Introduction

He used to read prayers in public to the ship’s crew every Sabbath day; and when first I saw him read, I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so to me.—As soon as my master had done reading I follow’d him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open’d it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it would say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis’d me because I was black.

—A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particular in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As Related by Himself

Contact and Conquest, Orality and Textuality

Ukawsaw Gronniosaw listened, but the book gave him nothing. What went wrong? Gronniosaw was sure he saw the book speak to the captain. Earlier that day, he and the Dutch captain stood on the same deck, but their horizons were worlds apart. In the captain’s Western cultural tradition, books—religious or otherwise—do not talk, but in traditional African religions, talismans, amulets, drums, and so forth sometimes speak to believers. Gronniosaw had no reference for reading as a mode to apprehend a book, and the Dutch captain had no reference for listening as a mode to apprehend a religious item. Thus, when the captain read the public prayer, Gronniosaw saw him talking to the book. Then something remarkable happened. Perhaps, in the natural pauses of the captain’s cadence, Gronniosaw saw the book respond. For Gronniosaw, conversation was so taken for granted, and reading aloud was so strange, that he
saw the book talk. Since the book had spoken to the captain, then why not him? As soon as he was alone, he approached the volume, lifted it to his ear, and listened, but the book gave him no response. Finally, Gronniosaw read the disappointing silence and spoke for the book: he knew that it, like everything else in the new world, despised him: because he was black.

Almost fifty years later, upon recollection, Gronniosaw transcribed his story and qualified his experience by adding the words, “for I thought it did.” But Gronniosaw retained the trope because it mediated the oral West African culture of his birth and the literate culture of his captivity. For African American biblical scholars, the talking book signified black people’s aspiration to hear the Bible speak the Word of God. As Allen D. Callahan contends, black folk en masse, old and young alike, learned to read as soon as it was legal. African Americans knew the book was more than a symbol of the conqueror’s religion and power. Because they believed it was a symbol of justice that held moral authority over even their captors, they wanted the Bible to speak this Word of God to them before they died.

However, the deep desire to hear the book talk seduces us away from a frightening possibility, and a less explored image in Gronniosaw’s experience, namely, the silent book. It, too, is signified by Gronniosaw’s narrative. In fact, Callahan hints at this trope when he mentions the Bible’s form—text: “As a written text, it greeted [African Americans] with silence.” In fact, the Bible “greeted” the captain in the same manner. Gronniosaw did not realize it, but the Bible gave him no more and no less than it had given to the Dutch captain. So when he spoke for the book, Gronniosaw did exactly as the Dutch captain had done. Both took up the book, both interpreted its silence, and both left the encounter with meaning. To be sure, each apprehended the book differently: Gronniosaw interpreted the book’s iconic power, while the captain read the book’s letters. But the difference between the two encounters cannot be reduced to their modes of apprehension. Even after Gronniosaw learned to read, he and the captain still spoke differently in the book’s silence. The politics of their respective subject positions led them to fill the silence with differing intentions. Gronniosaw spoke from the position of the vanquished, while the captain spoke from the position of the conqueror. As Charles H. Long describes, such is the irony of this silence. “Silence forces us to realize that our words, the units of our naming and
recognition in the world, presuppose a reality which is prior to our naming and doing." In the silence, what Gronniosaw took for granted—in a world totalized by his subjugation to white power—immediately came to consciousness and to articulation. From his viewpoint, even the book of God had nothing for him. Along with everyone and everything in this new world, it despised him because he was black.

Textuality, History, and Resistance

Textuality has therefore . . . become the exact antithesis and displacement of what might be called history. Textuality is considered to take place, yes, but by the same token it does not take place anywhere or anytime in particular. It is produced, but by no one and at no time. It can be read and interpreted, although reading and interpreting are routinely understood to occur in the form of misreading and misinterpreting. The list of examples could be extended indefinitely, but the point would remain the same. As it is practiced in the American academy today, literary theory has for the most part isolated textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work. Even if we accept (as in the main I do) the arguments put forward by Hayden White—that there is no way to get past texts in order to apprehend "real" history directly—it is still possible to say that such a claim need not also eliminate interest in the events and the circumstances entailed by and expressed in the texts themselves. Those events and circumstances are textual too (nearly all of Conrad’s tales and novels present us with a situation—giving rise to the narrative that forms the text), and much that goes on in texts alludes to them, affiliates itself directly to them. My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.

—Edward Said, The World, the Text, and the Critic, 1983
Like other West Africans, Gronniosaw entered the Western world from a position of security and centeredness. They were the subjects of their own rich and venerable oral tradition that was precise in both word and inflection from one generation of griots to the next. But he also entered as one whose people had been “sentenced” (both condemned and textualized) to silence by modernity. Indeed, modernity rendered its harshest judgment upon people with no history that the Western investigator could recognize. Hegel stated the issue clearly, “What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History.” First, Hegel and his contemporaries’ reference to history meant the modern world’s accounts of each “people’s” contributions to humankind’s evolutionary progress. Second, for the various European nations, these stories were discursive exercises in self-construction, but they proceeded dialectically. The accounts self-reflexively constructed the European against their projection of some “other.” Third, such history was written. It obtained in books, newspapers, and other print media. Fourth, it is self-referential—texts refer only to other texts. History produced in the new American Republic derived from a larger tradition that referred to British texts, which referred to Latin texts, which referred to Greek texts. Each referred to an earlier text, which is how language creates history and how history scripts a past.

In the Western tradition, this past represented people of African descent only in their silence. This second silence, like the silence Gronniosaw encountered, was neither an absence nor a void. Africans were present but only as projections of the Western gaze. Its tradition took up the “African” as an empirical and religious “other,” not as a human subject. Scientific discourses, particularly biology and anthropology, signified the African as a vacuous body and wrote their theories upon it. At the same time, Christianity viewed the African body as an empty canvas and wrote the religion of the heathen upon it. Both religious and scientific discourses constructed the white body as human and Christian, and simultaneously constructed the black body as savage and heathen. History’s silence fell upon people of African descent with crushing violence. From the eighteenth century forward, savage and heathen operated as
concrete structures against which Euro-American “civilization” and its “Christianity” constructed themselves.

African Americans had few resources to resist the discursive force of written history and to determine their own lives, but their religious imagination held transformative power. They deployed religious discourse to reclaim black bodies as human bodies and to reconstruct them in the Imago Dei with the firm conviction that they also were created in the likeness of the Divine. For most African Americans, the Bible’s stories, particularly exodus, grounded their religious knowledge. African Americans readily transferred its themes of bondage and freedom to their own context. Black religious imagination endowed Moses, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Children of Israel with iconic status. Such imaginations summoned the Bible’s stories to mediate the textuality of Western history with their own counter-history. Their captors’ world may claim that descendants of Africa were enslaved because they were despised, but Africans and their descendants in the American Republic mediated their identity with the exodus story and knew a different truth. Because they were enslaved, they knew God would deliver them. God had chosen them and God’s election would be manifestly evident when freedom came. They refused to be engrafted into the Western tradition as the conquered ones, whom the enlightened Euro-American civilized. They read the Bible’s stories onto themselves and, by doing so, they signified themselves into history (that is, into the Western tradition) and re-signified themselves as subjects in the present. When they preached about the “band of Israelites,” they inscribed new meaning upon their past and trafficked in the Bible’s discursive power. They conferred upon themselves the standing that the Israelites possessed within the Western tradition. These activities constitute the politics of African American biblical interpretation, which consists of successive attempts from the antebellum period onward to reclaim black bodies from Euro-American discourses and their epistemologies.

When African Americans appealed to biblical authority, they sought the Bible’s signifying power. For much of the new republic’s history, the Bible was singularly suited for this form of resistance. Through the nineteenth century, most Protestants in the American Republic saw the Bible as the Urtext of the Western tradition. Because other histories were in-
terpreted in view of the Bible's presentation of a transcendent history, the Bible's interpretation could disrupt the signifying processes of the Western historical tradition. For example, by claiming an identity with the Israelites in the story, Africans and their descendants re-signified the story's symbols in the American Republic's religious imagination. As early as the seventeenth century, Anglo-American settlers imagined themselves mimetically performing the Israelites' conquest. They pacified New England and rid it of so-called abominations just as the Israelites had done in Canaan. However, African Americans identified with the story's presentation of the Israelites as an enslaved people whom God delivered, rather than as an instrument of God's military will. Eventually, their interpretation informed the nation's self-understanding through the Civil War where U.S. troops sang about freeing Israel from Egypt as they marched through Confederate territory.

Pillars of Cloud and Fire as Political Forms and Biblical Precedent

The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

—Exodus 13:21–22

In the exodus narrative, God uses two distinct beacons—a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire—to lead the Children of Israel to Canaan. Each sign appears when its form was most visible—a cloud during the day and fire at night. During the day, clouds appear in fluid forms, blending almost seamlessly with sky. Their subtle, quiet movement recalls those more conservative leaders, whose interpretive activity sought civic reform, using measures legitimated by civil society. However, a raging column of fire pressing urgently against the silent, dark nightscape is at once a brilliant and arresting spectacle; such a symbol invokes those more strident voices whose interpretive work radically challenged the social and political fabric of the nation. Although the respective beacons of cloud and fire appeared in vastly different forms, they both led the Children
of Israel in the same direction, from slavery toward the Promised Land, and were necessary components of a liberatory project.

In the same manner, black interpreters summoned the exodus story with differing politics. Their positions resist the traditional dichotomous categorization of “radical” and “conservative.”15 Kelly Miller’s 1908 essay, “Radicals and Conservatives,” clarifies my correlation with cloud and fire politics.

When a distinguished Russian was informed that some American Negroes are radical and some conservative, he could not restrain his laughter. The idea of conservative Negroes was more than the Cossack’s risibilities could endure. “What on earth,” he exclaimed with astonishment, “have they to conserve?”16

More than a century ago Miller used these categories to describe the political landscape between William M. Trotter, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois. They still aptly frame a particular character of the politics of African American Biblical Interpretation. In the essay, Miller rethinks these categories to describe the tactics that African Americans deployed as a part of larger strategies to resist racial repression in the United States. His categories attend to difference in form, while holding ends in common. For Miller, “Radical and conservative Negroes agree as to the end in view, but differ as to the most effective means of attaining it. The difference is not essentially one of principle or purpose, but point of view.”17

What Miller calls “point of view,” I take up as cloud and fire performances over a changing political economy. First, the pillar of cloud performance appears as the ironic doubling described in Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s classic poem, “We Wear the Mask”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask! 18

In Dunbar’s poem, the mask conceals the existential alienation that African Americans experience as a part of everyday life. But masking possesses an ironic doubling. One does not simply hide behind the mask; one simultaneously publicizes something as well. In the poem, the mask obscures the wearer’s “cheeks” and “eyes,” but simultaneously announces the mask’s “grin” and “smile.” Its announcement calls attention to the mask itself and its disposition. The pillar of cloud performances entail this doubling that simultaneously conceals and advertises. Metaphorically, the “grin” and “smile” advertise contentment with the social arrangements. The mask diverts the viewer’s attention from what it hides and directs attention to what it advertises. Thus, the mask’s power lies in its ability to distract—not only by concealing (the mask is not simply a blank cover)—but by advertising something different. The greater the incongruity between the mask’s self-expression and that of the wearer, the greater the mask’s diversion. African Americans take up the mask in forms such as a mastery of civic and social behaviors. They exemplified model citizenship, moral virtue, and intellectual acumen. For pillar of cloud politics, these performances were not ends unto themselves. They fit their lives within the contemporaneous social arrangements so that the mask showed congruity with the social world. 19 For example, Absalom Jones displayed a mastery of exemplary citizenship to become a pillar in his Philadelphia community. He used his social and political capital to fortify the free black community against increasing white animosity in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Race notwithstanding, Frances E. W. Harper mastered the presentation of Victorian womanhood while orchestrating a program to undermine its complic-
ity with racial hierarchies. Martin Luther King, Jr., deployed republican rhetoric and Christian theology—representing ideal models of citizenship and religious virtue respectively—while he and his lieutenants at SCLC strategized nationally and internationally broadcasted conflicts between violent southern segregationists and unarmed African Americans engaging in the virtue of civil disobedience. For each pillar of cloud performer, the mask's expression differed from the wearer's activities.

On the other hand, those figures who represent pillars of fire reject the mask in order to advertise themselves. They are unwilling to fit within the unjust social arrangements. In fact, their politics proceed by advertising their unwillingness to fit as both a source of resistance and a show of power. For example, even though they lived in different centuries and under divergent circumstances, both David Walker and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., made their emancipatory intentions explicit. Their capital accrued not from \textit{fitting in}, and enacting performances of congruence, but from remaining steadfastly \textit{out of place}. They testify to the power of alienation.

Opposing Pillars but Converging Moral Ends

Although their politics differed, the various interpreters presented herein each took up exodus to articulate a shared and emancipatory hope—to reach a Promised Land. They adapted their prevailing politics, both cloud and fire, to meet the challenges of the nation's changing political economy and its ever-changing forms of racialization. From the end of the slave regime to uplift in the nineteenth century to civil rights and Black Power eras in the twentieth century—in each era “Promised Land” took on new meaning—black biblical interpreters in each generation reoccupied emancipatory language and imbued it with new meaning in hopes that they might realize fulfillment some day.

Description and Outline

Over the course of six chapters, this book, a study of “pillars of cloud and fire,” develops a typology for the biblical interpretive activity in black religious leadership as it has informed social transformation in the United States. After introducing the project and its methodological
considerations, the book lays out a method for interrogating the relationship between scripture and interpreter that attends to three dimensions of each figure’s lived experience: biography, cultural context, and political context. Each of the remaining chapters is structured in two moves: contextual and textual. The first frames the historical context for the interpretive activity at three levels: It identifies prevailing debates in black communities; second, it draws in broad outline the wider national socio-historical context of black political, social, and economic life; third, it locates each interpreter within the broader historical context. The second move, the lion’s share of each chapter, analyzes particular examples of ecclesial and popular sources of black interpretive activity and its effect in transforming black social reality.

Chapter 1 takes up the antebellum period. The chapter describes the political and social contexts of two African American interpreters: Absalom Jones and David Walker. Their works exemplify the robust and diverse political discourse occurring within African American communities in northern cities such as Philadelphia and Boston. In 1808, Absalom Jones delivered his celebrated “Thanksgiving Sermon” based on Exodus 3 to a well-established congregation at Philadelphia’s African Episcopal Church. He deploys a pillar of cloud politics that balances his ecclesial community’s commitments to justice for enslaved African Americans with concerns for their own survival and social uplift. Two decades later in Boston, David Walker, a Methodist layperson, published the first edition of his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Using references to the exodus story throughout, Walker’s missive is a display of his pillar of fire politics of the first order. It is oriented toward emancipation through nothing less than open rebellion. From radically different vantage points, both figures take up the exodus story to transform black social reality.

Chapter 2 takes up black biblical interpretation between 1865 and the Nadir. The chapter analyzes the interpretive activity of two prominent figures: Frances E. W. Harper and John Jasper. In the wake of the Civil War’s radical disruption of the South’s slave economy, and amid the promise of Reconstruction, Harper’s *Moses: Story of the Nile*, published in 1869, shows optimism about the possibilities for black life. Her pillar of cloud politics proceeds by locating her rhetoric of racial uplift within the wider concurrent conversation of national character. In the epic poem she fashions a Moses with virtues of the politics of respectability
and commends him to the black community as the key to racial uplift. The chapter will show how Harper’s depiction of Moses—a critical integration of the biblical character, Moses, and the life of her friend, Harriet Tubman, a real-life Moses—raises important questions about the status of black women following slavery.

Nine years later, after any hopes of the promise of Reconstruction had been eroded, John Jasper, the towering pastoral figure of Richmond, Virginia, takes Exodus 13:5 and preaches his renowned sermon, “The Sun Do Move.” Defiant rather than optimistic, Jasper’s pillar of fire politics rejects the truth claims of the new scientific discourses from which African Americans have been barred access. Rather, he affirms the truth claims of his community’s liberating God to sustain them amidst the rapidly unraveling protections and broken promises of Reconstruction. Unlettered, he leverages hermeneutical sophistication, political savvy, and unwavering faith to offer his community a powerful counter to the onslaught of southern repression. Both Harper and Jasper, from radically different social and political milieus and with divergent interpretive moves, turn to the exodus to negotiate the politics of early post-slavery America.

Chapter 3 turns to the New Negro Movement, particularly as the Harlem Renaissance manifests it. The chapter studies the work of Zora Neale Hurston as emblematic of the Harlem Renaissance intellectual tradition. In 1939 Hurston published Moses, Man of the Mountain. It is the first novel-length treatment of the exodus story. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, Hurston is suspicious of the black community’s reliance upon divine activity to resolve social ills. She focuses her pillar of fire politics on questions of African American self-reliance and human agency and offers an important critique for black ecclesial biblical interpretation.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Civil Rights Movement both as an ideological trajectory and a chronological rubric. The marches, boycotts, and sit-ins characterized a type of black resistance oriented toward reforming institutions that had denied access to African Americans. Much of the interpretive activity of the time appropriated biblical texts for the purpose of civil attainment. Within that frame, the chapter analyzes the interpretive work of two figures: Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the U.S. congressional representative from Harlem and pastor of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church; and Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights leader from the South. The chapter begins with Powell’s sermon on Exodus 32
entitled, “Stop Blaming Everybody Else,” delivered in 1953 at a critical juncture in his career and in the formation of black political identity. His pillar of fire politics takes up the exodus story to focus the black community on both the ravages of McCarthyism and the responsibilities of citizenship. Powell’s interpretive lens serves as a natural bridge between the thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance and the activists of the Civil Rights Movement proper, beginning in 1954. The chapter then examines two sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr., “Death of Evil Upon the Seashore,” and “Birth of a New Nation,” delivered in 1955 and 1957 respectively. Both sermons take the book of Exodus to deploy King’s pillar of cloud politics. Together, they serve as examples of interpretive activity during the civil rights era. King’s sermons gain a visibility that shapes the national discourse while Powell’s political and social excesses diminish his impact on public life. Ironically, each needed the other’s work. Powell’s legislative influence benefitted from King’s ability to energize the public. For King, many of the real material gains of the Civil Rights Movement depended upon Powell’s hardball politics and his legislative prowess. Taken together, their work, oriented toward reform, not only served as a catalyst for drastic changes in the black public sphere, but participated in transforming American identity as well.

Chapter 5 turns to the era of the Black Power Movement. The chapter probes the contours of the Black Power Movement as the ideological heir to the Civil Rights Movement. Within that frame, the chapter examines the interpretive work of Albert Cleage. Delivered in October 1967, his sermon “What Can We Give Our Youth” interprets the exodus narrative both as an exercise in radical race politics and Cleage’s own pillar of fire politics. While most figures of the Black Power Movement abandoned the Black Church for what they perceived to be its accommodationist orientation, Cleage constructed a theology and a politics that maximized the best insights of the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements, while remaining grounded in the history and traditions of the Black Church.

The conclusion makes overtures to the contemporary world and the ongoing deployment of exodus within a politics of freedom. From the Antebellum period through the Black Power Movement, Pillars attempts to expand the field considered proper to biblical studies and to show that analyzing such interpretations requires sustained attention to the cultural and historical forces from which it arose.