"*The Genesis of Liberation*: The Enslaved and the Interpretation of Scripture"
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I, too, live in the time of slavery,

which mean[s] I am living in the future created by it.[1]

Saidiya Hartman

For the vulnerable, it is the violence of the ordinary,

the terrorism of the quotidian, the injustice of the everyday,

that produces the most profound and intractable social misery.[2]

Marc Lamont Hill

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[1] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 2007), 13.
[2] Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Atria Books, 2016), xx.

Introduction:

A. Lessons from Black Lives Matter on the Historic Reach and the Horrific Range of Violence

Perhaps the greatest boon and benefit of the Black Lives Matter movement is that it sensitizes us to lament a state-sponsored or state-supported societal violence that is at one time *historic* in its reach and *horrific* in its range.

1. Historic Reach

It is indeed *historic* in its reach. State-sponsored or state-supported violence in this country did not begin with the arrival of the latest forms of police brutality in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

We have seen this before in 1963 when poor black men, women, and youth had to overcome fire hoses, vicious dogs, and the unrestrained violence of those who too quickly could change from white hoods and burning crosses to blue uniforms and swinging billy-clubs.

We have seen this before in 1965 when a determined people in Selma faced a Bloody Sunday, a short-fused sheriff, and 150 sadistic state troopers whose brutality on the Edmund Pettus bridge—captured in fifteen minutes of footage by ABC News—would eventually force President Johnson to sign the Voting Rights Acts of 1965, with its key fourth and fifth sections to seek to overcome decades of disenfranchisement.

We—as a people—have seen this before in the decades-long serving up of black bodies to lynching trees, raped bodies to the whims and appetites of white masters, and displaced and dehumanized bodies to the free-labor exploitation of capitalist enterprises—clearing land and constructing roads in Massachusetts, pruning or packing tobacco in the Chesapeake, cultivating

rice fields all year long in the low country, and planting and picking cotton in the lower South. We have seen this before: a state-sponsored or state-supported societal violence that is *historic* in its reach.

2. Horrific Range

Yet a state-sponsored or state-supported violence can also be *horrific* in its range. As the Norwegian philosopher Johan Galtung has shown, violence does not come only in the form of direct, physical assault, though we have seen that form.[3]

a. Direct, Physical Violence

We have certainly seen the direct, physical form of violence n what James Baldwin, were he yet alive, would call "the bloody catalogue of oppression,"[4] a list now much too long to count but also much too dear to forget. We have seen its direct form when young men or women are choked, gunned, or beaten down by those sworn to protect them—when direct violence made seemingly expendable and negligible a list of lives that runs from Eric Garner to Michael Brown and from Sandra Bland to Walter Scott and from Freddie Gray to Tamir Rice.

[3] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (1969): 167-191.
[4] An excellent work on the nation's creation of a mass group of "invisibles" that included and goes beyond those victimized by police brutality is Marc Lamont Hill's *Nobody*. On Baldwin's "bloody catalogue of oppression," see "I am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition to the Documentary Film," 23.

b. Structural Violence

Yet, there is also something known as structural violence, which works behind the scenes in the distribution of power and for which there may not be an identifiable personal agent, but people are still hurt by it (such as in a state's programs or by its policies).

When your water in Flint tastes funny because public officials care more about fiscal discipline than about public safety, with the result that body rashes appear, hair lost occurs, and your children have learning disabilities from lead poisoning, that is structural violence.

When you are forced to live in an inner-ring suburb like Ferguson in St. Louis Country, Missouri because of restrictive racial covenants that allow outer-ring properties only to be sold to whites, that is structural violence.

When your nation has a greater propensity to incapacitate its young rather than to educate them,[5] and when its criminal justice system tolerates racial disparities in policing, prosecuting, and sentencing,[6] that is structural violence.

c. Cultural Violence—through Religious Traditions, including the Bible

Yet another form of violence is cultural violence, which seeks to hide either the direct or structural forms of violence by cloaking such violence with ideological justification. Sadly, this is where religion comes in. Religion has often been used as a source of cultural, ideological violence to condone direct and structural forms, to make killing or maiming appear natural or justified.

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[5] According to Elizabeth Hinton, the "prison system costs taxpayers $80 billion annually, and has become such a permanent component of domestic social policy that states like California and Michigan spend more money on imprisoning young people than on educating them." Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2016), 5.

[6] Marc Mauer, "Addressing Racial Disparities in Incarceration," *The Prison Journal* 91 (2011): 87-101.

The use of religion, including the bible, to justify taking lands belonging to Native Americans, as did the Puritan settlers and then annihilate many of the Native Americans for fighting to protect themselves—this is a form of cultural violence.

The use of religion, including the bible, to deny women enfranchisement and opportunities to participate in the upper echelons of the political and economic enterprises in this country—this is a form of cultural violence.

The use of religion, including the bible, to as a form of cultural *logic* to justify the dehumanization and enslavement of Africans as free labor—this is a form of cultural violence. One is using a so-called type of cultural *logic* to justify the *lash* (direct violence) and the *laws* that legalize the lash (structural violence). So, Blacks too have seen this before: a state-sponsored or state-supported societal violence that is *horrific* in its wide range of forms.

B. Troubling Issue for Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler, Jr. in their Recent Book: Slavers' Quest to Justify Direct and Structural forms of Violence with Appeals to the Bible

Indeed, what mostly troubles the bible scholars who co-authored the book from which this lecture has received its title (*The Genesis of Liberation*) is this third spoke in a three-spoke wheel of societal violence as sponsored or supported by a state: cultural violence. Let me then conclude this introduction with remarks about the title of the book, the task that largely motivated these bible scholars, and the thematic significance of their book in opening our eyes—in the spirit of Black Lives Matter—to cultural violence and to the courageous ways that the earliest Black biblical critics fought against the use of the Bible as a form of cultural violence against Black Lives.

1. The Title of the Work: *The Genesis of Liberation*

By "genesis" (or beginning), the authors

are not referring to

the *first group* of African in North America to voice opposition to slavery

nor are they referring to

the *first genre(s)* or literature type(s) to voice opposition to slavery.[7]

Rather, they refer to

the *first generation of the formerly enslaved* who critiqued the **cultural violence of those who used the Bible (aka The Talking Book) to support slavery and its dehumanizing effects on Black Lives**.[8] That is, if biblical criticism is an interpretive approach that self-consciously

[7] As early as 1774, for example, Phillis Wheatley had already implicitly critiqued slavery when she called the North American slaveholders "our modern Egyptians" in her "Letter to Reverend Samson Occum." On Wheatley's "Modern Egyptians," see Rhonnda Robinson Thomas, *Claiming Exodus: A Cultural History of Afro-Atlantic Identity, 1774-1903* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2013), 9. Furthermore, one of the earliest critical genres for critiquing various forms of white supremacy was the jeremiad (aka a "catalogue of critique"). See Bercovitch, 5-7. The pioneering anti-slavery activist Caesar Sarter, the poets Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon, and the political essayists David Walker and Maria Stewart all deploy the jeremiad, which was a call to reform that pronounces the irony between a nation's assumed chosen status as expressed in its foundational creeds or principles and its actual failures to live up to such creeds and principles a la the tradition of Jeremiah the prophet.

[8] In discussing the development of the "freedom narratives" from the beginning of the genre to the pre-Civil War period, Powery and Sadler draw on *The Signifying Monkey*, a classic work by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. The two authors note that the trope of a "talking book" (a Bible that did not actually speak to Blacks) in the "freedom narrative" genre eventually was replaced roughly from 1830-1861 by the trope of the self-authenticating author (the claim that the narrative was "written by him or herself"), which highlighted the author's literacy as a factor of an author's humanity (38). Henry L. Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*, a tour de force work on double-talk, argues that the "signifyin" trope links the African past (in the African oral tradition of the Yoruba trickster god Esu-Elegbara) to the African American trickster tales (e.g., the signifying monkey) and the African American literary tradition. Antebellum blacks' "signifyin" was then a subversive use of rhetoric to undermine the dominant discourse of the masters. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University, 1988). So, the "freedom narratives" that Powery and Sadler analyze–all of which were written between 1830-1861—do not have the "Talking Book" trope. What they emphasize instead is the humanity of the formerly enslaved authors, which was generally held in question by their white counterparts. According to, Jennifer Fleischner, racist slave ideologues "naturalized the enslavement of Africans by enshrining notions of the moral and physical superiority of whites over blacks." See Jennifer Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* (New York: New York University, 1996), 33.

appraises and evaluates the cultural use of the bible, select African Americans who wrote "freedom narratives" (from Frederick Douglass to Linda Brent [aka Harriet Jacobs]) took a *critical* stance toward those uses that supported violence against Black people—those uses that dehumanized Black Lives.

2. The Task of the Authors

While the authors list several tasks or motivations for writing the book, a key one is *to recover the voices of some of the earliest black critical interpreters of the bible*. Thus, while some casual observers may think that twentieth-century African American Biblical Interpretation is rooted in branches that stretched forth from the 1960s Black Theology Movement, Powery and Sadler argue that a more distant antecedent would be the writers of the African American Freedom Narratives who, where applicable, talked about the bible's cultural role with respect to liberation, "individual survival and communal uplift."[9] Thus, these early black bible interpreters not only spoke against using the bible to support cultural violence. They also subversively re-read or reinterpreted the bible for the sake of the flourishing of Black Lives.

[9] Powery and Sadler, 21-25. As a study in reception history, though, the co-authors (in their "Purpose of this Project" section) state five specific interests:

1) "To analyze the function of the Bible within the 'Freedom Narrative'"
2) "To reclaim early black interpreters"
3) "To explore critical readers from the 'underside'"
4) "To recover the early history of a black biblical hermeneutic"
5) "To show the extensive role of black agency" (18-25)

If all of these interests were brought together, it is possible to say that their book project seeks to illustrate how early (and critical) black interpreters took agency (despite the imposed limitations placed on them as a part of the "underside") by both challenging existing interpretive traditions of the Bible (especially on the question of slavery) and by developing a hermeneutic of their own.

3. The Thematic Significance of the Book for Our Study Today

Coursing through the veins of the co-authors' work then is a salient theme: the subversive rebuttal of what the authors call "biblically based supremacy readings."[10] Thus, the key objective of our study today is an examination of the ways in which our ancestors re-read the biblical text through a subversive lens for the purpose of liberation.

So, the lecture has ***four*** parts. ***First***, I wish to name and illustrate the biblical support structures used by slaveholders and other slave supporters who wanted to work cultural violence against Black Lives in the colonial or antebellum period. ***Second***, I wish to survey several counter-responses by which the abolitionists (of all stripes) countered the implicit cultural and ideological violence of the slaveholding society. **Third**, I wish to survey a range of subversive responses by African Americans in Slavery's Era, especially in freedom narratives and the Spirituals.[11] ***Fourth***, I wish to ask what is useful in our ancestors' counter-ideologies to help us today as we fight state-sponsored or state-supported cultural violence on behalf of Black Lives today.

I. The Slaveholders' Use of the Bible to Commit Cultural Violence against Black Lives

The perpetuation of what religious scholars Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler, Jr. called "New World" slavery required warrants, justification, structures of support, especially in those days when the original colonies and the later young Republic were being inspired by the

[10] Powery and Sadler, 2.
[11] As these are delineated by Riggins R. Earl, Jr., they are called "conversion testimonies, spiritual songs, ex-slave autobiographies, and trickster tales." See his *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 1.

Enlightenment's focus on freedom. So, despite the Enlightenment's own contribution to "triumphalist racialism," at the least it created a buzz about freedom.[12] The Enlightenment philosophically supported the idea that every person should be free.[13] At the very time when the Atlantic seaboard settlers should have been caught up in the Enlightenment-inspired fervor for universal freedom, however, slavers in the colonial, revolutionary, and antebellum-proper periods were looking for other non-philosophical (and, given the eventuality of the Declaration of Independence, apparently non-political) grounds of support (or ***views about Blacks***) to deny such freedoms to enslaved Africans, those whom they deemed as chattel property.[14]

A. The Slaveholders' Two Views about Blacks

1. The Naturalist View

2. The Christian Master View

[12] Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 34. I owe the term "racialist triumphalism" to Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Race," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 274-287.

[13] White Afro-Atlantic authors drew on the Enlightenment's notions of natural rights (a la John Locke) to seek freedom from the tyranny of King George III (as both Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson would do, for example, in 1776). See *Claiming Exodus: A Cultural History of Afro-Atlantic Identity, 1774-1903* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2013), 15.

[14] The Declaration of Independence speaks of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as inalienable endowed to all humans by their Creator. Cf. Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge University, 1993), 21. In truth, "in the first decade after the American Revolution, many slave owners faced the grim disparity between the new republic's ideals of natural rights (as stated in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights) and the horrible degradation of slavery." See Abraham Smith, "'There is More in the Text than That': William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Slave Ideology, and Pauline Hermeneutics," *SBL Seminar Papers*, (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 623. On an even earlier dating for the recognition of the inconsistency, see Clayton E. Cramer, *Black Demographic Data, 1790-1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 10.

On theological grounds, then, according to Riggins Earl, the slave-holding society denied humanity to those that they had enslaved in one of two ways: they declared them to be *soulless bodies* or *bodiless souls*. Either was a denial of the full humanity of enslaved Africans.[15]

Slide # 1: Soulless Bodies and Bodiless Souls

The Ideal Naturalist View: The Enslaved do not have souls.

The Ideal Christian Master View: The Enslaved have souls but enslaved bodies lack worth.

Either View allows the slaver to mistreat the enslaved and to see the enslaved as less than human.

So, ***on the one hand***, as Riggins Earl has noted, some slavers espoused an ideal naturalist perspective toward the enslaved, that is, they argued that the enslaved—thought to be a primate—did not have a soul.[16] Some of these naturalists even presupposed the notion of polygenesis, as did the physician Josiah Nott (1804-1872), the Craniometrist Samuel George Morton (1799-1851), and the Egyptologist Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz (1807-1873).[17]

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[15] Riggins Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 1. At the least, slavery was defended on "religious, philosophical, and political grounds." See Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 22. On the other hand, honor was likely also a factor. On honor as a factor, see, for example, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University, 1982).

[16] Earl, 11

[17] The American School of ethnology (Josiah Nott, Samuel Morton [with George Gliddon] and the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz) compared cranium types, insisted that culture-rich Egyptians were Caucasoids (thus, denying Africans the possibility of contributing to the world's culture), and advocated a theory of polygenesis (that is, that blacks evolved from a different species from whites). See Forrest G. Wood, *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 8. According to Adam Dewbury, "The work of the American School lent support to the institution of slavery, and also to the virulent racism of the nineteenth century America, a condition which in no small part persists today." Dewbury, "The American School and Scientific Racism in Early American Anthropology," *Histories of Anthropology Annual* 3 (2007): 121-147, esp., 122.

On the other hand, the naturalist view was contradicted by a perspective that was largely and most effectively promulgated later by Anglican missionaries, namely, that the enslaved had a soul, but that the enslaved lacked worth. Thus, the master—it was assumed—could aid the enslaved by converting the soul and setting the enslaved on the road to redemption and "whiteness."[18]

How did such slavers, then, deploy the bible to support their theological claims against the humanity of Blacks? What did the slavers find in the Bible, as they appropriated it from a fragmented/narrow canon, to deny Blacks humanity either as *soulless bodies* or as *bodiless souls*?

B. The Slaveholders' Purported Evidence for the Two Views

1. For the Naturalist Views: Polygenesis with or without the Bible

While many polygenists *did not support the bible at all*, one of them, Agassiz, argued that the bible was not about Africans. His polygenesis presupposes that "the tale of Adam refers only to the origin of Caucasians."[19] As Abbey L. Ferber notes, "He maintained that polygenesis was consistent with the Bible, because the Bible only described the origins of the Caucasians and did not discuss areas of the world unknown to the ancients."[20]

[18] See Earl, 16.
[19] Gould, 78.
[20] Abbey L. Ferber, *White Man Falling*, 30.

2. For the Christian Master View: Two Hermeneutical Approaches

For the second view, the slavers had two approaches: 1) a Hermeneutics of Sanctioning a Doctrine or a Political Position through Proof-Texts; and 2) a Hermeneutics of Silence.[21] First, though, let us define the term hermeneutics and then talk further about the types used by the slave-holders and slave-supporters.

Slide # 2: Terminology and Types of Hermeneutical Approaches

B. Terminology: The word "hermeneutics" refers to an approach by which the bible is interpreted or otherwise appropriated. The term is based on a Greek word *hermēneuein* ("to interpret"). Relatedly, Hermes, a son of Zeus in Greek mythology, was also known as one of Zeus' messengers or interpreters.

Types of Hermeneutical Approaches: The list below includes three strands of hermeneutical approaches that can be seen in the works of those who lived in the era of North American Slavery

Slide # 3: Two Types of Hermeneutical Approaches Used to commit Cultural Violence against Black Lives

A Hermeneutics of Sanctioning a Doctrine or a Political Position through Proof-Texts

Gen 4:1-14 (the so-called Curse of Cain)

Gen 9:25-27 (the so-called Curse of Canaan/Curse of Ham)

Philemon (a letter by Paul to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus)

Household Codes in Colossians and Ephesians

[21] On a hermeneutics of silence, see J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 167.

A Hermeneutics of Silence (Jesus Never Condemned Slavery)

a. A Hermeneutics of Sanctioning a Doctrine or a Political Position through Proof-Texts

A Proof-text is a text that is lifted away from its literary context and used often indiscriminately and irresponsibly to support a position. The Slavers or their supporters turned principally to three types of proof-texts: 1) Gen 4:11-14 (on the so-called curse of Cain); 2) Gen 9:25-27 (on the so-called curse of Canaan/curse of Ham); and 3) several proof-texts attributed to Paul.

1). The So-called Curse of Cain

Slide # 4: Prooftext Hermeneutics: Gen 4:1-14 (the so-called Curse of Cain)

1 Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced[a] a man with the help of the Lord." 2 Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6 The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." 8 Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field."[b] And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12 When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." 13 Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! 14 Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me."[22]

[22] Unless otherwise cited, all biblical texts emanate from the NRSV. Of course, the bible that was read or heard by our enslaved ancestors was the King James Bible.

For example, some slave supporters accepted a thesis that the curse on Cain was blackness. Sometimes, this view was held separately, but at other times it was linked to views about Ham, one of Noah's sons.[23] Some racists, like Samuel A. Cartwright and Jefferson Davis (before he assumed the Presidency of the Confederacy), for example, torturously linked the Hamite hypothesis to a thesis about Cain. For example, Cartwright argued that Cain found his wife among the pre-Adamite Negroes (in the land of Nod), the descendants of which were destroyed in the flood because of the mixing of races.[24] Finally, he argued that a pure race of the Negro continued through Canaan for whom Ham (Noah's son) was the headmaster, not the father. Davis accepted Cartwright's second thesis, but he contended that both Ham and Cain were miscegenists.[25]

2). The so-called curse of Canaan/Ham

Slide # 5: Prooftext Hermeneutics: Gen 9:25-27 (the so-called Curse of Ham)

25 He [Noah] said,
"Cursed be Canaan;
lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."
26 He also said,
"Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem;
and let Canaan be his slave.

[23]The view extends at least as far back as a twelfth-century German poem in which the progeny of Cain's descendants are declared both "black" and lacking in beauty. Some racists, like Samuel A. Cartwright and Jefferson Davis (before he assumed the Presidency of the Confederacy), linked the Hamite hypothesis to a thesis about Cain. For example, Cartwright argued that Cain found his wife among the pre-Adamite Negroes (in the land of Nod), the descendants of which were destroyed in the flood because of the mixing of races. Finally, he argued that a pure race of the Negro continued through Canaan for whom Ham (Noah's son) was the headmaster, not the father. Davis accepted Cartwright's second thesis, but he contended that both Ham and Cain were miscegenists. Also, for a while, the Mormons considered Blacks to be descendants of Cain.

[24] Cartwright supported a pre-Adamite thesis, i.e., that the first blacks were created before Adam and Eve and that the serpent was actually a Negro gardener.

[25] Also, for a while, the Mormons considered Blacks to be descendants of Cain.

27 May God make space for[a] Japheth,
and let him live in the tents of Shem;
and let Canaan be his slave."

Bishop John H. Hopkins banked on the so-called curse of Canaan to argue that slavery was not only not wrong but ultimately beneficial.

Slide # 6: Excerpt from "Letter from the Right Reverend John H. Hopkins, D.D" (p. 10)

"The slavery of the Negro race, as maintained in the Southern States, appears to me fully authorized both in the Old and the New Testament which, as the written Word of God, afford the only infallible standard of moral rights and obligations. That very slavery, in my humble judgment, has raised the Negro incomparably higher in the scale of humanity, and seems, in fact, to be the only instrumentality through which the heathen posterity of Canaan have been raised at all."

3). Pauline Prooftexts

Slide # 7: Prooftext Hermeneutics: Philemon (a letter by Paul to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus)

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:
3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.
8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9 yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15 Perhaps this is the reason he

was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

22 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.
23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Slide # 8: Prooftext Hermeneutics: Household Codes in Colossians 3:18-4:1and Ephesians 5:21-6:9

Colossians 3:18-4:1

3:18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. 22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.] 23 Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, 24 since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

5:21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. 24 Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 because we are members of his body.31 “For this

reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. 33 Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband. 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “Honor your father and mother”—this is the first commandment with a promise: 3 “so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” 4 And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. 5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; 6 not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, 8 knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

9 And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.

b. A “Hermeneutics of Silence”

With an argument by silence, the slavers also supported slavery by arguing that the slavery must have been endorsed by Jesus because Jesus never denied it.

II. Resistance Approaches to Cultural Violence by Abolitionists (of all stripes)

A. A “Hermeneutics of Immutable Principles”[26]

According to J. Albert Harrill, the abolitionists used this principle to find “the kernel of universal truth lying beneath the superficial meaning of individual passages. This hermeneutics disfavors interpretation of isolated texts and subordinates all reading to the discernment of that kernel of immutable principles, the core teachings of Jesus.”[27]

B. A “Hermeneutics of Moral Intuition” (a Hermeneutics of Conscience)[28]

[26] On this hermeneutics type, see Harrill, 169-170.
[27] Ibid., 170.
[28] On this hermeneutics type, see Harrill, 174.

Informed both by the Second Great Awakening (which favored experience) and Scottish Common-Sense Realism (which favored the conscience), the abolitionists turned away from literalist interpretations of the bible to allow the heart or the conscience (moral convictions) to give them a more faithful "access to God's higher law."[29]

III. Resistance Approaches to Cultural Violence by African Americans in the Era of Slavery

A. Writing against the Bible

Some of our ancestors wrote against the Bible. Lamenting both the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (which allowed fugitives to be captured and retuned to southern states but also denied free Blacks accused of being fugitive a hearing before such a transfer would occur) and the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision of 1857 (which denied citizenship rights to Blacks who thought they had it if they were residing in a free state), some Blacks in New Bedford Massachusetts stayed with the church but issued a petition against any biblical texts that purportedly supported slavery.

Slide # 9: The Petition of the New Bedford Third Christian Church

"Resolved, That we neither recognize nor respect any laws for slavery, whether from Moses, Paul, or Taney [the Supreme Court Chief Justice in the Dred Scott decision]. We spurn and trample them all under our feet as in violation of the laws of God and the rights of men." [30]

[29] Ibid., 174-175.
[30] Quoted in Harrill, 178.

B. Walking out on Select Interpretations of the Bible (a type of "Hermeneutics of Suspicion")

Some of our ancestors exercised what today we would call a "hermeneutics of suspicion," which refers to an interpreter's ability to unmask deception.[31] Such was the case when some enslaved Black worshippers exercised mutiny after hearing a sermon on Philemon in 1833.

Slide# 10: Black Mutiny in 1833

> I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle of Philemon: and when I insisted upon fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismission, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared "that there was no such an Epistle in the Bible"; others, "that they did not care if they ever heard me preach again." . . . There were some too, who had strong objections against me as a Preacher, because I was a master, and said, "his people have to work as well as we."[32]

C. Working with the Bible

[31] The term was first used by Paul Ricoeur. See Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1970), 356.
[32] Quoted in Harrill, 179.

In the words of Randall C. Bailey, some Blacks did not take the option of "telling . . . [their oppressors] to take their religion and shove it."[33] Instead, these Blacks from the era tried to work with the bible by deploying one of the following ***four*** typical approaches:

Slide # 11: List of Four Strategies of Biblical Interpretation Deployed by African Americans

1) Counter-hegemonic Proof-texting Approach

a. Appeal to the Exodus Paradigm

b. Appeal to the Ethiopia text in Ps. 68:31

c. Appeal "one blood" text in Acts (Acts 17:26)

2) Core Principles Approach (aka the "immutable principles" approach, one looks for a kernel or a core truth by which the rest of the bible is to be weighed)

a. Golden Rule

b. Great Commandments

c. Gospel Truth ("Gospel Rightly Understood," aka "True Religion")

d. Gospel of Luke's Nazareth Synagogue Programmatic Sermon (Luke 4)

3) Characterological Pattern Approach (aka the Typological Approach)

4) Coded Messages Approach (in-group double-talk to talk-back or plot escapes clandestinely)

1. Counter-hegemonic Proof-texting Approach

[33] Randall C. Bailey, 'The Danger of Ignoring One's Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text," in *The Bible and Postcolonialism*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 68.

a. Appeal to the Exodus Paradigm

The story of Exodus was a fitting counter to any passages that seemed to support slavery. Shortly after her own liberation, for example, Phillis Wheatley metaphorically appealed to the Exodus story to critique North American slaveholders. In in her "Letter to Reverend Samson Occum" (1774), she called the North American slaveholders "our modern Egyptians."[34] According to Rhonnda Robinson Thomas, moreover, in so referencing North American slaveholders "on the eve of the American revolution," Phillis Wheatley decentered the Exodus paradigm, that is, she replaced white Afro-Atlantic authors as the protagonists taking up the role of the Israelites with African Americans.[35] So, while the white Afro-Atlantic authors drew both on the Bible and on the Enlightenment's notions of natural rights to seek freedom from the tyranny of King George III (as both Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson would do, for example, in 1776), Wheatley argued that "Africans' pleas for liberty are equivalent to ancient Israel's prayers for deliverance from Egyptian slavery."[36]

Also, in his *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen,* Allen appealed to the Exodus story. In addressing white slaveholders, he wrote that God was "the protector and avenger of slaves" [and that] "God himself [sic] was the first pleader of the cause of slaves."[37]

b. Appeal to the Ethiopia text in Ps. 68:31

[34]On Wheatley's "Modern Egyptians," see Rhonnda Robinson Thomas, *Claiming Exodus: A Cultural History of Afro-Atlantic Identity, 1774-1903* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2013), 9.
[35] Thomas, 14.
[36] Ibid., 15.
[37] Quoted in Powery and Sadler, 136.

Slide # 12: Psalm 68:31

"Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." KJV

While appeals to Psalm 68:31 took on multiple forms after the Civil War, the term's first recorded use by African descendants as a cipher for people of African descent can be seen as early as the writings of enslaved intellectuals like Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon and Olaudah Equiano.[38] They adopted this lexical designation from their slaveholding English masters who, in the tradition of European geographers, used the expression "Ethiopian" as a generic term for all people from the African interior."[39]

In his *My Bondage and My Freedom* version of his autobiography, Douglass also views Ethiopia as a cipher for all persons of African descent.[40]

Slide # 13: Ethiopia in Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom*

> Since I have been editing and publishing a journal devoted to the cause of liberty and progress, I have had my mind more directed to the condition and circumstances of the free colored people than when I was the agent of an abolition society. The result has been a corresponding change in the disposition of my time and labors. I have felt it to be a part of my mission—under a gracious Providence to impress my sable brothers in this country with the conviction that, notwithstanding the ten thousand discouragements and the powerful hinderances, which beset their existence in this country—notwithstanding the blood-written history of Africa, and her children, from whom we have descended, or the clouds and darkness (whose stillness and gloom are made only more awful by wrathful thunder and lightning) now overshadowing them—progress is yet possible, and bright

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[38] As historian Albert Raboteau has noted, for example, after the Civil War, blacks interpreted Psalm 68:31 ("Princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands") in three different ways: (1) as a prophecy about the "African race"; (2) as a prophecy about the "redemption of Africa"; and (3) as an indicator of "the mission of the darker races." Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 42, 45, 51, 51–56.

[39] William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1993), 13.

[40] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 298.

> skies shall yet shine upon their pathway; and that "Ethiopia shall yet reach forth her hand unto God."

c. Appeal "one blood" text in Acts (Acts 17:26)

One of the most commonly used counter-hegemonic proof-texts was Acts 17:26. The text was a clear counter-narrative to the polygenesis ethnologists, but it also linked the humanity slave-holders and the enslaved against the notion that the bodies of African Christian converts were of no worth.

Slide # 14: The "One-Blood" Proof-text: Acts 17:26

"And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation." KJV

African descendants quoted the verse with a vengeance, arguably making it "a touchstone for their religious-political rhetoric of human unity and equality."[41] We may credit Olaudah Equiano with the earliest recorded use by an African in America,[42] but a veritable explosion of uses would occur in the nineteenth century.[43] In her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent (aka Harriet Jacobs) also appeals to Acts as she speaks about northerners who go to reside in the south.[44]

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[41] Demetrius Williams, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount, et. al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 236; cf. Edward L. Wheeler, *Uplifting the Race: The Black Minister in the New South, 1865-1902* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 46.

[42] "If when they [Europeans] look round the world, they felt exultation, let it be tempered with benevolence and gratitude to God, 'who hath made of one blood all nations of men.'" Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and William L. Andrews, eds. *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1172-1815* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1998), 210.

[43] On Richard Allen's use of the verse, for example, in his 1833 narrative, see Powery and Sadler, 57.

[44] Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 48.

Slide # 15: Citation of Acts 17:26 in Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

> They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who "made of one blood all nations of men!" And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?

2. Core Principles Approach (aka the "immutable principles" approach, one looks for a kernel or a core truth by which the rest of the bible is to be weighed).

Blacks looked for a core such as what they found in the Golden Rule, the Great Commandments, Jesus' sermon in the Lukan Nazareth synagogue, or what the enslaved Africans often referred to as the Gospel Truth, which was basically anything but what they observed at the hands of the slavers.

a. Golden Rule

Some of our ancestors relished the so-called Golden Rule (aka the Golden Precept, Mt 7:12/Lk 6:31) as the core of Jesus' teachings. This was the case for Olaudah Equiano, for example, in his *Interesting Life* narrative. Apparently, there were two principles that governed his life: one, being the principle of honesty, which he picked up in a familiar maxim; the other being the "Golden Precept."[45]

Slide # 16: Excerpt from Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*

[45] Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African Written By Himself*, 92.

"for I always remembered the old adage; and I trust it has ever been my ruling principle, that honesty is the best policy; and likewise that other golden precept—to do unto all men as I would they should do unto me."

b. Great Commandments

While Peter Randolph also spoke about the Golden Rule as a core principle, he also cherished the Great Commandments (condensing two of them into one) as central.[46]

Slide # 17: Peter Randolph comments on two core principles in *Sketches of Slave Life*

"This is the great commandment of the New Testament—'Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself.' 'Do unto others as ye would that they should do to you,' is the golden rule for all men to follow. By this rule shall all men be judged."

c. Gospel Truth ("Gospel Rightly Understood," aka "True Religion")

Religion for Frederick Douglass, at its core, was not tantamount to love-feasting, class-attending, prayer-making, and revival-going activity, such as he observed in the lives of the slave-driver Reverend Rigby Hopkins or the slave-breaker Edward Covey.[47] Their religion, as he explains in the appendix to his narrative, allowed them to be or to endorse "men-stealers" (aka slave-traders; cf. 1 Tim 1:10); "women-whippers," and "cradle-plunderers."[48] As he explains further, one has to make a distinction between "slave-holding religion" and "Christianity

[46] Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 16.
[47] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: The Anti-Slave Office, 1845; Dover, 1995), 79,95.
[48] Ibid., 129-130.

proper."[49] At its core, true religion then is the kind that is "true to life."[50] Drawing on James 3:17, Douglass then describes the core of religion for him.

Slide # 18: James 3:17 and Douglass' Description of True Religion

James 3:17 KJV	Douglass' True Religion
"But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy."	"I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land."

d. Gospel of Luke's Nazareth Synagogue Programmatic Sermon (Luke 4:18-19)

Some of our ancestors also appealed to the Nazareth Synagogue as the kernel of truth by which all should live. Peter Randolph did so, for example, in his Sketches of a *Slave Life*. To defend his brand of Christianity as a true religion in the face of criticism from slaveholders, he quotes and commends Luke 4:18-19.[51]

Slide # 19: Peter Randolph on Luke 4:18-19 in his Sketches of a Salve's Life

[49] Ibid., 128.
[50] Ibid., 133.
[51] Ibid., 15. Randolph also references Luke 4 elsewhere in his *Sketches* (41,48).

> The slaveholders say we have not a true knowledge of religion; but the great Teacher said, when he came on his mission, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. Ile hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captive, and recovering of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that arc bruised, and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." This ought to be the work of the ministers and the churches. Anything short of this is not the true religion of Jesus.

3. Characterological Pattern Approach (aka the Typological Approach)

African descendants richly internalized the Bible. Its ample mix of narratives and backstories about the struggles and successes of communities—whether about Israel or the early churches/assemblies—was a rich matrix in which African descendants were able to imagine or read themselves. Venerated Black Religion Charles Long makes this clear.

Slide # 20: Quotation from Charles Long on the Adaptation of the Bible by Enslaved Blacks

"[The Bible] was adapted to and invested with the experience of the slave."[52]

African descendants were thus able to find in the Bible patterns on which the world of their experiences, anxious fears, and highest aspirations could be mapped time and time again. The Black Spirituals, for example, arguably the portable survival tools of the enslaved, supported a typological biblical hermeneutics and a temporally and spatially open cosmology. The African captives read their own plights as an extension of the plots of the biblical characters. With this

[52] Callahan, xii; Long, 193.

typological framework, the slaves repeatedly viewed themselves as the chosen people of God and their masters as hell-bent.[53] Temporally, the biblical world and the present world lost their chronological distinctiveness. The centuries collapsed in the well-known "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" or in the familiar "God's A-Gonna Trouble the Water." The biblical characters were as intimate (Sister Mary, Brudder Moses) as another slave and their sufferings as near as one's own tragic lot.[54] In addition, characters in the Hebrew bible freely moved in the narrative world of the New Testament.[55] Spatially, the slaves expanded the limits of their universe, recreating their low statuses with a higher status ingredient to their newly expanded worlds.[56]

So, when the slaves appropriated the Bible, they found in its themes and images a linguistic reality to challenge their own sordid experiences, they remythologized its concepts to speak cryptically to their own people, and they broadened the semantic codes of the bible to make fluid the borders between the biblical world and the slaves' world. They created a space, and as Donald Matthews has noted, "Creating this cultural space was a dialectical process in which Africans affirmed in their sacred music precisely what was being negated in their everyday world."[57]

Accordingly, leaders of the underground railroad and of the revolts typically drew on the diction of the bible. According to Dick Russell, Prosser, Vesey and Turner "all cited biblical passages to inspire their followers;"[58] Turner particularly drew on apocalyptic biblical passages

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[53] Lawrence Levine, 34-45.
[54]On the temporal fusion of the two worlds, see Levine, 37; Raboteau, 33.
[55] See Bailey, 70.
[56]Levine, 32,33.
[57]Donald H. Matthews, *Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature* (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 30.
[58]Dick Russell, *Black Genius and the American Experience* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1998), 408.

(e.g., Revelation 6:2); and Harriett Tubman, a conductor on the underground railroad and herself a slave rebellion agitator, allegorized the biblical story of the Israelites' enslavement to send coded messages to slaves seeking escape.[59]

4. Coded Messages Approach (in-group double-talk to talk-back or plot escapes clandestinely)

What Henry Gates calls "signifyin" (and others call "artful ambiguity") was a key mode of discourse for African Americans in the antebellum period and beyond.[60] Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*, once a tour de force work on double-talk, argues that the "signifyin" trope links the African past (in the African oral tradition of the Yoruba trickster god Esu-Elegbara) to the African American trickster tales (e.g., the signifying monkey) and the African American literary tradition. Antebellum blacks' "signifyin" was then a subversive use of rhetoric to undermine the dominant discourse of the masters. As the Reverend. L. S. Burkhead reveals in his autobiography: "I remember how we used to have to employ our dark symbols and obscure figures to cover up the real meaning."[61]

The enslaved preacher developed this art in order to speak cryptically to fellow captives., but the art extended beyond the enslaved preacher. Commenting on the use of double-talk in black songs, Frederick Douglass writes in his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), the following:

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[59]Ibid., 409.

[60]Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University, 1988); Banks, 6.
[61]Earl, vii.

Slide # 21: Frederick Douglass on Coded Messages[62]

We were, at times, remarkably buoyant, singing hymns and making joyous exclamations, almost as triumphant in their tone as if we reached a land of freedom and safety. A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of

'O Canaan, sweet Canaan,

I am bound for the land of Canaan,'

something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the north—and the north was our Canaan.

'I thought I heard them say,

There were lions in the way,

I don't expect to Star [stay?]

Much longer here.

Run to Jesus—shun the danger—

I don't expect to stay

Much longer here.'

was a favorite air, and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but, in the lips of our company, it simply meant, a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.

[62] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 278-279.

IV. The Utility of our Ancestors' Subversive Strategies as we fight state-sponsored or state-supported cultural violence on behalf of Black Lives today.

So, what are the take-aways? What can we learn from our study of the cultural violence done to our ancestors and our ancestors' subversive attempt to fight the cultural violence in the era of North American slavery? I suggest there are ***three*** important take-aways, though perhaps you could suggest yet others.

A. Biblical Texts can be used to do Violence because they have Cultural Capital

In the several centuries that have passed and gone since the "biblical books were compiled over a period of some 700 years," Christians have used these texts to victimize "children, women, Jews, the disabled [or better, those located as disabled], witches, people of color, slaves, scientists, criminals, heretics, and even animals, nature, and the environment."[63] It appears, then, that biblical texts have a rhetorical appeal such that Christians (and others) frequently cite them to support arguments on the social and public policies of their day. In effect, these texts are attributed some sort of cultural capital in decision-making processes and in how certain groups define themselves against others.

What is interesting to note, moreover, is that some of the same basic steps taken to commit cultural violence against one group or to make villains out of one human grouping in one historical period are used to create another, newer set of villains in another historical period. So, for example, if nineteenth century Christians could take a handful of isolated texts to build "a flimsy edifice of interpretation, judgment, and rejection" to support slavery and to deny suffrage to women, then, yet other handfuls of texts pasted together would be used by the Nazis to fan the

[63] Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 5-6.

flames of anti-Jewish sentiment and violence or by white South Africans to sanction apartheid or by twenty-first century Christians to repress sexual minorities.[64] And so, *bully-gesis* continues. Thus, the biblical texts have become not simply stories, chronicles, and letters. They have become texts that figure into consistent, recurring patterns of caricaturization, victimization or demonization. These texts, in effect, are made to mirror the politics of those who appropriate them, to participate in the binaries that are perennially used to control and wield power over others. In other words, the use of the biblical texts is really about power, about control.

B. Biblical Texts can be used to do Cultural Violence because they depend *a priori* on Hermeneutical Strategies

The biblical texts alone do not have force as cultural capital to do violence. Part of the power of these texts to do violent damage lies with the hermeneutical strategies we take to interpret or otherwise appropriate them. Assignments of a preference for one set of hermeneutical strategies over another, then, are also dynamics of power. If African descendants tended in some instances to interpret the bible in ways that mimicked their oppressors, perhaps they did so not because they wanted to do so but they had to do so. That is, if in any given period there are acceptable standards for what constitutes good arguments, many of us are forced to buy into certain arguments even if those same intellectual standards are not always accepted by every successive generation.

So, one of the things that we must begin to do is to interrogate not only the bible but our standards of what constitutes acceptable arguments about biblical interpretation. Perhaps, what we need then is what Musa Dube would call a "curriculum transformation," that is, a

[64] Ibid.

transformation that would take seriously interrogate what we take to be acceptable ways to appropriate the bible. Put another way, are we constantly committing violence against one group or another because we are still focused on a Western practice of trying to get the "meaning" of a text. If we did not believe that getting "the meaning" was critical, no one could then turn to a text with the expectation of thinking that it was necessary to convince others of one position over another.

C. Biblical Texts can be used to do Cultural Violence because they depend on Convictions that we already have about the persuasive appeal of the Bible

Most of us approach the bible already having a set of prevailing convictions that function like pre-interpretive perspectives for what we think the bible is, what we think the bible does, or the authority we think it has (which, of course, is always an ascribed authority).[65] Such convictions are not solipsistic (just in our individual heads) but are very much "culturally ordered. . . ."[66] One such conviction, which has the backing of most denominational bodies, for example, is the doctrine of biblical authority. The doctrine, which is of relatively recent vintage, attributes authority to the [whole] bible as a normative source for making "beliefs, activities or positions credible."[67]

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[65]Note that Brad R. Braxton defines *biblical authority* not as a textual property but an attributed value by specific interpretive communities. See Brad R. Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 37. Accordingly, engagement with a biblical text does not mandate a community's automatic assent to the text's assumed values. Likewise, Braxton views *biblical inspiration* as a "byproduct of a religious text's *usefulness* in a religious community" (34). Thus, historically, beyond early religious communities' assumption of divine revelation as a valid claim, biblical inspiration *was possible* only through several processes occurring in those communities, namely, the composition, codification and canonization of texts deemed useful or valuable to the communities (32-34). And, for contemporary religious communities, biblical inspiration *is possible* only because these communities both respect the documents' foundational utility and deem them as yet having theological relevance for contemporary audiences (31-37).

[66] Bielo, 5.

[67] Susan McClintock Fulkerson, "Church Documents on Human Sexuality and the Authority of Scripture," *Interpretation* 49 (2001) 51.

Yet another ideological commitment that often goes unexamined is the view that the bible is the "Word of God." However innocent the expression may seem, it is not. In fact, this confessional claim often breeds bibliolatry (or worship of the bible). So, I think this study should make us aware that cultural violence is possible with the bible because of our conceptualizations of how or why the bible impacts identity formation for human groupings.

Of course, these convictions about the bible are based on what Mary Ann Tolbert would call "[t]he institutional voices of the Christian church, in all of its many divisions."[68] These voices often control "not only the publication of biblical interpretations but also the education of those who read the Bible—from scholars to pastors to congregants."[69] These voices also control who is allowed to become ordained and who is not allowed—and which new group becomes the latest victim in a long litany of monsterization and cultural violence —all in the name of God. So, the greater work to be done likely lies in creating venues through which we may begin to demystify the propaganda ports of the aforementioned institutional voices. If there is to be an intervention to stop cultural violence against Blacks, women, the LGBTQ community, the poor and yet others cast away as vulnerable, that intervention must assess every moment in our "cultural circuits," that is, "in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct." [70] It will come only when we recognize, as James Baldwin did many years ago, that "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."[71]

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[68] Mary Ann Tolbert, "What Word Shall We Take Back?," in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible,* ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2000), x.
[69]Tolbert, xi.
[70] Hall, 4.
[71] James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984), 163.