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Reading Between the Lines

The Bible in the African American Neo-Slave Narrative

With a focus on Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003), James McBride's *Song Yet Sung* (2008), and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2003), the article examines how neo-slave narratives frame their discussions of the past in order to define future debates about race, culture, and academic politics. It is in looking back that these novels, ironically, carry forward the discussion of enslaved and free identities in biblical and extra-biblical contexts. Contemporary African American writers who situate their texts in the antebellum south are therefore shown to perform an important archival, hermeneutic, and cultural work.

It is perhaps axiomatic, at least since the publication of Vincent Wimbush's monumental anthology *African Americans and the Bible* in 2000, that the Bible has had a profound effect on African American literature and culture since the arrival of enslaved African women, men and children on these shores via the Middle Passage, the arduous journey across the Atlantic

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Ocean for the captives. The Bible was an essential part of African enculturation, language and literacy acquisition, and provided narratives from which African Americans "conjured a culture" to adapt Theophus Smith's apt phrase.[1] What I am particularly struck by, however, is the endurance of the Bible—particularly the King James Version—as a well-spring of linguistic, imagistic, and cultural resources for African American writers of the postmodern and contemporary eras. This endurance, I argue, is intimately connected with the endurance of slavery as an Ur-trope for the emergence of black self-consciousness, both as a cautionary tale about past oppression (and the danger of its persistence and repeatability) and as a reference point by which to gauge current and future progress, such as with the election of the first president of African descent, Barack Obama in 2008.

I. Resurrection

A conference at the Ohio State University in 2011 on "The King James Bible at 400" referred to the "cultural afterlife" of the Bible, language that presumes an at least "socially dead" status for the text in Orlando Patterson's sense of the term. Several such "deaths" have been hailed of late sporting the moniker "post" as in "post-racial," "post-feminist," "post-biblical," even "post-blackness" a phrase made popular by media commentator Touré in his book, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* Indeed, Kenneth A. Warren has declared African American literature itself "dead"' in his series of W.E.B. DuBois lectures at Harvard published as *What* Was *African American Literature?* (my emphasis added).[2] So then this article addresses dead things, or rather their resurrections, or at least raises the possibility of empty tombs. I do not mean to suggest, by this gesture, that the Bible ever registered as a "dead" text in western, particularly US, culture. Rather I wish to point out

[1] Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); note also Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) and my *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010). On the role of the King James Bible in antebellum literacy acquisition, see Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

[2] Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What it Means to be Black Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011); Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

what is often a conflation of various discourses of religion, oppression and difference that this essay seeks to explore.

I make my claim for "resurrection" based on the emergence in the twentieth century and the persistence in the twenty-first of a specific fictional genre in African American literature that, in the words of Keith Byerman in *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, made "[historical narrative] the dominant mode in African American literature" (1). Blyden Jackson had dubbed the genre as "neo-slave narratives," in his book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions* (1987),[3] a term carried forth by critics such as Ashraf Rushdy and others. Jackson defines "neo-slave narratives" as contemporary novels that "assume the form, adopt the conventions and [or] take on the first person voice of the antebellum slave narrative." In this way, neo-slave narratives perform a particular type of intertextuality as revisions of the paradigms identified in texts by Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs that Henry Louis Gates named "the classic slave narratives."[4] Not only do *neo*-slave narratives bear the imprint or afterimage of their nineteenth-century predecessor texts, the abolitionist slave narratives, claimed as fitting objects of literary study in the 1980s and 1990s, but in reframing and re-visioning slavery they reimagine, as well, the status, themes and hermeneutic of the Bible, in master narratives of bondage and African American narratives of deliverance and liberation.

[3] Keith Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Blyden Jackson coined the term "neo-slave narrative" to designate "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions and [or] take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" in *A History of Afro-American Literature* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1989). Ashraf Rushdy's book-length study, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) continues to use this term. Challenges to this terminology come from black feminist scholars Elizabeth Anne Beaulieu in *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) and Angelyn Mitchell in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) who use the term "freedom narratives" and "liberatory narratives" respectively. A good overview article on the genre was written by Valerie Smith, "Neo-slave Narratives" in Audrey Fisch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 168–85.

[4] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Signet Classics, 1987). The volume contains *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1814); *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831); *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

It is important to note that not all scholars of the genre use the term "neo-slave narratives" when writing about this body of texts. Taking a black and feminist approach, for example, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu uses the term "freedom narratives," observing the presence of "strong female characters who mother at the center of their imaginative investigations" as central to the genre. Similarly, Angelyn Mitchell in *The Freedom to Remember*, notes that unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, contemporary neo-slave narratives by African American women are more interested in interrogating the construct of freedom than on representing the slave past. For this reason, she coins the term *liberatory narratives* for this literature. While I appreciate the work of these two scholars in renaming the genre, especially in light of the representation of African American women, I will use the term neo-slave narrative here to highlight the tension created by the linearity implied in the prefix "post" (-feminism, -racialism, -biblicism, etc.) and "neo" which promises a dialogic movement between past and present. As Rushdy points out, neo-slave narratives are not only nostalgic about the past but "definitive" in that the writers frame their discussions of the past in order to define future debates about race, culture, and academic politics. They are, in other words, using the past to say something about contemporary times.

My fascination with these novels is that at a time when slavery has all but disappeared from public discourse, these writers choose to write novels set in the pre-Emancipation south. Indeed, *A Mercy* is Morrison's second novel of slavery following *Beloved* in 1987. It is in looking back that these novels, ironically, carry forward the discussion of enslaved and free identities in biblical and extra-biblical contexts. Thus as "belated participants in an earlier cultural conversation" (Rushdy) contemporary African American writers who situate their texts in the antebellum south perform an important archival, hermeneutic, and cultural work. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on three novels: Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003), James McBride's *Song Yet Sung* (2008) and Toni Morrison's novel of the same year, *A Mercy*.[5] In *The Known World*, for example, Augustus Townsend purchases himself and then his wife Mildred and son out of slavery, only to watch as his son becomes a (free black) slaveholder himself. Liz Spocott in *Song Yet Sung* due to a head injury, is able to see into the future (our present) and make

[5] Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (New York: Amistad Books, 2003); James McBride, *Song Yet Sung* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008) and Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

commentary about the legacy of the heroism of the underground railroad and Civil Rights Movement. All of the characters in *A Mercy* are trying to forge a sense of identity and community in an "ad hoc territory" (13) in which the usual categories for self-definition are up for grabs. In addition to complicating our usual coordinates of race, gender, region and religion, among other things, these novels engage the Bible as it figures in the nineteenth-century biblical defense of chattel slavery, the issue of public versus private reading as representation of the difference between African American and pro-slavery hermeneutics, and, readings of the Book of Job as a narrative of suffering and theodicy.

II. The Bible Defense of Slavery and African American Literature

As I have argued extensively elsewhere, any assessment of African Americans and the Bible must take into account the use of the Bible in the defense of the enslavement of African Americans.[6] Jones in *The Known World* and McBride in *Song Yet Sung* both represent white southern ambivalence about slavery and raise the issue of the pro-slavery Bible defense. Although much of the scholarship on *The Known World* focuses on the contradiction of Henry Townsend as a free black slaveowner, Jones uses a white character, John Skiffington to interrogation an equally baffling ambivalence: white southerners that were anti-slavery in sentiment but pro-slavery in practice. In the novel we watch Skiffington advance from deputy to sheriff of fictional Manchester County, Virginia because of his ability to live with a contradiction between his personal misgivings about slavery (a stance "inherited" from his overseer father) and his position in law enforcement. He is determined to stay in power by representing to the slaveholding community "the good face of the law" (147). The duality arises for Skiffington in chapter two where Minerva, a nine-year-old African American slave girl, is presented to Skiffington and his "northern wife" Winifred as a wedding present by his wealthy cousin from North Carolina, Counsel. The chapter begins by invoking the Bible: "In the Bible God commanded men to take wives, and John Skiffington obeyed" (29). Yet in upholding heterosexual marriage as a divine mandate, Skiffington unwittingly becomes complicitous in the economics of slavery through the social convention of giving and receiving wedding gifts; unwilling to offend his rich cousin, Skiffington is caught up in competing social

[6] See Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures*.

conventions: marriage, hospitality, giving and receiving of gifts, which bind him and Winifred to the institution of slavery. Marcel Mauss in his book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*[7] writes of how gift exchange is "where obligation and liberty intermingle" (83). He elaborates: "Almost always such services have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism and social deceit, and where really there is obligation and economic self-interest" (4). Mauss's idea of charity or gift-giving as "wounding" applies to Counsel's motive in giving Minerva as a demonstration of his superior wealth and as a way to obligate Skiffington to southern conventions of slavery. The morning after their wedding night, Skiffington and Winifred exchange a private vow: "Winifred turned to her husband in bed and told him slavery was not something she wanted in her life. It was not something he wanted either, he said" (33). Ultimately, however, it is the Skiffingtons' *public* exchange of marriage vows and acceptance of the "wedding present" (with his nod and her "Thank you") that overrides their private vows to each other. They rationalize keeping Minerva (Minnie) but never free her (Minnie will later run away), constructing her in their minds as their "daughter" (43). Although the people in Manchester agree that Minnie is the Skiffingtons' "property," they "did not feel that they owned her, not in the way whites and a few blacks owned slaves. Minerva was not free, but only in the way a child in a family is not free" (43).

The duality between private vow and public obligation in Skiffington's character is connected to his belief in the pro-slavery Bible hermeneutic: "despite vowing to never own a slave Skiffington had no trouble doing his job to keep the institution of slavery going, *an institution even God himself had sanctioned throughout the Bible*" (43, my emphasis). By appealing to the pro-slavery Bible defense, Skiffington is able to keep a distance between private belief and public duty, a misapplication of his father's separation between external and internal, body and soul:

> "Render your body unto them," his father had taught, "but know your soul belongs to God." As long as Skiffington and Winifred lived within the light that came from God's law, from the Bible, nothing on earth, not even his duty as a sheriff to the Caesars, could deny them the kingdom of God. "We will not

[7] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, tr. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967).

> own slaves," Skiffington promised God, and he promised each morning he went to his knees to pray. (43)

His prayers, however, do nothing to hinder his formation of a slave patrol to apprehend runaways from Manchester County, an act that wins the approval of the county's slaveholders and leads directly to his promotion to sheriff.

In *Song Yet Sung*, James McBride explores this ambivalence about slavery through the character of Kathleen Sullivan, a white woman described as "a short, dark-haired, bright slip of a woman" who owns a "modest cabin at Blackwater Creek" (101). As a widow who owns a small farm (and its slaves) six months after her husband's death, Kathleen does not "look" like the typical slaveowner and like Skiffington, she envisions herself as a benign, somewhat unwitting participant in slavery which she sees as "a necessary evil" (104). In the chapter called "Eighty Miles," which refers to the eighty miles from Maryland's Eastern Shore to freedom across the Mason-Dixon line, McBride signals intertextually to Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Through Kathleen's center of consciousness, the omniscient narrator muses about the interdependence between master and slave on her farm: "they were, she felt, part of her family, and hers, she felt, was part of theirs.... Yet, a space had opened up" (103). Into that space, geographically and figuratively represented by the phrase "eighty miles," McBride situates the King James Bible. Unlike Skiffington, however, for whom the public question of the institution of slavery is settled by appealing to a pro-slavery reading, for Kathleen the Bible far from settles the issue. For all her egalitarian aspirations—at one point, Kathleen's children work alongside slaves harvesting crops—Kathleen remains committed to socially-ordained racial difference:

> She believed the Negro was inferior—was sure of it—but lately she had taken to reading the Bible, something her late husband discouraged. The more she read the Bible, the less civilized slavery seemed. She'd even abandoned the Bible lately in favor of the newspaper, which only brought more troubling news: Negro breakouts, killings, rampages, all of which were quickly snuffed out by the local constables, who said, Don't worry, it is not a problem, we have the colored population under control. But it was not under control. (104)

In this passage it is not the Bible but the newspaper that is responsible for constructing racial profiles of restless African Americans. Like the white slave-

owners in *The Known World* who fear that Manchester County is "hemorrhaging slaves" (41), Kathleen fears, as well, that the Eastern Shore of Maryland has become "a siege for runaway slaves, a sponge for freedom seekers" (105). As the escapes and rebellions chronicled in the (somewhat paranoid) newspaper belie the illusion of social control, so the King James Bible slips out from under Kathleen's ideological and hermeneutic control. The warning from her late husband who discouraged her from reading the Bible seems to indicate that Bible reading may, indeed, be a subversive endeavor. The disturbances in the newspaper, in this sense, echo the disturbance created by a Bible that makes slavery seem "less civilized." From Kathleen's perspective the fear, then, is two-fold: a fear of what appears to be an inherent desire for freedom in African Americans held in bondage, and a related fear that appeal to a sacred text to give divine sanction to the institution of slavery is a futile enterprise. This is consistent with an overall suspicion of writing in *Song Yet Sung* as evidenced by the Code and its dynamic, performative orality as a superior form of communication for the "gospel train" to freedom. Indeed writing in the novel is often represented as duplicitous and deceptive as witnessed by a sign posted to inform free blacks of a meeting that turns out to be a trap to lure them back into slavery. The idea of extra-biblical, indeed extra-textual signs becomes the space for the emergence of a counter-narrative. The eighty-mile gap between borders of North and South points to a gap between two distinct hermeneutics that developed in nineteenth-century America, one that sees the Bible as a book central to private religious devotion and the other that approaches the Bible as a book that constructs public social relations. These two different reading constructs have powerful implications for the possibility of a counter-hermeneutic to the master narrative of Bible-sanctioned enslavement.

III. Private Devotion and Public Hermeneutics

The issue of a contradiction between private and public in the neo-slave narratives raises the subject of a difference between pro-slavery (privatized) Bible reading, emphasizing individual religious devotion, and African American public hermeneutics, that focuses on the Bible as a communal text with social and political consequences.[8] In *The Known World*, Skiffington's prior

[8] See my article "Private Interpretations: The Defense of Slavery, Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics, and the Poetry of Frances E. W. Harper," in Roger Lundin, ed., *There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 2007): 110–40.

commitment to the Bible defense of slavery (although he personally eschews owning slaves) ultimately makes the Bible inaccessible to him except as a privatized text, "something to companion his mood" (162). This is underscored by the fact that Skiffington is most often found reading the Bible at home by his bedside. His attempt to control the Bible's meaning by keeping it close to him "in the jail, on the northwest corner of his desk and … in his saddlebags" (43) is directly in proportion to his desire to appropriate the text for his own convenience: "He found it a comfort knowing that wherever he might be, God's word could be picked up and read" (43). Indeed, the concept of the Bible as his personal text is naturalized in Skiffington's mind when he "took out his Bible from the saddle bag and sat down under a dogwood tree. Before he opened the Bible, he looked all around, at the way the sun poured down over two peach trees and over the hills.… This is what my God has given me, he thought" (161).

The contradiction between Skiffington's public (law enforcement) and private (religious devotee) personae, however causes a failure of his hermeneutic when he finds himself confronted with difficult (and decidedly uncomfortable) parts of the Bible:

> Skiffington flipped through the pages … wanting something to companion his mood. He came to the place in Genesis where two angels disguised as strangers are guests in Lot's house.… It was one of the more disturbing passages in the Bible for Skiffington and he was tempted to pass on, to find his way to Psalms and Revelation or to Matthew, but he knew that Lot and the daughters and the angels posing as strangers were all part of God's plan.… So he read through the passage, and not for the second time, and not for the third, and not for the fourth. Then he moved on to Psalms. (162).

The Bible is reduced to a book Skiffington "flip[s] through" looking for meaning, guidance, consolation that will not come because the text remains at least partially closed to him. His privatized hermeneutic—assuming that the Bible only exists to "companion his mood"—leads him to completely gloss over the social difficulties of the text of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19 just as it renders him unable to make a clear moral choice with respect to slavery. At the end of the novel when he is shot attempting to apprehend Moses, a runaway slave, the moment of his death is described as a metaphorical transition to a different afterlife than he imagined and he is confronted

with a book much bigger than he had ever expected: "at the very end of the hall there was a Bible, tilting forward, a Bible some three feet taller that he was. He got to it in time to keep it from falling over, his hands reaching to prop it up, his open left hand on the *O* in *Holy* and his open right on the second *B* in *Bible*" (369). Skiffington is crushed by the text he purported to "uphold," a text which, in his view, upheld the institution of slavery. Indeed, the Bible was always much too big for him, and the tragedy of Skiffington is, in part, his failure to grasp the possibility of alternative interpretations of the text, ones that would challenge his assumption that the Bible sanctioned slavery.

However, it is a black female character in *The Known World*, an escaped slave named Annette, who provides a fitting counterpoint to Sheriff Skiffington, allowing Jones to make more a more nuanced argument about textual authority, hermeneutics and cultural memory. Indeed, Skiffington and Annette represent polar opposites: he representing the law and she, a fugitive slave, its transgression. Annette, the former maid to Belle who is married to Skiffington's cousin Counsel, had been dismissed as her maid because she had a "disagreeable" cough, represented by Belle as a defect, giving no thought for Annette's medical condition. Annette's story is told by way of a brief vignette that illuminates the tension for African Americans with a history of slavery between religious devotion and unbearable memory in this passage:

> The night that Belle Skiffington would die, that first maid, Annette, grown out of a cough that had plagued her for years, would open a Bible in the study of her Massachusetts home, looking for some verses to calm her mind before sleep. Out of the Bible would fall a leaf from a North Carolina apple tree that she had, the night she escaped with five other slaves, secreted in her bosom for good luck. She would not have seen the leaf for many years and at first she would not remember where the browned and brittle thing came from. But as she remembered, as the leaf fell apart in her fingers, she would fall into a cry that would wake everyone in her house and she could not be calmed, not even when morning came. (32–33)

According to this compressed portion of narration we learn that Annette escaped from North Carolina to Massachusetts with five other slaves, but before leaving takes a leaf of an apple tree "secreted in her bosom for good luck."

This nostalgic gesture which brings the prior space, North Carolina, and the prior condition of enslavement with her into the free space of Massachusetts enacts the movement of the neo-slave narrative. Yet, when she sees the object of remembrance again—re-visions it—there is a moment of misrecognition as the (presumably) green leaf has become "the browned and brittle thing." The brilliance in this passage, however, is in its pun—a literal leaf drops out of the Bible—and intertextual references to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Early in *Beloved*, referring to the ironically-named Sweet Home plantation, the narrator tells us that "there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her [Sethe] want to scream" (6). The presence of a real or imagined organic element from their respective plantations trigger for Sethe and Annette visceral, body responses that embody what Sethe terms in *Beloved* "rememory": "You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world" (36).

Adding to the irony for Annette in *The Known World*, her motive for reading the Bible is not unlike Skiffington's as she searched "for some verses to calm her mind before sleep." (Recall that Skiffington sought out something to "companion his mood.") Jones is suggesting, astutely, I think, that there isn't always much difference in the *way* in which African American and white readers approach the Bible (there is, for example, plenty of African American proof-texting). The difference lies in the memories triggered by the text, itself a keeper of certain elements of family and cultural memory and legacy. Annette, then, cannot enjoy the luxury of discovering scriptures that could help her sleep because of the presence of an extra-textual memory (represented by the leaf) which both is and is not part of the Bible. The figurative leaf, the passage suggests, could as easily have been a literal leaf or page of the biblical text. Moreover, Annette "fall[s] into a cry" not only because of the memory triggered by the object, but of its crumpling, its erasure. The sorrow is born of both the recovered memory and the loss of any tangible connection to the past that would validate and authenticate the pain. More importantly, perhaps, the loss of the leaf does not correspond to an erasure of the power of the experience to continue to shape Annette's life in freedom, as Byerman observes in discussing neo-slave narratives as "trauma stories": "they tell of both tremendous loss and survival; they describe the psychological and social effects of suffering. More importantly, perhaps, they tell of the erasure of such history and as a consequence, its continued power to shape

black life" (3). The "cry" that Annette falls into remains ambivalent as well as ironic. It is the cry of loss and sorrow in a space (Massachusetts) that should represent triumph and escape. The change in geography does not erase either the prior memory of having been a slave or the complex psychology and emotions associated with it.

IV. Cosmic Suffering and Black Liberation

All three of the novels reference the Book of Job, the text of cosmic (and undeserved) suffering. The Book of Job is divided into an older prose section (chapters 1-2; and 42) and a later, more complex poetic section (chapters 3–41). In contrast to the prose folk frame, from whence we get our notions of "the patience of Job," the poetry is filled with words of a Job who is in turn filled with despair, anger, demands and even self-pity: "Let the day perish wherein I ws born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived" (3:3). As a result of a wager between God and Satan (whose name in Hebrew means "adversary"), Job suffers the loss of his family, fortune and health in rapid succession; when the poetry begins, he is reduced to sitting among rubble surrounded by three friends who visit and attempt to comfort him. The poetry, thus, vacillates between the friends' flawed assessment of Job's situation (none of the characters in the poetic section are aware of the wager between God and the devil) and Job's attempts to defend himself before them and God.[9] John Skiffington in *The Known World*, acknowledging that "the words of God sometimes put his mind in a turmoil" (153), flips through the Bible "and settled on Job, after God had given him so much more, far more than what he had before God devastated his life" (153). That he focuses on the brief prosaic ending rather than wrestling with the moral implications of Job's plight in the poetry is indicative of Skiffington's failed hermeneutic.

In *Song Yet Sung*, the Book of Job comes up in a brief conversation Kathleen Sullivan has with her once-trusted slave Amber, about whom she is beginning to have suspicions. Kathleen brings up the subject of marriage, hoping to find a way to tie Amber down to the farm. He answers:

> —Yes ma'am, I've thought on it quite regular, Amber said. The book of Job do say, He that will go forth must multiply, don't it.

[9] Qiana Whitted has an interesting discussion of the Book of Job in Countee Cullen's poetry in her book *"A God of Justice?": The Problem of Evil in Twentieth-Century Black Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2009).

> That, too, gave Kathleen pause. She had wanted to teach Amber his letters, but her late husband stopped her. Still, he had the presence of mind to scrawl markings and pictures in the dirt to remind him of various Bible passages she had read to him. Everthing he did, she realized with what amounted to alarm, screamed runaway. (111)

Although Amber's quotation of Job is incorrect, his citation is evidence of a desire for literacy which Kathleen interprets, correctly, as a desire for freedom. Later in the conversation, Amber will mention that his late master, Kathleen's late husband, offered to allow him to buy his freedom. The alliance of an African American hermeneutic that reads the Bible as a book of liberation was alluded to earlier in Kathleen's recollection of her late husband discouraging her from reading the Bible and her own sense that it made slavery seem "less civilized." Even though Amber misquotes Job, I would argue, McBride's mention of the text signals the reader to its message of suffering and redemption. Amber may not have been able to read Job's story, but he has, in part lived the story of being singled out arbitrarily for a life of slavery.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison depicts an Edenic, nascent America before many of the categories of gender, property and race were stabilized. The novel is told through a series of third person narrations centered, largely, in one character's center of consciousness (with the exception of Florens, whose voice is in first or second person). It is in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, moreover, that we find a gendered reading of Job through Rebekka, Jacob Vaark's arranged bride who arrives on a ship from England. Realizing she is infected with the disease that has already killed her husband, she begins to hallucinate the voices of her female "shipmates" which recall Job and his "comforters":

> They had come to soothe her but, like all ghostly presences, they were interested only in themselves.... Well, she thought, that was the true value of Job's comforters. He lay wracked with pain and in moral despair; they told him about themselves, and when he felt even worse, he got an answer from God saying, Who on earth do you think you are? Question me? Let me give you a hint of who I am and what I know. (91)

Besides the obvious hint back to *Beloved*—"like all ghostly presences, they were interested only in themselves"—this passage sets up a dichotomy between the human voices of Job's friends and the voice of God who in the biblical text emerges in chapters 38–41 as the voice "out of the whirlwind"

(Job 38:1). Important for an understanding of Job as a narrative of suffering and redemption is whether or not Rebekka can identify with Job as the recipient of God's discourse:

> For a moment Job must have longed for the self-interested musings of humans as vulnerable and misguided as he was. But a peek into Divine knowledge was less important than gaining, at last, the Lord's attention. Which, Rebekka concluded, was all Job even wanted. Not proof of His existence—he never questioned that. Nor proof of His power—everyone accepted that. He wanted simply to catch His eye. To be recognized not as worthy or worthless, but to be noticed as a life-form by the One who made and unmade it. Not a bargain; merely a glow of the miraculous. (91)

That this language, put within Rebekka's consciousness, mimicks Morrison's own claim that her references to the Bible in her work were "the gesture of getting something holy" is instructive.

However, Rebekka ultimately experiences Job as an exclusionary text because of her gender:

> But then Job was a man. Invisibility was intolerable to men. What complaint would a female Job dare to put forth? And if, having done so, and He deigned to remind her of how weak and ignorant she was, where was the news in that? What shocked Job into humility and renewed fidelity was the message a female Job would have known and heard every minute of her life. No. Better false comfort than none. (91)

Rebekka's barrenness and failing health cause her to think deeply about the religious options around her. What attracts her to the Baptist women who "seemed flat to her, convinced they were innocent and therefore free" (92), is their certainty about the social order in an "ad hoc territory" (13) where identity is so destabilized. The firm sense of identity and belonging that Rebekka craves, however, comes at the price of a rigid hermeneutic: "Adam first, Eve next, and also, confused about her role, the first outlaw?" (98). Beyond gender, the Anabaptist theology further divided along racial and ethnic lines: "They understood, also, that here were lines of acceptable behavior and righteous thought. Levels of sin, in other words, and lesser peoples. Natives and Africans, for instance, had access to grace but not to heaven—a heaven they

knew as intimately as their own gardens" (98–99). "Other than themselves," Morrison's narrator tells us, "no one was saved. The possibility was open to most, however, except children of Ham. In addition there were Papists and tribes of Judah to whom redemption was denied along with a variety of others living willfully in error" (92).

Denied access to Job as a narrative of innocent suffering, Rebekka undergoes a change in order to find religious community among the women she previously felt were "even narrower … than her parents" (92). Scully, one of the two white male indentured servants on the Vaark land describes the change: "she laundered nothing, planted nothing, weeded never. She cooked and mended. Otherwise her time was spent reading a Bible or entertaining one or two people from the village" (145). Like Skiffington's fall from his father's stance to never own a slave, Rebekka's compromise with the Baptist women is marked by solitary reading of the Bible. The social consequences are clear in Rebekka's mistreatment of the women who used to work alongside her as equals and nursed her back to health: "When she beat Sorrow, had Lina's hammock taken down, advertised the sale of Florens, he cringed inside but said nothing" (155). With Rebekka's transformation and Florens' return the promises

> They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess. One thing was certain, courage alone would not be enough. Minus bloodlines, he saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them. (156) The hope, however, is in the word "yet" which hovers in this passage like the mother's discourse at the novel's end: "It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human heart" (166–67).

V. Meditation

In her courageous book, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*, Heather Andrea Williams documents a whole body of archival texts chronicling the desperation of post-bellum African Americans who sought to reconnect with loved ones. Toward the end of the book, she goes on to describe what must surely be the answer to the question posed by the neo-slave narrative: "some descendants [of slaves]

employ literature to call up the ghosts, to explore the memories, and to build their own written monuments to the people of the past."[10]

> Beyond literary representation, however, she remarks, "People did not forget the loss": Today, long after there is any chance that actual people can be found, descendants who did not know them, who only know that they must have existed … take up the search, hoping to find traces of their ancestors in the documents that individuals and institutions leave behind. They take on the role of genealogists, digging into the past in an effort to put their fingers on just who they came from and perhaps, too, who they are. These descendants, removed from the palpable and direct loss of those who lived during slavery, can still be haunted by the need to know, the desire to find out about those who were lost through sale or through the negligence of history. (191–92)

So I would like to end on a note both scholarly and deeply personal. While pursing the type of archival research Williams describes, I discovered information about my family that bore directly on the subject of the role of the King James Bible in the literature, lives, history and memory of African Americans. It is also a tale about the retrieval of archival memory. In 2005 I stumbled upon a deed in the archives of the University of Virginia showing that on June 23, 1891, my great grandfather, Lafayette Banks who may have been born in slavery, purchased five acres of land from Sarah Carter Randolph, the former mistress of Round Top Plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia, for $25.00 "cash in hand." Mrs. Randolph had been the wife of Benjamin Franklin Randolph, who was the son of Martha Jefferson and Thomas Jefferson's grandson. Round Top Plantation sat eight miles due south of Monticello and in 1891 my great grandfather became owner of a small piece of that land, marking the deed with an X. Lafayette was born in 1853 and died in Blenheim, Virginia in 1927. The 1910 census listed him as a widower and head of household consisting of one son Roscoe, my grandfather, described in the cryptic way of early census records as "mulatto" who was recorded as fifteen years old and "working out" as a farm laborer. At 57 Lafayette could, according to the census taker, read but not write.

[10] Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 192.

This family history frames the peculiar intertextual relationship between the King James Bible and the institution of US Chattel slavery. Specifically, discovering the document that recorded my great grandfather's transformation from (possibly) property to property owner, has led, more recently, to two other texts that provide insight into African Americans' complex relationship with the Bible. The first text was comprised of the Bible pages of the Randolph family inscribed "To B. F. Randolph from his Mother" which recorded the marriages, births and deaths of the white family from 1834–1896. This particular instance reminds us of how the King James Bible—in this case heavily annotated with handwritten hymns and sentimental religious poems—often serves as a keeper of family record and as a participant in reifying notions of Family in western, particularly American culture. In the case of African Americans, this sanctified notion of family stood in stark contrast to the equally sacrosanct inscriptions of race and property that turned African American women, men, and children into "chattels personal."

The second document was the actual *Diary of Benjamin F. Randolph* with entries from 1835 to 1843. To my utter astonishment, seated at a lighted desk in Small Special Collections at the University of Virginia, I opened the book to see written, at the top of page one, "References to Scripture authority for the Institution of Slavery." Painstakingly written in Protestant canonical order were entire proof-texted scripture verses from Gen 9:35—the curse of Ham—to 2 Tim 2:9 in the New Testament. Like his grandfather, Thomas Jefferson, who had cut holes in the Bible to discount the supernatural, forming the great homage to the enlightenment popularly known as *The Jefferson Bible*, Randolph had formed a canon of his own making, much smaller and narrower, one that ensured that the people he owned would be denied the right to the type of lineage inscribed in his family Bible pages. Indeed, the intertext between these two documents is uncanny given that he probably copied scripture verses from the very Bible in which his own family history was inscribed. African Americans, literally and figuratively, have been forced to "read between the lines" of the Bible and its often ideological (re)canonizations.

I will never know how my great grandfather felt as he handed over the $25.00 (his life savings?) to a former slaveholder. I take great comfort, however, in a small detail gleaned from the 1920 census, seven years before his death. In 1891 he has signed his name with an X. In 1910 he could read but not write. In 1920 the census taker records that, at the age of 67, he could both read and write.