed text. God's "speaking" voice is still the privileged authority in Jea's evangelical theology, but the voices of believers and preachers were also considered "authoritative" in Jea's religious-cultural milieu (Hatch, *Democratization* 50). Moreover, the prevailing Arminianist and liberal emphases on the individual self and will circulating in the early nineteenth century fostered the individual's expression and interpretation of even God's "voice"—spoken and

inscribed. This ethos, in other words, was not just invested in language as a means to express and authorize the self; but also in the notion that discourse, its meaning and the subject positions it produced, were open to individual interpretation and, therefore, open to revision. This was especially true in regard to the authority supposedly embodied in written texts. Indeed, "the wide-spread cultural investment of authority in vocal forms like political oration and sermons," Looby argues, "created a counterpoint of anxiety about the sufficiency of textuality as a ground of authority, and inspired a widespread enchantment with vocal forms as necessary supplements to if not alternative grounds for authority" (44). This ambivalence about the legitimacy and role of the spoken and written word to authorize the self, through or in which to locate or challenge authority, and whether and how meaning is fixed or destabilized, are all on display in Jea's autobiographical performance and narrative "I."

The relationship and tension between the speaking self and the inscribed subject, between the performer and the performance, are illuminated from the outset in Jea's narrative. This is signified by the portrait and language on his cover and title page. The front-side features his portrait, in profile and silhouette, his name, "John Jea," followed by "African Preacher of the Gospel." The reverse side includes the full title of Jea's narrative, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, The African Preacher. Compiled and Written by Himself*, which is imposed over the reverse imprint of Jea's profile. The doubled images and language on his cover/title page produce a curious effect. Only Jea's head is shown in silhouette on the cover page; his shoulders and upper-torso are clearly revealed, fully lit, and finely detailed. The only discernable features of Jea's darkened face are the outlines of his profile, but

the light source suggests that his face should also be fully illuminated.   "Jea's representation of himself in shadow draws attention," as Gates points out, "primarily to his 'African' features, especially his 'Bantu' nose, his thick lips, and his 'Ibo' forehead [. . .]" (*Signifying* 159). The effect is one that exaggerates Jea's "Africanness," a cultural-ethnic identity that is reinforced by the legend under the portrait and his name: "African Preacher of the Gospel." In part, Jea's cover page offers a typological semiotics; he is figured as a type, an African and an African preacher, and this suggests that his spiritual autobiography and narrative "I" are representative of an Afro-Christian discourse community and the black nationalist discourse communities I have argued informed his "poor black African." Yet, the absence of any distinguishing facial details on his cover portrait is incongruous in an autobiographical performance that stresses Jea's "individualism" and "independency." These character traits and ideological positions are instead represented in script—his name and title—a title that is, I think, distinct from the title of the narrative proper. The design of the cover page indicates that Jea's image is the antecedent of his written name, and his name the antecedent of "African Preacher." In other words, "African Preacher of the Gospel" is *Jea's* title, his office and calling. While the scripted language helps to individuate Jea, it only refers back to a darkened type (*tabula ebenus*, a black slate), not a distinct individual. What are the implications of this? Jea positions his narrative identity and theology as synecdoches for Afro-Christianity and black discourse communities; implies that his identity is a product of his work and experiences as a preacher of the gospel; finally, his portrait indicates that the signified and inscribed self cannot sufficiently and fully convey the self that precedes and is outside the text.

All three inform Jea's narrative "I" and indicate an autobiographical performance that is both of and exorbitant to Enlightenment discourses of subjectivity and nineteenth-century ideologies of liberal individualism. The divide between the conscious and inscribed self that Jea's portrait makes visible, is, however, paradoxical. While my reading emphasizes an "absence" to which the written name and title refer, another is that the script (and thus the text of Jea's narrative proper) is precisely that which distinguishes Jea as an individual. This paradox is extended on the reverse side of the cover page. Here the full title of Jea's autobiography dominates the page, the title of his office and calling—"African Preacher"—is incorporated into his narrative's title, and, what is now an indistinct shadow of his cover portrait appears behind the printed language. Does this privilege the text as evidence of the self or continue to gesture to a consciousness that precedes and is behind the printed word, and, that is, ultimately, independent of the inscribed self? Again, I think it is both, and another indication of Jea's "ideological consciousness" shaped by dialectical engagements with other discourses (Bakhtin 348).

As recent studies of early American culture, like Looby's *Voicing America: Language, Literary form, and the Origins of the United States*, Sandra M. Gustafson's *Eloquence is Power: Oratory & Performance in Early America*, and Todd Nathan Thompson's "Representative Nobodies: The Politics of Benjamin Franklin's Satiric Personae, 1722-1757," demonstrate, oral modes of expression—sermons, lectures, debates, and even public reading "that often transformed written text into oral performance" (Thompson 453)—supplemented or countered the authority of written texts. Evangelical preaching and what Dawn Coleman calls the "sermonic mode," "a

nexus of oratorical style, biblical language, and personal presence . . ." (266), was a prevalent and potent form of oral expression and discourse in the early nineteenth century. This was especially true for marginalized members of the body-politic for whom evangelical religion provided an extrapolitical discourse and "a vital arena of democratic engagement" (Coleman 267) that valorized the vocal expressions of preachers and worshippers. Jea's narrative "I" is primarily informed by this discourse community and evangelical ethos, which helps to explain the paradoxical tensions between image and language on his cover and title pages and the contradiction in his claim of authorship and confession of illiteracy. Moreover, the primacy Jea gives to spoken texts in his narrative, speaking from a written text and speaking extemporaneously, without a text, in order to produce the self and to (re)produce others—to speak into existence—is a rhetorical trope in his autobiography that privileges orality but simultaneously and reflexively relies on written texts to express and convey his narrative "I." Jea's speaking voice, the extra-and intertextual references and structure of his narrative, all rendered through his "African" signs reveals, finally, Jea's awareness and use of language, discourse, and narrativity in ways that contain a radicalizing and empowering potential for himself and for the black national and religious discourse communities that inform his autobiographical performance.

Jea relies on evangelical Christianity's sacred text, the bible, throughout his autobiography, a common rhetorical feature in spiritual autobiography. The bible provided a palimpsest in an early American textual tradition, traceable to the seventeenth-century Puritan narratives—textual productions intended to render an individual's or group's material and spiritual life as a reflection and extension of

biblical stories and typologies, with the implication that the language contained in these secular narratives was sacred; that there was "no difference between the words of godly writers and the Word of God" (Hall 29). Jea's rhetorical uses of scripture mirror these generic conventions and goals. His constant references to scriptural passages that were "brought to his mind" or revealed to him by "the Lord" in moments of crisis and struggle help to fashion him as a prophet in possession of and speaking God's authoritative word. Indeed, almost one third of Jea's narrative is comprised of direct quotes from scripture (many are several pages long), an extensive use of interpolated biblical texts that sometimes differentiate the bible from his text, but more often, blurs the relationship between the two. First, scripture acts as a "sacred proof" text that Jea quotes from and relies on to explain the import of events in his life or to render moral judgments about others' actions and behavior. Jea's use of scripture is also a rhetorical strategy that enables him to preach to his contemporary readers. Often, Jea interrupts the story of his life with direct address, "My dear reader," followed or preceded by long scriptural passages that he uses to draw analogies between his experiences and the experiences of those he imagines reading his *Life*.

Jea also presents scripture in a way that creates the impression that he thinks and speaks God's word immediately, directly, without recourse to the inscribed text. In these instances scripture is not so clearly a secondary written text, but is instead figured as a language Jea possesses and enunciates, even before the event of his "miraculous literacy." For instance, after his conversion experience, Jea writes that he "began to speak boldly in the name of the living God, and to preach as the oracles of God . . .," speech and proselytizing rejected by his fellow-slaves. Jea writes that they "reviled"

him, and his response was to tell "them of Christ's example" (110). This is followed by direct quotes from 1 Peter, chapters II and III, which are presented as if this was the actual language Jea spoke. A more pointed example of this occurs in the story Jea tells about his owner's ploy to convince him that his conversion is not grounds for his emancipation from slavery. His owner argues that Jea's status as a slave is part of the natural order established by God, a design that includes his mastery over Jea and that requires Jea's obedience. To prove this, Jea's owner "took the bible and showed it to [Jea] and said that the book talked with him" (112). The owner's sons reinforce their father's claims "by their reading in the behalf of their father," which, Jea remembers, "surprised me much, how they could take that blessed book into their hands, and to be so superstitious as to want to make me believe that the book did talk with them [. . .]" (112). Despite his skepticism, however, Jea holds the book to his ears, hoping it will talk to him, but he "could not hear it speak one word." This caused Jea to "grieve and lament," and his despair was only relieved when, Jea claims, "the Spirit of the Lord brought this passage of Scripture to my mind [. . .]" (112). Jea interpolates and combines two passages—John 15:16 and Mark 9:23—which are made available to him, he implies, without recourse to the bible or another human speaker. This suggests that the language of scripture and God's word was available to Jea in ways not dependent on the inscribed text, and, moreover, that he thinks and expresses this language either spontaneously or as a result of the Holy Spirit's influence.

In addition to valorizing memorization and vocalization as forms of "literacy" and modes of expression, Jea's "rhetoricity" (Looby 25), or rhetorical performance (which implies God's "living voice" and the "breath" of the Holy Spirit are direct

sources for his speaking and thinking) works to authorize and sacralize his subjectivity and calling as an "African Preacher" vis-à-vis "direct inspiration." This is the belief that the bible is God's voice transcribed; that the individuals who authored the respective books of scripture did so through "divine inspiration," a phenomenon recorded in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God . . ." (also translated as "God-breathed"). Arguments for scripture as a record of God's unassailable and transparent "truth" rely in part on what Bakhtin defines as "the authoritative word," which "is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse" (342). Certainly, belief in scripture as "inspired," God's prior and "authoritative word," accounts for its extrapolitical efficacy in Afro-Christian evangelicalism and in Jea's autobiographical performance. The implication that Jea's consciousness, speaking voice, and narrative are "God-breathed" invests his subjectivity, faith, and ministry with the "special dispensation" ascribed to Christ's disciples in the apostolic era.

But, as Bakhtin also asserts, the vitality of a discourse depends on its "dialogical" circulation: that is, "the word" or discourse cannot be treated "neutrally, as if it were a thing, but is obliged to initiate talk not only about words but in words, in order to penetrate their ideological meanings—which can only be grasped dialogically, and which include evaluation and response" (352). The trope of direct inspiration in Jea's rhetorical performance is "authoritative" because it is premised not only on God's voice as prior, "*acknowledged* in the past," but also on his continuing presence, a living "voice" that edifies because it "enters into interanimating relationships with new

contexts" (Bakhtin 345-46), those specific to the lives and experiences of believers who "receive" and "evaluate" (or interpret) the words and signs of God's "voice" (351). Thus, in the "talking book" scene, Jea's refutation of his owner's authority is not simply based on his rejection of the owner's interpretation of scripture. Instead, it is, first, that his owner claims patrimony for the text, and, second, that only he can "speak" it; even his sons can only make the book talk in their father's voice. They "read," Jea writes, "in behalf of their father" (112). This is, in other words, a closed discourse in which reception and evaluation are not possible—instead, the "father" imposes his voice on the text and disallows response or alternate readings. This arrangement (informed by the *de jure* and *de facto* efforts to limit or forbid literacy to enslaved Africans) prevents Jea's access and response to the biblical text, and, thus, forecloses any opportunity for him to reinterpret the passages his owner uses to define his status as slave. The "text" of slavery, in which the owner is positioned as "father," who authors and controls the discourse, is also closed, a discourse and system that "permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it" (Bakhtin 343). Hence, Jea confronts Bakhtin's "reified word-thing . . . there can be no conversing with such a word" (352). But dialogue does occur after Jea tries and fails to make the book (the dead letter) talk. He implies that his expressions of despair were heard by the "Spirit of the Lord," and, significantly, the "inspired" text "brought" to Jea's mind begins with, "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, ye shall receive." Here, Jea skillfully refutes and inverts the closed father-son-text discourse community of his owner and the institution of slavery, and offers an alternate and open discourse with an "authority" that derives

not from the Father but from the Son, who freely offers his name (language), so that his disciples (believers) can speak to and engage the Father.

In part, the potency of this discourse and Jea's rhetorical performance lies in its origin: "direct inspiration" from a living and responsive deity. This is not unrelated to the extrapolitical potential in evangelicalism that made it so appealing to marginalized social groups in the nineteenth century. Denied voices and suffrage in the larger body-politic, evangelical Christianity offered an empowering language to enslaved Africans and free black citizens, the poor, and women, and spaces in which to vocalize that language. Further, Jea suggests that its possession and use was not dependent on texts or the authorities that made them "talk." Even more potent in Jea's allusion to "direct inspiration" and valuation of oral discourse, is the "response" and "evaluation" that Bakhtin argues are necessary for the health and vitality of discourse. Response and evaluation are both operative in Jea's inversion of his owner's "reified" discourse: after receiving the "inspired" language of the "Spirit," Jea writes that he immediately began to pray for "knowledge" of the Lord's word so that he could "understand it in its pure light, and be able to speak it in the Dutch and English languages" for the express purpose of refuting his owner's interpretation of scripture and definition of Jea's status and subjectivity (112). The specificity of Jea's responsive prayers and the linkage he makes between "knowledge" and expression for the purpose of revising his owner's discourse, and, thereby, altering his position and relationship with his owner, is suggestive of "evaluation," the crucial element of which is the translation and re-articulation of discourse in light of one's contemporaneity.

Indeed, this is exactly the outcome of Jea's "inspired" discourse. When he reads and speaks the first book of John for the "magistrates" he hopes will grant his appeal for freedom, they were "persuaded" based, as I have suggested, on the quality of Jea's voice and because, as Jea writes, "it was right and just that I should have my liberty, for they believed that I was of God . . . [and] taught of God" (115). The opening lines in the book of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," figure God as the source and incarnate form of the "Word"—a transcendental signified or "originary logos." In part, the "Word" in this passage is an allusion to the Genesis story of creation. According to the Genesis account, God created the world through language—he spoke the world into existence. Like the generative word of God alluded to in the book of John, Jea's reading is rendered as a performative speech act; the words he spoke produced his freedom. Again, response, evaluation, and contemporaneity inform Jea's discourse and autobiographical performance. It isn't simply that Jea was able to read scripture "very well and distinct" (Jea 115), with correct pronunciation and enunciation. This is only to "repeat without knowing" the dead letters of the text, as is often imputed to those who read (Derrida 1839). Jea's auditors were persuaded, he implies, because he read and spoke "in such a manner" (115) that demonstrated his "knowing" or understanding of the text's meaning and significance. Moreover, the scripture Jea selected for the story of his "miraculous literacy" and emancipation illustrates his reinterpretation of the text's central trope—Logos as generative—in light of his contemporary circumstances. The "Word" in the book of John is also an allusion to "the Word incarnate," a metaphor for the "Son of God," sent, according to a Christian mythos, to redeem humankind with

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his sacrificial death, but also to "testify" on his Father's behalf and liberate humankind from spiritual death through the emancipatory language of the gospel. Jea's translation of the creative and liberatory meaning of the "Word" and word includes its potential to produce his literal, physical freedom—emancipation from chattel slavery and the "social death" it causes (Patterson 102). Rather than a mechanical repetition or recitation of scripture, with a meaning external to Jea, his narrative construction makes visible his appropriation and reinterpretation of the "sacred" text and its insertion into his liberatory discourse.

Jea's rendering of the "talking book" trope, his "miraculous literacy," and his subsequent emancipation situates his black radical evangelical discourse within the sphere of "counterpublics," alternative discursive sites "defined by their tension with a larger public," wherein expressions of selfhood and social belonging "remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power" (Warner, *Publics* 56). Counterpublics both supplemented and countered the "bourgeois public sphere" and its ostensible authority based on the rise of "print technology" (Gustafson 469). In her essay, "American Literature and the Public Sphere," Sandra M. Gustafson wonders whether "persuasion and not rational deliberation was the gold standard of republican political discourse," and, whether "oratory and not print was the defining genre of political modernity in the age of democratic revolution" (471). If this was so, she argues that the cultural and political currency ascribed to print discourse in the shaping of early American culture—a currency established by Michael Warner's print-culture thesis in his 1990 study *The Letters of the Republic*—occludes the prevalence and efficacy of oral expression and performance in nineteenth-century political and social

life. Persuasion through oration defines the counterpublic sphere and the authenticity of the subject positions and social relationships expressed therein were gauged and often re-defined through "concrete, emotional, physical" expression (Gustafson 471)—an authenticity "readable" in speakers' voices, faces, and bodies, not just in the inanimate letters of printed texts. This ethos helps to explain Jea's privileging of orality and why he describes his emancipation from slavery as the literal result of his speaking the text.

His "talking book" trope is informed, in other words, by an early nineteenth-century investment in, to use Gustafson's terms, an "ethic of transparency" (*Eloquence* xxi). In her book-length study of oratorical performance and authority in early America, *Eloquence is Power*, Gustafson argues that the authenticity of oral discourse and self-expression depended upon either or both a perceptible spiritual and/or cultural authenticity. In each case, "the speaker's emotional authenticity" and the "spectacle of sincerity" created by the oratorical performance were understood as visible (transparent) evidence of the legitimacy of the spoken message (xxi). Jea's presentation of the "talking book" trope, "miraculous literacy," and performative emancipation resonates, as I have attempted to demonstrate, with the transparent spiritual authenticity to which Gustafson refers. His use of the "talking book" is also indicative of the "cultural authenticity" that "demands," Gustafson explains, "clear origins of its practitioners; they must be originals in the sense that they originate in the community that they claim to represent" (xxi). Jea, according to the compelling analysis Gates offers in his *The Signifying Monkey*, is the final author in an early textual tradition Gates calls "the shared text of blackness" (129) to use the "talking book"

trope. James Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Quobna Cugoano, and Oulaudah Equiano all

include and revise or "signify" on the trope in their respective autobiographical

narratives, and their renderings, like Jea's, echo with a West African cultural source re-

rendered in light of their diasporic cultural-political contexts and the black discourse

communities to which they belonged. While Jea's forebears deployed the trope in ways

that emphasized its metaphoricity, Gates argues that Jea "literalizes" the "talking book"

and that it falls out of use after the publication of his autobiography because his literal

rendering left no room for future revision or "signifying" (*Signifying* 164). Jea's

presentation of the trope "tells us," Gates theorizes, "that true freedom, in the life of the

slave, turns upon the mastery of Western letters or, more properly, upon the mastery

inherent in the communion of the subject with the logos, in both its most literal and

most figurative forms" (165). Gates's insightful and nuanced reading of Jea's literal

rendering of the "talking book" becomes even more potent, I believe, when it is linked

to the spoken word's valence as a mode of expression in the early republic. Hence, I

would extend Gates's analysis by arguing that the oratorical ethos informing Jea's

historical-cultural context and his self-conscious awareness of language and its mastery

opens the possibility that Jea literalized the trope, wherein spoken language is presented

as the cause of his emancipation (an alternative subject position and re-defined social

relationship), in order to expose and counter the ways in which hegemonic definitions

of race and valuations of blackness were also produced by language.

In another context, Gates argues that Enlightenment definitions of a fully human

and humane self privileged the faculty and expression of "reason," supposedly

discernable only through written texts. In this paradigm, the absence of an inscribed

"self" meant the absence of "reason," and, therefore, the absence of selfhood. As Gates also demonstrates in "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference it Makes," "race" as a "natural" subject position was generated and disseminated through the medium of language. Enlightenment theories, debates, formulas, and taxonomies about and for racial difference circulated widely during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in texts. One result of this discourse was the reification of "race," its meaning literalized in and through language. Indeed, a primary point made by Gates is that "race" is only language—a trope, a metaphor, a linguistic sign that "pretends to be an objective form of classification . . ." (49). "But language is not only the medium," wherein "race" was often the topic of Enlightenment discourse and "natural" differences were literalized and fixed in print; language, writes Gates, "is its *sign*. Language use signifies the difference between cultures and their possession of power, spelling the difference between subordinate and superordinate, between bondsman and lord" (50-51). Rather than a "decadent" treatment that exhausts its figurative potential, I want to suggest, first, that Jea's literal use of the "talking book" trope turns on and against the same logic behind an Enlightenment discourse of subjectivity, "race," and language use: language and its control produces and fixes subjectivity and states of being, like "freedom" and "slavery." Second, Jea's use of the trope and, indeed, his narrative as a whole, reveals written language as a signifying system in service of self-fashioning. Finally, Jea's narrative reveals writing as an open system of signification rather than a series of closed or "natural" signs.

Jea's awareness of written language and texts as open, available for the expression of his consciousness and self-fashioning endeavor is apparent in a rhetorical

strategy he frequently deploys in his introduction of scriptural passages. Many of these are preceded by a first-person declarative—"I thought," "I cried out," "I cried and mourned saying"—followed by biblical passages which are also written in the first person. Its effect reinforces Jea's speaking voice and written narrative as "inspired." His narrative "I" is projected into the biblical text and he becomes the narrator and subject of God's sacred text. There is intertextuality at work here that allows Jea's narrative self to inhabit and "speak" from multiple texts—his own: "I, John Jea, the subject of this narrative" (89); and the text he considered sacred and authoritative: "I, John Jea, the subject of God's narrative." This is also suggestive of interpretation and revision, first, because the biblical passages are used to fashion Jea's narrative self and are contextualized by his circumstances and experiences. Jea often combines and synthesizes different passages from scripture and presents them as linear, organic expressions; or he engages a "Biblical hermeneutics," wherein he interprets a particular passage in light of other biblical passages and books. In part, Jea's deft incorporation and synthesis of biblical texts into and with his narrative is an "authenticating" strategy that legitimates his narrative "I" (Stepto 3-31). Jea's narrative construction and uses of scripture also makes overt writing and textuality as "a play of appearances" (Derrida 1852) that can be manipulated in service of self-fashioning and ideology.

A representative example of this is illustrated in Jea's story about his encounter with an adversarial preacher named Chittle who was jealous of Jea's popularity and the numbers of people who came to hear him preach. In order to discredit Jea, Chittle compared him to Lazarus and suggested that, rather than encouraging believers to follow Christ, Jea was developing his own cult of personality. Between the

introduction of the conflict he had with Chittle and his summary of the sermon Chittle

gave, Jea interpolates almost the entire biblical text of the Lazarus story, found in John,

chapter 11. The Lazarus text is italicized with Jea's exegetical commentary inserted

throughout, distinguishable by its standard font. Jea's commentary explicates the

significances of the responses and behaviors of the characters in the story and supports

those with references to other New Testament passages. His exegesis reveals Lazarus

as a spiritual antitype for sinful humankind "dead in trespasses and sins, laying in the

grave of sin and wickedness, and stinking in the nostrils of God," and resurrected from

"the grave of sin . . . by the Spirit of God" in order to "preach the gospel" or bear

witness to Christ's redemptive work (Jea 134-35). After his thorough presentation and

tropological analysis of the Lazarus story, Jea briefly summarizes Chittle's sermon and

its comparison of Jea and Lazarus. Jea writes that Chittle described Lazarus as "a poor

man, a porter, of no reputation, and . . . scarcely any notice was taken of him, because

he was a poor stinking man." Hence, according to Chittle, those who came to hear Jea

preach "were all running after a poor dead Lazarus, and that they did not come to see

Jesus; and told the people that they might as well throw their bibles and books away, as

to be always running after a poor dead man, nothing but a poor wounded Lazarus." Jea

writes that "[t]his was [Chittle's] discourse to the congregation, and then he closed the

subject; and said, 'Our friend, our black brother, will speak a few words unto you'"

(134). Jea then took the pulpit and told the congregation that he would "not take a text,

but only make a few remarks, by God's assistance, on what our brother has spoken unto

you concerning poor Lazarus." "I then stated unto them," remembers Jea, "the

particulars of that transaction, which has been noticed" (134). After what Jea suggests

was his extemporaneous discussion, sans text, of Lazarus and his significance, he made explicit Lazarus's symbolic meaning and preached that "every sinner is as Lazarus," including Chittle, rendered in Jea's sermon as "the stinking sinner Christ has risen by his Spirit, to preach the gospel to every creature" (134 and 135).

In this densely layered and textured episode, Jea's rhetorical performance demonstrates his exegetical mastery over scripture, his control of discourse—his own and Chittle's—and, I think, his self-reflexive focus on written texts and linguistic terms as open to appropriation and revision. Chittle's rendering of the Lazarus trope parallels the "talking book" trope and Jea's owner "speaking" the text and "closing" the discourse. The primary short-comings of Chittle's interpretation of Lazarus indicated by Jea are his narrow focus on Lazarus's abject and marginal status and that Chittle isolates the Lazarus story from a larger biblical context. This is the same kind of reductive and de-contextualized reading Jea's owner produced in his paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 ("There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven . . .") to convince Jea that his enslavement was simply a reflection of God's "natural" order. Jea's language to describe how Chittle "closed the subject," by introducing Jea as "our black brother," echoes with the same kind of closed discourse and "reified word-thing" in his rendering of the "talking book" trope. Even more significant, Jea's inclusion of the signifier "black" resounds both as a reference to why the "subject" or discourse was presumed closed to Jea, and with the implication that its use by Chittle would "close" the subject for the congregation or persuade them that Chittle's reading of Lazarus and of Jea was the correct one. In the "talking book" scene, scripture and the "text" of slavery were "closed" to Jea due, in part, to a system

and institution premised on a discourse of "divinely sanctioned" racial difference. Early in his narrative, Jea remembers that he and the other slaves "were often led away with the idea that our masters were our gods" (90) and frequently told that "we were made by, and like the devil, and commonly called . . . *black devils*" (94). Jea's narrative re-construction of Chittle's "closed" subject and rendering of Jea as "our black brother" parallels his "talking book" trope vis-à-vis the implicit reference Chittle makes to a discourse of racial difference and blackness as the ostensible sign of Jea's abject identity and marginal social position.

Jea utilizes parallelism (a feature of the sermonic mode) throughout his narrative, and one of its stylistic effects requires that one scene or episode be interpreted in light of another. This is precisely the "Biblical hermeneutic" at work in Jea's presentation of the Lazarus text. The implication is that this episode in Jea's *Life* is not irreducible to signs, scenes, or tropes isolated from the larger discursive topos of his whole narrative or from the biblical text and the multiple discursive threads and discourse communities that inform and circulate in his narrative "I" and "African" signs. Jea's uses of parallelism and his tropological exegesis of the Lazarus text highlight the textually interdependent relationships between events in his life and *Life*, and between his *Life* and scripture; and, thus, begins to make visible his narrative's reflexive engagement with language use, writing, and textuality. This reflexivity is amplified by Jea's comment to the congregation after Chittle's introduction: "I shall not take a text, but only make a few remarks, by God's assistance . . ." (134). The stress here, once again, is on Jea's valuation of spoken language "inspired" by a divine source and its extempore expression. But the image Jea fashions of himself as a speaker

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without a text is also ironic. In fact, Jea "takes" multiple texts—the Lazarus trope, the bible, his sermon, Chittle's discourse, even the "text" of blackness—and, rather than "closing the subject," Jea's autobiographical performance opens and revalues the discursive signs Chittle imagined as "closed": the subject of Lazarus and Jea's subjectivity reified by Chittle's analogy and its dependence on blackness as a "natural" sign of the abject.

Instead, the link between Lazarus and "blackness" that Jea may have had in mind is a product of the currency the Lazarus trope had in a black radical evangelical discourse. As Joanna Brooks has convincingly argued in her study of colonial and early national African and Native American writers, "when they turned to their Bibles, early African American and Native American authors sought out stories that honored their haunted and paradoxical circumstances and offered some key into the mystery of personal and community redemption" (*American Lazarus* 8). Like the Exodus story, the Lazarus parable offered an emblem that resonated with peoples who confronted literal and figurative deaths—through forced dispersal, enslavement, colonial and white brutality, and the erasure or marginalization of their cultural beliefs and practices—and who actively sought discursive symbols to evaluate their lived experiences. Jea's interpretation of the Lazarus text (informed, perhaps, by the discourse communities to which Brooks refers), is not, in other words, the product of his "natural" affiliation with the abject, signified by his "blackness"; but is instead, a product of his experiences as a black man abjected by slavery and racist discourse.

The valence discernable in Jea's "black" sign, suggestive of black radical evangelicalism and his lived experiences, makes it (and his other "African" signs) more

than just a counter sign which valorizes rather than denigrates blackness. To re-inscribe it with only an opposite, even if ideal, value, would be to leave it a "reified word-thing" and a closed discursive sign. The prominence of intertextuality in the Chittle episode, wherein Chittle's analogy and Jea's response can only be understood in relation to the interpolated Lazarus text and its explication, as well as in relation to the other parallel experiences, tropes, and discursive references that fashion Jea's narrative "I," reveals the dependency of text on context, the scripted self on the speaking self, and discourse on response and (re)valuation. Moreover, the historical-cultural discursive and ideological traces and echoes that inhabit Jea's "African" signs and which come into view as a result of where and how he contextualizes them—image in relation to language, parallelism, antithesis—keeps them open as signifiers. They circulate in Jea's text as scripted signs for his narrative "I," and are, therefore, intended to stand for Jea. But, Jea's sermonic aesthetics and rhetorical architectonics call attention to the speaking subject outside of the text and to the multiple discourse communities and counterpublics where and within which these signs circulate. While they stand for Jea, they do not "close" his subjectivity. Jea fashions a narrative self that does not just describe his liberation from sin and slavery in the "inspired" language of the spirit and scripture or simply in the ideological terms of liberal individualism. Instead, the subject of his *Life* is also language itself—spoken and written—how it signifies and the ways in which signs produce and perform subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

In his groundbreaking study *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* Gayraud Wilmore argues, "despite sociological heterogeneity with respect to such secular factors as regional differences, education, gender, and socioeconomic background, religion has been and continues to be an essential thread interweaving the fabric of black culture" (253). The significance of religion in the production of black culture that Wilmore argues for echoes the emphasis Cornel West, for instance, assigns to the black church as source and site of social and political agency for African Americans. "This is so," writes West, "because it is the major institution created, sustained and controlled by black people themselves; that is, it is the most visible and salient cultural product of black people in the United States" ("Prophetic Christian" 426). More recently, in his 2008 book *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic, 1760-1835*, Cedrick May suggests that "Christianity played a much larger role in early black resistance movements than scholars have realized," and that "black Christianity operated and spread throughout the transatlantic as a consequence of an understanding of the power of the spoken and written word to encourage positive change by black speakers and writers" (12). I have urged, throughout this study, a similar understanding of the role of religion, particularly evangelical Christianity and the institutional shape it took in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a primary (if not essential) cultural resource and political language of resistance for enslaved Africans and a free black population. I have argued that John Marrant, George White, and John Jea were leaders, preachers, and theologians who extended an ideology of black radicalism through their interpretations of evangelical Christianity and that their autobiographies and other

writings, the churches and religious societies they helped to establish, and the black discourse communities they were members of or interacted with are representative of a black radical evangelical tradition.

In their respective stories of conversion and faith, in the ministerial careers they each describe, in their rhetorical uses and interpretations of the bible, Marrant, White, and Jea construct and express an identity politics of resistance and black empowerment primarily through an evangelical Christian discourse. In doing so, they participate in what Frank Lentricchia calls the "stealing back and forth of signs" or "the linguistic symbols of authority . . ." (79); in this case, scripture and the language of evangelical Christianity. Drawing on Kenneth Burke's theories of hegemonic processes and the potential for "progressive change" if not for "radical rupture" (78), Lentricchia stresses "the oscillation of power between possessors and dispossessed" based, in part, on the appropriation of discourse, signs, and linguistic symbols of authority by the dispossessed, which are then "turned against those who last appropriated them . . ." (79). Certainly, Marrant, White, Jea turn the language of Christianity (with its authority) against hegemonic expressions and interpretations of Christianity which were often used to justify the enslavement and infantilization of black peoples. Their uses of evangelical Christian discourse, their interpretations of the bible, and the immediate and direct relationship they each believed they had with God are often presented in order to condemn and counter the institution of slavery, the dominant culture's definitions of racial identity, and the social positions available to diasporic black people.

But the preaching and writings of Marrant, White, and Jea, the separatist African churches and other religious institutions they led or participated in, and a black

radical evangelical discourse and tradition were not undertaken, constructed, or extended simply in response to oppression. As important as analyses of early black responses to the brutality of slavery, victimization, and oppression are, to only look for evidence of this in early black texts and discourse comes at the expense, as Cedric May points out, of "black intellectualism," which "remains uninvestigated" to this day (9). Indeed, it is precisely this kind of scholarly myopia that Cedric Robinson identifies in his fine study *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Twentieth-century "Western scholars of the African experience," tended to interpret black resistance to slavery and racial oppression "as geographically and historically bounded acts, episodes connected categorically by the similarity of their sociological elements (e.g., slave or colonial societies) but evidently unrelated in the sense of any emerging social movement inspired by historical experience and a social ideology" (72). Turning our critical gaze toward "the presence of a historical or political consciousness or a social tradition among Blacks" (Robinson 72), and away from just the defensive maneuvers and strategies enacted by early black narrators and writers, enables a more expansive interrogation, one attentive to how peoples of African descent enmeshed in the colonial and racialized context of the diasporic New World produced a historical-cultural identity, tradition, and a sense of what Katherine Clay Bassard calls "peoplehood" (128). In other words, the ways in which black people viewed themselves, apart from the "narrow and self-interested White Gaze" (Bassard 129) that defined them as chattel or inferior, and the alternative social positions and categories they created in their performances of community.

I have maintained that Marrant and White were actively involved in the construction and maintenance of black communities or, in Jea's case, drew on the cultural and ideological signs circulating in black discourse communities to fashion his narrative "I" and black radical evangelical theology. Their focus on a discourse of black *communitas* and their religio-political identity politics of black empowerment signifies their black radical evangelical ideological consciousness, their extension of the tradition of black resistance, and their reproduction of a culture of black "peoplehood." Indeed, they, like the members of the respective black communities they led or interacted with, produced cultural expressions of self and group that originated "from self-interest, from the desires of African Americans to communicate their experiences and philosophies, to record the words and ideas most precious to their own psychic and spiritual (as well as physical and political) survival, and to create and to preserve their history for themselves and for others" (Foster 723). In addition to an evangelical Christian tradition and belief system, their narrative constructions and these discourse communities accessed a variety of African cultural forms and practices and rendered these in light of their experiences with "the institution of slavery and the prejudices it spawned" (Glaude 79). Glaude argues that "[e]very black person in the nation [and, I would argue, in the black Atlantic world] was affected" by slavery and racism. "This continuity of experience yielded," insists Glaude, "an effective ideological form that enabled the construction of the 'black community'" (79). While colonization, slavery, and racism may have been the immediate causes of black radicalism and black radical evangelicalism, these do not, ultimately, define their "nature or character" (Robinson 73).

Instead, black leaders like Marrant, White, Jea, and the black communities they served defined for themselves, in creative and interactive ways, a black radical evangelical identity politics. They engaged with, responded to, and theorized their encounters with Enlightenment ideology, the Western Europeans who enslaved them, and the diasporic context in which they were forcibly enmeshed. They participated in and helped to shape the religious and secular discussions and debates about racial and national identity, citizenship, and the respective roles and potentials of individuals and groups in the early republic. These responses, theories, and assertions of self, group, and membership—performances of black community—are determined by a series of ethical standards and moral ideals derived from the bible, the tropes of exodus, deliverance, and liberation, and a repertory of expressive and worship practices transformed into Afro-Christianity and used to inform the social and political dimensions of black communities. These standards, tropes, and repertory enable Marrant, White, and Jea (like their forebears in a historical and ideological tradition of black radicalism) to ask the two primary questions Lewis Gordon ascribes to existentialist inquiry: "'What are we?' and 'What shall we do?' These are also questions," Gordon asserts, "of identity and moral action. They are questions, further, of ontological and teleological significance, for the former addresses being and the latter addresses what to become—in a word, *purpose*. Such questions can be further radicalized through reflection on their preconditions: how are such questions, in a word, possible?" (7). Black radical evangelicalism pursues these questions of being and telos, subjectivity and potential, and Marrant, White, and Jea frame and answer them through

an evangelical Christian discourse syncretized with African religious beliefs and cultural forms, which are brought to bear on their contemporary places and conditions.

These black communities and institutions were both of and more than the larger body politics in the British colonies or America. Thus, in addition to developing a black historical-cultural tradition and a radical politics of resistance, Marrant, White, Jea, and the black communities that produced them, simultaneously pursued a religio-political project of belonging within these national bodies. For example, while Marrant was an advocate for emigration to Sierra Leone and developed a restoration theology that prophesied the return of diasporic blacks to an African Zion, he never rejects the Anglican Methodist Church that ordained him, or his patron, the Countess of Huntingdon. Neither George White nor the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church he helped to establish calls for a radical black nationalism. Instead, he and his church develop and enact a black radical evangelicalism informed by the tradition and "nation language" Glaude interrogates: "a tradition of racial advocacy, one animated by the idea of racial solidarity, that chooses America" (165). While Jea rejects America as a land of "tyrants," he identifies with "Old England," but only as "a poor black African, *a preacher of the gospel*" (155). Like Marrant and White, Jea constructs a narrative and identity politics that implicitly advocates racial solidarity within the colonizing national body (even if, at times, in ironic ways), and all three articulate an evangelical theology founded in a Christian ethic of fraternal love, service, and membership in God's universal Church of believers. But they never countenance white supremacy and brutality or the ideological arguments (secular or divine) for black inferiority. Indeed, the evangelicalism of Marrant, White, and Jea are founded in what they understand as

their divine call to preach the gospel or, as Jea writes, "to speak boldly in the name of the living God, and to preach as the oracles of God . . ." (110). Ultimately, the messages they convey are specific to the spiritual, physical, and social liberation of black people. Their interpretations of the Word they believe they were called to boldly preach are shaped by their immediate contexts as well as by the historical experiences and ideological imperatives of diasporic Africans.

Thus, the narratives and ministries of Marrant, White, and Jea reveal the relationship between religion and black radical politics. Their evangelicalism is not escapist or apologetic but a proscriptive language and belief system deployed to alter the social and political conditions of their lives and to shape the black communities they represent. Evangelical Christianity is a language and belief system they appropriate and revise in their productions of black radical evangelicalism, language and belief foundational to the internal performances of black communities within yet apart from the national bodies of America and England, and the dominant ideologies that limited or excluded black membership. Their narratives and uses of religion extend the black radical tradition of resistance, marronage, and revolt identified by Robinson, and the black communities and churches they were members of and helped to establish enact black "peoplehood," a shared cultural-political identity and purpose that defines black subjectivity—individual and collective—from the perspectives, valuations, and judgments of black people themselves. The black radical evangelicalism of Marrant, White, and Jea also reveals, therefore, the theoretical complexity and cultural vitality of diasporic black evangelical thinkers and preachers in the late colonial and early national periods. Because their narrative constructions are,

as I have argued throughout this study, produced by and re-produce the discursive signs, expressive modes, and social values circulating in the black communities that inform their ministries, engaging their written works and black radical evangelicalism reveals as well, the complexity and vitality of black life, culture, and community-building in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Marrant, White, Jea, and the black communities behind their narratives are, finally, representative of an early black nationalism informed by historical experience and a social ideology of resistance, articulated through religious language, symbols, and practices.

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