
Setting Down the Sacred Past

AFRICAN-AMERICAN RACE HISTORIES

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp

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Contents

Introduction	1
1 Wonders of the Ancient Past	16
2 The Children of Gilead	65
3 The Serpentine Trail	109
4 Exodus and Ethiopia	154
5 The Negro Race History	201
6 “The Grand Traditions of Our Race”	234
Conclusion	276
Notes	287
Acknowledgments	333
Index	335

4

Exodus and Ethiopia

Dear brethren, I want you to examine yourselves well in the glass, and consider all things well, and thus you will discover what is good for you in time and in eternity. Let us think of Africa for a few moments. Know you not that, in the beginning, the blessed Lord gave this great quarter of the earth to our nation, and bade us keep the Law and live?

DANIEL H. PETERSON, *The Looking-Glass* (1854)

When Daniel Peterson, an AME minister from Baltimore, embarked on a tour of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Gambia in 1853, he cited several reasons for his trip: to bring the gospel “to my brethren,” to speak to the heads of government about the prospects for future emigration, and to see for himself the condition and potential of the “heathen.” But he also wanted to communicate with African Americans—not just about Africa but also about their own situation. Peterson published his “report and narrative” the following year, and its title, *The Looking-Glass*, conveyed his intent. He called upon blacks to “examine yourselves well in the glass, and consider all things well, and thus you will discover what is good for you in time and in eternity.”¹

On the face of it, Peterson’s emphasis might seem odd: why did the clergyman need to cross the Atlantic to call for self-reflection? What kind of mirror could such travel provide? The obvious motivation for his trip was the escalation of racial tensions after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Increasing numbers of black leaders since then had given up on the notion of peaceful coexistence with whites in an integrated country, and blacks and whites alike turned to the prospect of African colonization with new interest. The American Colonization Society sponsored Peterson’s trip and published his report in an effort to encourage African Americans to see Africa as a viable possibility for migration. With the collective future of

blacks in the United States looking increasingly bleak, Africa also proved a fertile place to imagine the possibilities for cultural development.

Peterson's report went well beyond the mechanics of movement to weave a broader tale of history, kinship, and salvation. Africa would assist African Americans in their spiritual discernment, the preacher argued, because the fate of black Americans was entangled with the destiny of that continent, and knowing the divine history of the African people was necessary for their salvation. God's sacred intent was that African Americans would one day re-occupy their homeland. But it would happen only after they ceased their backsliding ways. Slavery had occurred for a reason, he insisted: "In the beginning, the blessed Lord gave this great quarter of the earth to our nation, and bade us keep the Law and live. . . . But our progenitors were rebellious and disobedient, and refused to serve the true and living God." As it had been for the children of Israel, exile from their homeland was a punishment and enslavement a divine chastisement. The salvation of the race, Peterson asserted, depended on the will of the people to follow God's ways and thereby reclaim Africa for themselves and for Christ: "I believe that great treasures are embedded in those lands, and that only understanding and enterprise are wanting to bring them to light. It remains for us to go forth, sons and daughters of Ethiopia, embrace our privileges, obtain the lands, dwell thereon, and become a great nation."²

Peterson was only one of many nineteenth-century African-American leaders to write about the significance of Africa. Motivated by political expediency, missionary fervor, and race consciousness, Peterson and others made connections—temporal as well as spatial—between the fate of American blacks and the destiny of African peoples. Their accounts in turn stimulated more travel and reporting back home. Whereas Haiti was seen as a New World exemplar and redeemer for the race, Africa was the motherland, the connecting link with family and history, the place of origin. While Haiti symbolized the future, Africa represented the past. Whereas union with Haiti represented a political and religious choice, *reunion* with Africa represented ties of blood that were far more fraught and spiritually significant. By the middle of the nineteenth century, few African Americans had direct family connections with native-born Africans. But that hardly diminished the importance of Africa as a subject of desire and concern.³

Like all missionary accounts, the stories of Peterson and his comrades

have a formulaic quality; in their desire to convince readers to support the cause, authors stressed the obvious urgency of the moral situation. In Gambia, Peterson related, "I walked through the markets and saw the people lying about in the sand like pigs, half naked, both heathen and Mahometans, loaded down with charms and idols, going about shaving each other's heads."⁴ He juxtaposed discussion of Muslims and "others" who wore idols with a lengthy passage on criminality. These accounts reflect a curiously hybrid collection of history, ethnography, climatology, and demography, and that very eclecticism leaves space for the voices of missionaries to emerge in distinctive ways.⁵ Some express prurient interest in African sexuality or religious practices; others spur readers to action; and still others entertain with daring exploits. On lecture tours, as well as in articles in black periodicals and published books, African-American missionaries taught home audiences about Africa and about themselves. By constructing particular kinds of relationships to a place and a people, missionaries hoped to shape the future of both Africa and African Americans.

African-American missionary narrators—Daniel Peterson, Thomas L. Johnson, Alexander Priestley Camphor, Amanda Berry Smith, and William Sheppard, among them—were popular in African-American communities. Southerners themselves, they spent much of their lives in the states, yet they lectured widely at black colleges and churches about the significance of Africa for everyday black people. Many had strong connections to white-run church organizations, and few had any real desire to sever those connections; indeed, they saw the cause of Africa as a Christian cause, one that might best be met by black evangelists, but that ultimately served the cause of Christ, not simply the African race. Most of them were also colonizers, men and women who believed that American economic and political institutions run by African-American emigrants could bring African nations up to their own standards of civilization. Thus in writing about the meaning of Africa, missionary authors sought to create communities defined simultaneously by race, religion, and colonial interests.⁶ Their accounts instilled a historical memory of Africa and ushered ordinary African Americans into both a global evangelical project and a localized colonial endeavor.

African Americans, both slave and free, had obviously thought about Africa for a very long time. Familial links to the continent grew increasingly atten-

uated by the early nineteenth century as the trafficking in slaves declined, but this did not stop slaves from continuing to pass along stories about returning “across grandywater.”⁷ For Northern blacks, even more removed from the direct experience of that homeland, the meaning of Africa began to change. By the 1810s their stories designated Africa as a homogeneous and sacred location rather than as a constellation of separate ethnic groups. Ancient Egypt and Ethiopia stood in for the continent as a whole as a symbol of collective accomplishment. Free blacks learned about Africa through contemporary Euro-American scholarship, although as late as the 1850s a centralized body of scientific knowledge about the continent simply did not exist. Instead, current knowledge consisted of highly dispersed and simultaneous discourses from travel writers, biologists, men of letters, and antislavery Christians, all writing for specific audiences with particular objectives.⁸ This last source, abolitionist rhetoric, proved most accessible and influential for African Americans, inasmuch as it provided information circulated by leaders whose opinions they trusted. But despite myriad resources, free blacks’ impressions of Africa continued to be shaped largely by classical literature and biblical prophecy rather than by contemporary accounts.

This base of knowledge changed as African Americans gradually began to return to Africa themselves, forging new connections to the homeland. In the late eighteenth century, Great Britain established Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa as a place of settlement for its own poor blacks, but it soon served as a refuge for migrants from the United States and the Caribbean as well. Its founding spurred Northern free blacks to consider seriously the prospect of emigration. From the beginning, free blacks were divided over the wisdom of such a move. The black Masons of Boston, led by Prince Hall, agitated for assistance in helping free blacks move back to Africa in 1787, with more than seventy-five signatories in support; the Free African Society of Philadelphia, on the contrary, rejected the concept entirely. The movement for African settlement was further complicated by the formation of the American Colonization Society in 1816.⁹ Although African Americans remained involved with the ACS throughout its existence, many black leaders roundly criticized the organization and retreated from emigrationism as a result. Throughout the antebellum period, debates over colonization, freighted by the overtly racist motives of some proponents, inevitably focused on agency and intention. Would blacks be required to emigrate? The

actual number of emigrants to Africa before 1860 remained very small, much smaller than the number going to Haiti. Probably only 10,000 African Americans settled in Africa before 1861, nearly all under ACS auspices. Between 1820 and 1833, only 169 African Americans from the North emigrated to Liberia.¹⁰

More significant than the human movement was the new supply of knowledge about contemporary Africa that the founding of Sierra Leone (and in 1820 Liberia, under ACS auspices) provided. Paul Cuffe, a wealthy and well-connected Boston sea captain and merchant, was among the first African Americans to report back on a trip to Sierra Leone. Cuffe, ever the entrepreneur and missionary, envisioned an international commercial enterprise that would unite the economic and spiritual interests of Africans and black Americans. In 1812 he published an account of a trip in which he described meeting native peoples from various tribes in Africa, including the king of the Bullone tribe. Cuffe gave Bibles to the Bullone as a gift and told them how useful the books could be. But he concluded that “so accustomed are they to wars and slavery that I apprehend it would be a difficult task to convince them of the impropriety of these pernicious practices.” He also related a more auspicious encounter with the Muslim “Mendingo” tribe, a group that in Cuffe’s estimation exhibited the virtues of education and abstention from alcohol. They did, however, traffic in slaves, a vice that the Quaker Cuffe attributed to Islamic influence. Cuffe tried to convince them that the practice was wrong, but “the prejudice of education had taken too firm hold of their minds to admit of much effect from reason on this subject.” From the beginning, Cuffe envisioned the encounter as an exchange as much spiritual as it was economic, an ongoing relationship in which African Americans could offer “civilized” customs and beliefs in return for renewed ties to their homeland.¹¹

Between 1816 and 1850 the ACS emerged as the most consistent public voice on African emigration. Its official organ, the *African Repository*, served as a significant source of information about Liberia for those back home, influencing conceptions of the morality and inevitability of Christian progress. The paper was, of course, primarily a “testimonial for colonization,” and it relied heavily on letters of praise and African travel books to make its point.¹² Its opinions about African natives were heavily influenced both by the Christian impulse to evangelize the heathen and by the desire to pro-

mote patriotic support for Americo-Liberians in their ongoing civil war with indigenous peoples, both of which contributed to consistent reports stressing the immorality of natives and the Christian valor of the new settlers. Typical were the sentiments of Hilary Teage, editor of the *Repository* from 1835 to 1850 and a Liberian missionary. Teage, an extremely influential figure on both sides of the Atlantic who would eventually write Liberia's declaration of independence, composed a hymn that was published in the *Liberia Herald* and reprinted in the *African Repository* in 1837. A paean to God, the song included in its verses the history of the civil war in Liberia between patriots and native peoples, the latter of which are portrayed as dimwitted and brutish heathens facing the forces of righteousness.

Other early black missionaries to Africa voiced similar understandings of the place of their African work in the longer span of Christian progress. The former AME minister and organizer Daniel Coker, en route to Liberia as a missionary in 1820, spent his time on shipboard reading *The History of the Propagation of Christianity and Overthrow of Paganism*, a missionary tract penned by the eighteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian Robert Millar. Coker clearly absorbed Millar's narrative of the global march of Christianity that would eventually enlighten the most ignorant heathen.¹³ Coker's subsequent descriptions of the "Cruemen" he observed upon landing stressed their pitiable religious state: "They adhere to their superstition, of charms and witchcraft—I stood on deck and looked at these children of nature, till streams of tears ran down my cheeks."¹⁴ Like most American observers of the day, Coker used stock images of the continent borrowed from evangelical missionary rhetoric: "I expect to give my life to bleeding, groaning, dark benighted Africa," wrote Coker to Jeremiah Watts of Baltimore.¹⁵ Coker, Teage, and others saw the salvation of Africa as a matter of Christian enlightenment, a story in which they would be the benevolent bearers of civility and progress.

Yet constant publicity could have unanticipated consequences, and at times ACS publications conveyed more ambiguous information than the authors realized. The *African Repository* in the 1830s and 1840s featured numerous articles containing intriguing facts about African cultures that did not necessarily correspond to their tales of progress from darkness to light. Some gave fairly relativistic renderings of local religious systems, such as the piece by an anonymous writer who acknowledged dispassionately that "the

idea of virtue differs in different countries.” Providing examples from Scandinavian and Greek mythology, the author concluded that “savages have *their* virtues; and although they may exclude other nations from the benefit of their operations, still, as it regards themselves, they connect happiness with the practice of these virtues.” His report critiqued the Africans’ alternative ethical systems but still conveyed some awareness that they contained internal coherence.¹⁶

Through the late 1840s, the focus of missionary supporters—driven almost solely by the ACS and its public relations campaign—rested exclusively on Liberia and Sierra Leone. Among the majority of African Americans opposed to ACS politics, discussion of emigration—to Africa or elsewhere—languished after the failure of the Haitian movement in the 1820s. Although a small, steady stream of settlers continued to move to Liberia, the unstable political situation there, as well as the country’s associations with the ACS, made it a poor prospect for support. The Southern Baptist Convention appointed its first missionary to Nigeria in 1849, but the effort was initially small-scale and lacked support from African-American leaders.¹⁷ In the early 1850s, the domestic political situation for blacks deteriorated further with the Compromise of 1850 and passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, a measure that compelled whites to return fugitive slaves to their owners or face criminal penalties. Northern whites and African Americans saw this development as one more effort to restrict the freedom of all blacks, since it denied a fugitive’s right to a jury trial and encouraged a cottage industry in slavecatchers who could stop any black person to ascertain his legal status. Free blacks were rounded up and sent to Southern states. The Act led tens of thousands of African Americans in Northern states, fearful for their communities, to flee across the border into Canada, and many others turned to emigration as a last resort. African-American leaders once again reinvigorated debates about resettlement, opening up discussion of movement to a much wider range of possibilities: Canada, Mexico, or the West Indies, as well as Africa. Liberia retained the taint of association with the racist policies of the ACS. But other parts of Africa were about to emerge as likely prospects for the civilizing mission.

The opening of Central Africa to evangelization and potential settlement was facilitated less by missionary interest than by the earliest wave of a new Euro-American breed: the imperial missionary explorer. Typified by David

Livingstone, the explorer was a hardy adventurer, naturalist, and publicist who brought the wilds of Africa into the living rooms of British and American readers. In 1857 the publication of two travel accounts written by European adventurers electrified audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Thomas Bowen's book *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labours in the Interior of Africa*, and David Livingstone's work *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, dazzled European and American audiences with tales of the travelers' courageous exploits in the "dark heart" of the continent. These narratives focused on the daring achievements of heroic masculine figures struggling against brute nature and animal savagery. Although the advent of exploratory expeditions owed as much to the widespread use of quinine to prevent malaria as to any intrinsic interest in the continent, it would be difficult to underestimate their appeal and power to fuel domestic interest. The texts would serve as touchstones for all subsequent missionary labor (and imperial expansion more generally) in Africa, and they were particularly important in reinvigorating African-American interest in emigration. Could other areas of Africa provide possibilities for settlement untainted by the motivations of the ACS? And, simultaneously, might not African Americans emerge as the heroic bestowers of light to their heathen brethren?¹⁸

Martin Delany thought so. A member of the AME Church, a Freemason, and an outspoken critic of the ACS, Delany had been converted to the cause of emigration in the early 1850s. After reading Bowen's and Livingstone's texts, he agreed to head an exploration party in 1859 that would trace Bowen's journey through the Niger Valley. Interested in prospects for black settlement, Delany was more attentive to the economic than the spiritual potential of the area; he reported on the vegetation, soil, local diseases, and trade more meticulously than he observed the people. Yet he couched his report in an unmistakably historical framework: alluding to Africa's ancient glory, he observed that Africans had once had a vibrant culture and now awaited "regeneration." His initial encounters with natives were quite positive: "They are shrewd, intelligent, and industrious, with high conceptions of the Supreme Being, only using their images generally as mediators." Delany concluded that they could be readily Christianized. In some respects,

moreover, they were still exemplary; reading their significance through the lens of ancient African civilizations, he compared their buildings favorably with those of Babylon, Ninevah, and Tyre.¹⁹

Like other antebellum black missionaries, Delany assumed that the future of Africa lay in its ability to accept Protestant Christianity and political leadership from African Americans. Previous efforts by foreign missionaries, he asserted, had led to “visible evidences of a purer and higher civilization.” It was now time for American blacks, who were by virtue of their shared race better equipped to launch missionary efforts, to provide substantial material aid and human labor to lead Africans toward civility. When he met with the king and chiefs in Abbeokuta, he promised them that “no heterogeneous nor promiscuous ‘masses’ or companies, but select and intelligent people of high moral as well as religious character were to be induced to go out [emigrate].” They would teach the natives Christian habits—to eat with utensils, to sleep in beds, and to wear more clothes—but would not compel them to change their names, a practice he considered abhorrent: “A loss of name, and so far loss of identity.”²⁰

But if black Americans could give Yorubaland the benefits of Christianity and civilization, as Delany understood them, Africa also had much to give back. Delany’s report made it clear that only by returning to Africa would African Americans become fully human. In his text he quoted the words of a black teacher who had written to him in 1858: “I have read Bowen’s work, and shall to-day purchase Livingstone’s. I am more and more convinced that Africa is the country to which all colored men who wish to attain the full stature of manhood, and bring up their children to be men and not creeping things, should turn their steps.” The gendered language here is noteworthy; as was the case with the Haitian emigration movement, African-American men associated the move to Africa with the attainment of manhood, something denied them by the oppressive racial restrictions of Euro-American society. But as in Haiti, the paradox was evident even if unstated: to become human, blacks were to leave behind Christian civilization as they knew it and live among the heathen—those who were not yet fully “human” themselves.²¹ Redemption lay not simply in a settlement of the land but in a symbiotic—if hierarchical—relationship: Africans and black Americans, working together, one as the subject to be enlightened and the other as the heroic carrier of light, would restore their common humanity.

For African-American Christians, the Bible provided vital and enduring paradigms about how communities became fully human. Yet as Puritan settlers in the New World had discovered previously, its communal lessons remained elusively inchoate. The Exodus theme had long been enmeshed in black Protestant thinking about the African-American community in the United States. Led by Moses, the Israelites were brought out of the place of enslavement—Egypt—into the land God had promised to them. That much was certain. But little mention is made of the peoples already inhabiting the land of Canaan, and little attention paid to what happened between Israel and preexisting inhabitants once the Israelites laid down their tents and settled.²² Political and social harmony in Canaan is assumed, and the rule of Yahweh is tacitly understood to be the correct way to live. But what if others disagreed or refused to comply? Equally important as a trope for thinking about African missions was the Ethiopian prophecy, which declared that “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” Just who “Ethiopia” referred to, of course, remained ambiguous: did it refer to all those of African descent? Or only to native-born Africans? And if Ethiopians disagreed about how to gain their own redemption, whose vision would win out? African Americans pondered those uncertainties, and after the Civil War, the questions became harder and more entangled. What was the relationship between the Exodus story, which emphasized the agency and fulfillment of the newly freed Israelites, and the Ethiopian prophecy, which at least suggested that there were other Ethiopians to take into account? Daniel Coker’s response, at once pitying and paternal, said it all: Africans may have been Ethiopians, but they, too, needed an exodus away from their superstitions and into “civilized” behavior.

Exodus and Ethiopia were never far from the minds of African-American missionaries. Two of the best-known supporters of emigration to Africa, Edward Blyden (1832–1912) and Alexander Crummell (1819–1898), waded deep into historical waters. Both began their careers as Christian missionaries in West Africa in the 1850s, Blyden as a Presbyterian and Crummell as an Episcopalian. Crummell stayed in Liberia for nearly two decades, and Blyden remained in West Africa until the end of his life in 1912. Each produced a large corpus of work dealing with questions of African-American history, collective identity, and Christian agency, and each would have gladly accepted the label of “Pan-Africanist” that subsequently became associated

with his ideas. Yet their basic historical frameworks, modified greatly over many years of teaching and writing, posited very different understandings of divine agency, race, and collective history.

Edward Blyden, born in the Danish West Indies in 1832, left for Liberia in the early 1850s under the auspices of the ACS, an organization to which he, unlike most of his African-American colleagues, remained committed for more than four decades. Through both regular contributions to the *African Repository* and speaking tours on behalf of the organization, Blyden worked tirelessly for the cause of emigration. Ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1858 (after receiving his education under Old School Presbyterian auspices), Blyden also became a formidable scholar of classical learning and a teacher of classics. Despite his absence physically from the American scene, he was no intellectual exile. In addition to the *African Repository*, his work was published and reviewed in black denominational journals, including the *AME Christian Recorder*. As a reader, Blyden kept up with American missionary literature and intellectual culture from across the political spectrum, including the *Princeton Review*, the *Presbyterian Quarterly*, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. Nothing illustrates more vividly his love of learning than a letter he sent to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone, British chancellor of the Exchequer in 1860, asking him to forward to Blyden a small library containing the works of Cicero, Herodotus, Shakespeare, Milton, and "the Oxford or Cambridge Examination Papers for 1859."²³

A supporter of the ACS who believed that only "pure" Africans should emigrate; a longtime citizen of Liberia who despised the mulatto ruling class; a Christian who believed that Islam was perhaps better suited to Africans than was Christianity; and a scholar of the Western "classics" who fought fiercely to preserve indigenous African cultures, Blyden was a multi-dimensional thinker living in binary contexts: native African / ruling mulatto; black / white; and Christian / heathen. As a historical theorist, Blyden favored a view that might be characterized as racialized particularism, a belief that racial distinctions are (or should be) permanent, and that each race has a distinctive role to play in world history. Given that he was raised in the strict Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church, it is little wonder that Blyden's outlook was thoroughly providential: "In the music of the universe," he wrote in

1887, “each shall give a different sound, but necessary to the grand symphony.”²⁴

If the orchestra needed many instruments, Blyden felt most connected to the particular song of Africa. He believed in the importance of racial purity, so much so that he tried to convince ACS agents that only pure-blooded Africans should be allowed to emigrate to Liberia. His desire for purity also contributed to his intense hatred of the mulatto ruling elite and his conviction that missionary activity ought to be focused on native Africans rather than on new settlers. Blyden saw a direct link between a biologically based definition of race and moral behavior: “For thousands of years before Ethiopia had been meddled with by any exotic interference her people were described as long-lived, tall and handsome; and this physical perfection was the basis of moral excellence.”²⁵ He believed that physical dilution had contributed to moral dilution, an opinion shared by later pan-Africanists such as Marcus Garvey, as well as by many white racists. Blyden therefore promulgated a distinctive definition of racial history, a one-drop philosophy in reverse, in which interracial children had fallen from their original pure state and were no longer considered full members of the community.

From this premise followed his understanding of religious difference in Africa. Because he took the creation of racial identity as his historical touchstone, religious adherence flowed from this as a secondary and less determinative component of collective identity. There had to be one religion that was appropriate for the African race. If Africans in their original purity were morally perfect, after all, they must have adhered to the most appropriate religion. As a Christian, however, Blyden still believed that the Christian message surpassed cultural particularities; over the course of his life he struggled to distill the essence of Christianity, to find the elements of his faith that transcended differences of time and space.

Although Blyden revered pure African ethnicity, he found indigenous religious practices abhorrent. In 1887 he published *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, a compilation of essays that explored the interrelations of sacred history, religious faith, and racial identity. Islam attracted him, in part, because it represented an appropriately religious alternative to a “hoary and pernicious” paganism and an African alternative to a Christianity that had been tainted by Euro-American mores. Muslims “are without doubt the most influential people on the continent, and they cannot be ignored,” he

noted. Their worship, moreover, fit well into his sense of what constituted appropriate religious reverence. During a visit to Muslim towns in the interior of Sierra Leone, Blyden remarked on the seriousness and piety of the population. The evenings were particularly quiet, “entirely undisturbed by those terpsichorean performances, which, in most pagan towns, as soon as the sun disappears, drive away sleep from the weary traveller. In Moham-medan communities here all foolish dancing is prohibited. The only music I heard was vocal and of a religious character.” He also expressed appreciation for the Muslim love of history and tradition that meshed with his own Abrahamic theology: “They hold the language of the Koran in the greatest veneration. They affirm that it is the language which was spoken by Adam, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob; that it was introduced into Arabia by Abraham and Ishmael.”²⁶ Islam served an important historical and religious function for Africans, raising them out of the degradation of paganism to a higher moral ground.

Yet Blyden, despite his renunciation of his own Presbyterian ordination in 1866, did not view Islam as an endpoint. It was merely a necessary historical steppingstone for Africans. Muhammed, Blyden averred, will “prove a servant of Christ.” Christ, of course, first had to be reconceived in the likeness of Africa. Blyden was increasingly bothered by the conflation of European cultural mores (dress, names, customs) with the worship of Christ. The Christian Church is not true religion, he argued, because it has been so “travestied and diluted,” weighted down with the cultural accretions of white values. He thereby distinguished between the spirit of Christ and the historical development of Christianity, the latter a tale of enslavement and the enforcement of cultural imitation that Blyden so wanted to disavow. Liberia, he came to believe, should be Christian “in the Bible sense, in the theological sense.” But it must do this “without the instruments called Churches, which European genius and necessities have invented, but which, for us, are only ornaments and the means of confusion and disintegration. . . . Liberia, in a word, can have religion without dogmatism—Christ without the church.”²⁷

By 1908, when he published *African Life and Customs*, Blyden’s growing cultural particularism had led him closer to a belief that all cultures have their own manifestations of one universal faith. He cited the noted philologist and scholar of comparative religions Max Müller to assert that a foundational Christian faith could serve as a sort of religious essence that might

still vary widely from place to place. He married this notion to a commitment to African originary preeminence: true religion, he affirmed, began in Ethiopia and gradually traveled to Egypt and down the Nile. Cultural dilution explained the Euro-American failure to recognize the essential truth of African belief systems. In this way, Blyden was able to meld pure religion and pure race into a historical narrative that placed Africans at the point of origin. All other cultures were, in a sense, faint replicas of that original perfection.²⁸

It is difficult to see any place in this scheme for an exodus by the children of Israel. Rather, Blyden envisioned in Africa a return to Eden—or at least a return to a society in which those closest to that pure religious and racial state of nature, “untouched either by European or Asiatic influence,” would take the lead.²⁹ Yet Blyden’s intellectual trajectory remained squarely within a Western classical tradition. The fact that he used Müller’s comparative philology, an intellectual model premised on the assumption that Euro-American societies represented the cultural apex of human development, as a lens through which to understand the evolution of African religions reveals how wedded he was to Euro-American scholarly paradigms.³⁰

In January 1909 Blyden addressed the senate chamber at Monrovia about the state of the republic, and he spoke of the role that emigrants would play in the life of the country. American migrants have been a boon for Liberia, he stressed, and they have rendered Liberians far better off than civilized Africans in the European colonies on the continent:

We bring with us the spoils of the house of bondage—a prestige of civilization with many of its useful appliances. We have shown to the aborigines the example of national organization, weak as it has been. They know that we are returned exiles, their own kith and kin, from a distant land. They know that we laboured in that land under serious disadvantages. But they see us, on our own initiative, establishing settlements, building substantial houses, planting farms, and enacting laws under which life and property are secure. . . . We are the main, if not the only, channel through which they have held intercourse with the outside world.

Despite the admirable example of the emigrants, Blyden still worried that the natives were not acting on their own initiative, that they were “slaves to

foreign ideas.” He longed for a Liberia in which emigrants and native Africans could be united in one community: “We must merge ourselves in the indigenous forces of the land and become one with them in a vast body social, political, and religious. They are ours and we are theirs.”

If native Africans were slaves to foreign ideas, then they, too, needed an exodus from intellectual dependence. Religious faith served as a shorthand of sorts for Blyden’s ideal of cultural union, and his efforts to find a common religious language reflected his desire for collective unanimity. But achieving this Canaan was a difficult task, and clearly the old missionary model of Christian conversion had not worked. “Missions after Missions have been established and Missions after Missions have gone down, leaving not a rack behind,” he argued. Yet he would not give up the concept of Christianity’s providing the basis for cultural coherence. He called on Liberians to find a way to promote Christianity without the trappings of the church. To gain Christ for Africa, he concluded, the country must “nationalize” Christ as the Europeans had done: “We must make Christ an African.”³¹

Blyden’s Liberian colleague Alexander Crummell shared equally in his passion to discern the future of Africa within a broad historical framework. Crummell claimed that he had always been possessed by Africa: “From my early childhood my mind was filled with facts and thoughts about Africa and my imagination literally glowed with visions of its people, its scenery, and its native life.”³² Born in New York City to free African-American parents, Crummell attended the Oneida Institute and Yale Seminary, and then trained privately for the Episcopal priesthood, into which he was ordained in 1844. Crummell also became the first African American to graduate from Cambridge University, receiving his A.B. at Queen’s College in 1853. Shortly thereafter he left for Liberia, where he remained for nearly twenty years, working as an educator, farmer, and missionary. In 1872 he returned to the United States and settled into a position as pastor of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. Crummell continued to write and lecture widely, promoting support for African missions and development. He also helped to establish the American Negro Academy in 1897, a group dedicated to the historical and sociological study of the race.³³

Crummell’s understanding of the perseverance of race in human history closely resembled Blyden’s. The scholars agreed that races are human com-

munities that have particular roles to play in world history, and that the time for the African was near. As Crummell put it, history seems to be “converging, in this our day, towards the continent of Africa.” Although Crummell believed that a race was a biological entity, he did not share Blyden’s concern for an original physiological purity. Crummell attributed races to God because they were “like families . . . the organisms and the ordinance of God; and race feeling, like the family feeling, is of divine origin. . . . Indeed, a race is a family.” Influenced greatly by the historical trajectory of the Hebrew Scriptures, Crummell believed that nations (a term he sometimes used interchangeably with “races”) were subject to the “disciplinary and retributive economy” of divine will. God has his hand in all things, Crummell asserted, and he leads some nations to ruin because of their sins, and chastises others as a way of preparing them for destined greatness. “Negroes,” because of their cultural adaptability and capacity to assimilate into other racial settings, were clearly being groomed by God for future sacred work.³⁴

Unlike Blyden, Crummell posited a distinction between race and culture. Whereas for Blyden racial identity based on biology was intimately linked to a particular cultural style (of which religion played one part), Crummell saw race as an organism that could adapt in a variety of ways to new situations, taking on new cultural characteristics. The term “civilization” did not have a negative connotation for Crummell, as it did for Blyden; becoming “civilized” in the classical Western style only demonstrated the remarkable malleability of the African race—an evidence of its chosenness. In this sense, the race represented a historical parallel, albeit “in a lower degree,” to the case of the Jews. Still, Crummell held out for natural religiosity as an immutable racial characteristic. In descriptions of Africa published in the Episcopal organ *Spirit of Missions* in the 1870s, he emphasized the spiritual beauty of Africans, seeing in them “very clear evidences of the presence and recognition of the main institutes of natural religion.” The people were superstitious, he admitted, “but their superstition is but a thin incrustation; for immediately beneath a thin surface one finds the ideas of GOD, His providence.” Unlike Blyden’s universal religious sensibility, Crummell’s “natural religion” was decidedly Christian. Crummell had absolutely no use for Islam or indigenous religions, and he believed that the task of evangelization meant bringing out the Christian essence residing just beneath the surface of African heathenism.³⁵

In keeping with his reliance on the Hebraic model of historical progres-

sion, Crummell urged New World Africans to heed the example of the Jews and flee Egypt. In “Emigration, an Aid to the Evangelization of Africa,” a sermon preached to Barbadian emigrants in 1863, he urged listeners to forget the horrors of enslavement, the “partial pictures of many a sad tale from the lips of your fathers and mine,” and to “turn . . . to another and fairer page.” Colonization was a fact of human existence from the beginning, he pointed out, not an exception: as evidenced by Noah’s sons having been scattered over the earth, God used such movements in a providential way. In this case, the New World Israelites could aid in the enlightenment of their African brethren:

We have gone out as the immigrants of this republic to the shores of heathen Africa, and re-created these free institutions and a nation modelled after your own. . . . The black race in this country, as they increase in intelligence, will have to think of Africa, will have to contemplate the sad condition of that vast continent; will have to consider their relation to the people of Africa; must per force do something for Africa.³⁶

Crummell’s employment of the Exodus model highlights the curious and conflicted relationship the reformer had to historical memory. He urged African Americans *not* to look back on the flesh-pots of Egypt. “For 200 years the misfortune of the black race has been the confinement of its mind in the pent-up prison of human bondage,” he explained to the graduating class at Storer College in Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, in 1885. Given that he was at the time situated on one of the most hallowed spots of African-American memory, the site of John Brown’s ill-fated 1859 stand against slavery, Crummell’s reference to the “morbid, absorbing, and abiding recollection” as a veritable continuation of enslavement had a curious ring. He himself was possessed by history: what was the Exodus model if not a chronicle of God’s relationship with the Jews over time and space? What Crummell seemed to be calling for was selective remembrance, a remembering that would strengthen rather than diminish the community. Slavery was not a useful memory, for Crummell, and it did not contribute to the development of the nation.³⁷

Other paradigms, however, proved more constructive in building up the

new Canaan in Africa. In a lecture before the Common Council and citizens of Monrovia in 1855, delivered in honor of Liberian Independence Day, Crummell placed the future of this promised land within a biblical framework, edged by the classical Western tradition. Although all human beings came from two original progenitors, after Noah's curse the world was divided into "three distinct forms of race and family." African peoples are part of one of those original nations, but they are also, he insisted, religious and cultural "heirs" of the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans, cultures whose spirits form "the elements of our faith, of our culture, and of our national rule and State polity." Again rejecting the notion that race and culture were necessarily linked, Crummell told his audience that indeed, their society resulted from "the ceaseless energy of mind and body of all past nations."³⁸

The speaker was insistent, however, that Liberia must be a Christian community, and part of the work of evangelization would be to bring native Africans back to their true religious nature. Here selective memory became extremely important for communal development. Unlike Blyden and many other African-American historians, Crummell had no interest in the glories of ancient Egypt, Babylonia, or Phoenicia; they were all debased cultures, "saturated with the spirit of brutality, lust, and murder."³⁹ Human civilization, in an important sense, began with the birth of Christ, and it was this legacy, Crummell asserted, that Liberians must claim as their inheritance:

Our religion is the *Christian religion*,—PROTESTANT, God be praised, in its main characteristics; and it is harmonious, in all its utterances, as the music of the spheres. Our civilization, in its elements, is that of the world's Christendom. . . . and it makes as *our* inheritance, although of other blood and race than theirs, the large common sense, the strong practicalness, the pure and lofty morals, the genuine philanthropy, the noble wisdom, and all the treasures of thought and genius, with which ENGLAND has blessed the world.

In 1855, a point at which Great Britain had freed all slaves in the empire but the United States was still gripped tightly in the death throes of the slave system, it is no wonder that Crummell looked to England as a political and moral model. It represented the best of what a Christian society could be, a civilization that embraced true Christian values and spread them liberally

around the globe.⁴⁰ Only when Liberia—and, by extension, all those of African descent—embraced Christ's legacy would the continent gain its true spiritual inheritance.

Blyden, Crummell, and Delany all articulated hard-edged critiques of American political history and life. They looked to prior moments (ancient Africa, biblical history) or alternative models (England) to see how Africa might best fulfill its promise. But American nationalism had its proponents in nineteenth-century African-American communities despite the various critiques leveled by black expatriates. A significant number of African Americans expressed deep appreciation for the role that the United States was playing in the unfolding of Africa's destiny. Recall Daniel Peterson, the AME minister whose 1854 journey compelled him to urge his African-American readers to repent so that the Ethiopian promise of Psalm 68 might be fulfilled. Unlike Blyden, Peterson had no official ties to the ACS. Yet he, too, argued vehemently for the importance of emigration to Africa. At the same time, however, he defended the many white philanthropists in the United States who were helping the cause. Peterson, whose trip to Africa had been sponsored in part by white benefactors, remained grateful for their help, although he was not unmindful of the three million Africans still in bondage.⁴¹

Peterson, like Blyden and Crummell, was perched metaphorically between Exodus and Ethiopia. His view of American philanthropical support was informed by the Exodus story, although his reading of that event brought him to a conclusion very different from that of Blyden and Crummell. Israelite enslavement, he argued, had been considerably more brutal than what Africans endured in the United States:

The sufferings of the Israelites in Egypt, were much greater than ours in this country. Their children were put to death by oppression, and they lost the covenant of their forefathers which they made with the Lord. But Moses was an instrument in the hands of the Lord, in leading the people out of bondage. Those people were among the heathens, but we are in the midst of Christians: their taskmasters made no provision for improving the condition of the sufferers, but there is good provision

made for us by the true friends of the colored race, comprising many comforts and conveniences. . . . There is another advantage which you have over the Hebrews. The rulers of Egypt did not aid them in their religious worship by providing churches or any other conveniences: but the Christian community of these United States has ever been, and still is, very kind and benevolent towards us in all cases. They have ever aided us very kindly in obtaining places of worship for the religious instruction of our unfortunate people.⁴²

Black Americans were not quite like the Jews, the AME preacher insisted. They had the resources of Christianity at their disposal, and these they would bring with them back to Africa. Peterson was more concerned with the matter of unity, with how African Americans and Africans would become one people in Liberia. Like Crummell, he compared the natural surroundings and resources of Liberia to Eden. But in his recounting, Liberian society most closely resembled Israel after the return from Babylon, not from Egypt. On December 22, 1853, during his stay in Monrovia, he preached on Psalms 133, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." That particular choice of text spoke volumes about Peterson's concerns for the new republic. Thought to have been written in the post-exilic period in Israel, the psalm stresses the problems of collective disunity; the author calls for a revival of the togetherness of the pre-exilic period, when families and communities were more stable than after the return. For Peterson (as for the prophet Jeremiah), the wickedness of Israel itself prevented the communion he so desired: "The great evils which we have suffered came upon us, our forefathers, and our nation, on account of our disobedience, rebellion, and neglect of God. Dear brethren, the remedy for these evils is righteousness and truth." Then, and only then, he noted, "Ethiopia will stretch her hands unto God, and the islands shall be filled with his glory."⁴³

Blyden, Crummell, and Peterson, three African-American Christians from disparate denominational traditions, came to varied understandings of Africa, its past and future, and its significance for African Americans. At a time of unsettling political shifts and increased intolerance of black freedom of movement in the United States, African Americans looked to their religious and racial loyalties for new perspectives on their present and future. Config-

ured in slightly different ways, those loyalties produced markedly different evaluations of historical development, the essence of communal identity, the role of the U.S. government in African “progress,” and even Christianity itself. Nonetheless, all three men wrestled with the same set of tropes: Eden, Exodus, and Ethiopia; salvation and rescue; progress and civilization. All three endeavored to link their understandings of sacred history to the endurance of an oppressed people. And all hoped that Africa could provide a future for that people as well as a past. Africa could be both Eden *and* Canaan. And its future would redeem and reunify the race.

Emancipation dramatically transformed the lives of African Americans and began to reshape their collective stories and aspirations. Most obviously, the war’s end signaled the beginning of different legal and social relationships between blacks and whites in the United States, on terms that would be worked out for decades to come. But the new political status of four million free blacks also necessitated myriad adjustments internal to black collective life. It forced a rethinking of the relationship between Northern and Southern blacks, since the former were no longer the sole advocates for their enslaved kin. It compelled different ways of characterizing community, based on the experiences and opportunities of newly freed men and women. It also affected the relationship of African Americans to Africa. Since they were no longer living in Egypt, the paradigm of exile or migration to Canaan did not carry the same force it once had. Africa was still significant, but it was incumbent on diasporic Africans to figure out just what it now meant.

Emigrationist rhetoric and advocacy died down during the exhilarating early days after Emancipation. Inspired by the martyred President Lincoln, whom many envisioned as their own Moses, African Americans believed that it might finally be possible to build Canaan on American soil. They set about to do just that, forming families, founding churches, establishing schools, and running for elected office. During the late 1860s and 1870s few narratives about Africa appeared, perhaps because blacks were so busy building the lives about which they had previously only dreamed. But that heady optimism was short-lived. After the failure of Reconstruction in the 1870s, as hopes were dashed for the racially egalitarian regeneration of the

South, the American missionary movement focused on Africa with new intensity. Exodus once again became a live prospect.

Perhaps because of the brief glimpse of equality afforded by Reconstruction, the late nineteenth-century emigration movement looked decidedly different from its antebellum predecessor. By the 1880s the push for Africa was no longer dominated by the now-moribund ACS but by African-American ministers and politicians. Black churches themselves played a much greater role, although disputes, sometimes tendentious, continued within sanctuary walls over the wisdom of emigration. Most profoundly, the movement now had a decidedly Southern accent. Southern black schools and periodicals established in the late nineteenth century furnished an ideal way to publicize, raise money for, and attract emigrants and missionaries to the cause. As black organizations shifted their efforts, resources, and leadership southward after Emancipation, the leading voices discussing Africa increasingly were those who had witnessed the horrors of slavery for themselves.⁴⁴

Between 1877 and 1900 at least 116 African Americans served as missionaries in Africa: sixty-eight in Liberia, twenty in the Congo, thirteen in Sierra Leone, six in South Africa, three in Nigeria, three in Mozambique, and one each in Cameroons, Angola, and Rhodesia. Although the majority of missionaries were black, the effort remained, for the most part, an interracial cause. Fifty of those who served were sponsored by predominantly white churches, and sixty-five by black denominations. Most missionaries were Southern, well-educated, and had learned about Africa in black colleges and seminaries in the postwar years. They had been encouraged by white teachers and sponsors, as well as by the work of prominent African-American spokesmen such as Blyden and Crummell. White and black missionary advocates mounted speaking tours at black colleges in the 1880s and 1890s, reiterating the promise that Ethiopia would redeem the world and, like Crummell and Blyden, arguing that missionary work was the "duty" of African-American Christians. Their excitement generated the formation of "Friends of Africa" clubs in Freedman's Aid schools by the 1890s, beginning at Methodist-sponsored New Orleans University in 1890. In 1894 a white Methodist minister established the Stewart Missionary Foundation in Atlanta, organized to train African-American missionaries for Africa. Co-

directed by the white president of Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta and a black professor, John W. E. Bowen, the foundation subsidized essay and hymn-writing contests, collected an African library, provided fellowships, and sponsored a Congress on Africa in 1895. Study of Africa became part of the standard curriculum at schools such as Wilberforce (AME) in Ohio and Lincoln Seminary (Presbyterian) in Pennsylvania, where students were required to write essays about the continent as a way of fostering interest.⁴⁵

The African missionary enterprise consisted primarily of men, especially in its early phases. With the exception of Amanda Berry Smith, who was forced to look abroad for material support of her evangelistic tours in the 1870s, few women ventured into the mission field before the late 1880s without a husband to serve as the missionary figurehead. Those who did received little backing for their efforts. Yet postbellum black church women raised far more money for missions than did their male counterparts, a situation that became the subject of debate and conflict in many churches. In 1874, for instance, a group of bishops' wives in the AME Church formed the Women's Mite Missionary Society, an organization that quickly became the chief denominational fundraising arm for mission activity. The society initially devoted its labors to supporting missionaries in Haiti, but in the late 1880s Bishop Daniel Payne, seeing an opportunity, enlisted its support for work in Sierra Leone. In 1893 the society held its first national convention.⁴⁶ By the 1910s and 1920s a new generation of female recruits, women trained mostly in Southern black schools, catalyzed the creation of a rhetoric of sisterhood among black women in the mission field. Their labors as teachers and healthcare workers thereafter became an indispensable component of missionary efforts. But in the late nineteenth century women's voices were almost entirely absent from the public narration of Africa.

The call to Africa after Emancipation also necessitated a shift of the biblical paradigms that had impelled the antebellum movement. If Egypt had been defeated, then what would become of the Israelites? The binary relationship of Africa and African Americans now became a triad. There were, in the minds of many black leaders, at least three different groups of "Ethiopians": Northern blacks, freed Southerners, and Africans. What would it mean for all of them to reach the promised land? Could they do it together and form one racial community? If an exodus out of the United States was

still necessary, who would lead the way and how could one build Canaan? In the growth of new missionary organizations such as the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention, formed in Richmond in 1866, we see a renewed effort to come to terms with the past as a way of moving forward. In the minutes of their annual meeting for 1877, the convention targeted Africa as their primary field of influence, because “God signals the intelligent men of our race, to begin to occupy the land, lest the African soon become a wandering Jew, without Judea, and without Jerusalem.”⁴⁷

Missions and emigration supporters continued to frame the cause in historical terms, but the past took on new meaning. The stalwart ACS-backer Beverly Page Yates, in a letter advocating emigration to Liberia in 1873, argued that “*a peculiar claim then rests upon us*”:

The work must be done by *us*, and done by you, brethren in America, who are enjoying the glorious advantages of education. . . . Here is a great land, and there is a great race, to be elevated, enlightened, and saved. . . . You will not come as the prodigal son, wasted, weary, and wretched; but like the Jews, hastening from the land of Egypt, laden with precious and valuable spoils. You are one in origin with us, and with the benighted tribes in whose behalf we plead—one in interest and one in worldly destiny.⁴⁸

Yates adroitly used the Exodus tale to a slightly different end, meshing it with the Ethiopian prophecy to call for missionary volunteers. In a great reversal of worldly fortune, the lowest caste in the United States, the ex-slaves, would become the redeemers of Africa. Black Americans figured as divine agents of redemption, not merely the victims of “Egyptian” aggression. Simultaneously, Yates cast African Americans as Israelites fleeing Egypt—this time carrying much more than manna. White supporters, convinced that Africa was indeed a grave for Euro-Americans, also adopted the Ethiopian prophecy as a way to recruit African Americans. The white missionary C. L. Woodworth, speaking before an audience at Atlanta University in 1888, asserted that slavery had been part of the divine plan, preparing an elect in America who would then spread the gospel to Africa. This historical interpretation, known as the theory of “Providential Design,” became a common theme of missionary rhetoric by 1900.⁴⁹

Yates's plea also invoked another powerful communal narrative that had figured as part of African-American national memory: the echoes of John Winthrop, the leader of the Protestant mission to New England. Just as the Puritans had been chosen by God and had a particular obligation to fulfill, African Americans were subject to a "peculiar claim"—by God, by virtue of racial affinity, or perhaps by both. They were the chosen people, the New Israelites, called upon now to serve as an example for the benighted souls of Africa. Appealing simultaneously to racial and national loyalties, the tale of the New Israelites would lead black Christians across the ocean.

By the 1890s, black students in Southern schools and members of black churches could count on regular visits from returned missionaries on fund-raising tours who described their adventures and championed the cause of Africa. Just as the historical paradigm had changed, so had the types of people who responded to the call. This younger cohort of advocates, a group that included the first black female missionaries to Africa, expressed less of a commitment to a pan-African vision than did their older comrades. With a few notable exceptions, they were at once more practical in their approach, more committed to the workings of the denominational bureaucracies that had sent them forth, and more concerned with immediate and formulaic priorities. Generally these narrators had no trouble identifying the saved and civilized (American Christians) from the unsaved and uncivilized (African heathens). This shift reflected, at least in part, the harder-edged scientific racialized ideology and the imperialist cant of the 1890s that further bifurcated renderings of race and nation. Rather than abstract theories about history and race, these later writers provided vivid descriptions, compelling anecdotes, and sometimes lurid tales of the dark continent—a "meet the natives" style of entertainment and education rolled into one. Good publicists all, missionary writers narrated the history of Africa and America to vast numbers of African Americans at the opening of the new century.

While their aims were ultimately serious, their messages were often delivered with the aplomb of the showman. In an age when P. T. Barnum's circus garnered enormous profits parading exotic animals and humans from Central Africa around the country, audiences black and white clamored for a glimpse of anything from the "dark continent." This was the high imperial

era of the museum and the historical pageant, two sites where American and European audiences could gaze upon carefully orchestrated representations of “primitive” peoples and civilizations. Those performances reflected back for domestic viewers what they already knew about themselves: they were civilized people who lived in the most advanced society the world had ever seen. For African Americans, of course, this mirrored message was complicated by racial affiliation, by the knowledge that those poor dark souls on the other side of the glass or across the stagelights were not simply “other” than themselves. But the images also entertained, amused, and delighted, and black missionaries were smart enough to capitalize on the pleasure—and the concomitant dollars—they could generate.

Two of the most notable of these impresarios were Thomas L. Johnson and William Sheppard. Thomas Johnson inspired immediate sympathy for Africa in audiences from Denver to London in the two decades before 1900. Born in 1836 in Rock Raymon, Virginia, the son of a slave mother and a free father, Johnson was freed after the fall of Richmond and later became a Baptist preacher in Denver and Chicago. Intent on delivering the message of Christ to Africa and encouraged in his interests by British sympathizers whom he had met in Chicago, Johnson traveled first to London in 1876. In his memoir he later claimed to have always held a special love for Great Britain. (“We had the idea on the plantation that the Queen was black. . . . We had never imagined that a great ruler, so kind to coloured people, could be otherwise than black.”) There, in the hands of supportive white Baptists, he received missionary training and his first formal education.⁵⁰ In 1878 he and his wife headed off to establish a mission station in Bakundu, Cameroon, under the auspices of the British Baptist Missionary Society. Within six months Johnson’s wife had died, and he, seriously ill, had to be carried out of the interior on a stretcher and sent back to London. Warned by physicians not to return to Africa, Johnson instead served for the next several decades as one of the most ardent African boosters, giving lectures and eventually publishing his memoirs. That volume, significantly revised and expanded over the years, ran through more than half a dozen editions in the United States and England by 1909.

A moving speaker in the simple, heartfelt manner of his mentor Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), Johnson became known for his affecting speeches. “He preaches Christ with a simplicity, an unction, and an earnest-

ness that win all hearts,” wrote the Rev. T. Hamilton of York Street Presbyterian Church in Hillsborough, Ireland. Throughout Great Britain Johnson attracted enormous crowds at missionary meetings, and supporters likened the pathos of his renderings of slavery to the most touching scenes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Back in the United States, Johnson helped organize an African missions movement among black Baptists in the Western states and U.S. territories. He served as its financial agent, speaking before large and receptive gatherings of African Americans throughout the West and Midwest. A writer for the *Chicago Herald* described him as a “born entertainer.” He traveled the country wearing a bright red fez and flowing African robes, which, in combination with his long pyramidal shaped hair, cut a remarkable figure. Advance publicity promised that he would “exhibit many African curiosities, including maps, idols, pictures of natives, &c.,” and that the missions advocate would “don the African dress, and sing in the African language.”⁵¹

William Sheppard’s performance took a different tack. Like Johnson, Sheppard was from Virginia, and he, too, gained fame by offering a story of affiliation—as well as material elements of African culture and plenty of drama—to his audiences. But his presentation was decidedly more flamboyant and heroic than Johnson’s evocation of the “authentic” simplicity of the ex-slave. Born in the Shenandoah Valley town of Waynesboro, Virginia, in 1865, Sheppard enjoyed the best opportunities that the son of an African-American barber could expect: a Presbyterian Sunday school education followed by formal training at both Hampton Institute and Stillman College. With much fanfare and celebration of their interracial efforts, Sheppard and a white colleague, Samuel Lapsley, were sent to the Congo in 1890 by the Southern Presbyterian Church. Lapsley died within the first two years, but Sheppard remained for the better part of two decades and built a substantial mission station in Central Africa. After his “discovery” of the long-sought kingdom of Kuba in the early 1890s, Sheppard was inducted into the Royal Geographical Society, and on subsequent speaking tours he regaled audiences with his exploits. The self-styled “Black Livingstone” toured the South with his former Hampton Institute classmate Booker T. Washington in 1893, with Sheppard receiving top billing in local black newspapers. After that campaign some half-dozen young black students, stirred by his message, returned with him to Africa. His fame, enhanced in the early 1900s by his vo-

cal opposition to Belgian atrocities in the Congo, spread throughout the Southern black population.⁵²

Part of Sheppard's strategy was to bring Africa back to America, completing the circle of cultural influence. Sheppard claimed that the missionaries sought to convert the African soul "without changing the African heart."⁵³ He would, in turn, bring that heart home to Southern blacks. And deliver it he did, with famous anecdotes about buying and eating dozens of eggs as a way of ingratiating himself with the natives, stories of big game hunts and near-death experiences with wild animals, and plenty of African artifacts. In his journey to the interior of Congo, Sheppard had discovered one of the last of the ancient courts of Central Africa, a civilization of ornate and lavish artwork, elaborate monarchical and judicial systems, and clean, orderly streets. He returned with, quite literally, piles of souvenirs of his extended visit—pottery, weavings, and metalwork that toured the United States with him. He donated a collection to Hampton, to which he added over the years until it became one of the largest assemblages of Kuba art in the world. Sheppard entertained audiences with a dramatic re-creation of the time his life had been threatened by a prince brandishing a ritual knife. At just the right moment, Sheppard pulled out a replica of the blade and whirled it around, imitating the gruesome execution that he had narrowly escaped. With his dramatic flair, it is no wonder that Sheppard attracted large crowds wherever he went.⁵⁴

The contrasts between the two men were striking: Johnson, the ex-slave who celebrated his humble origins and spoke in sentimental terms of saving the barbaric Africans for Christ; and Sheppard, the hunter who dressed in a white pith helmet and celebrated his heroic exploits in engagements with the natives. In different ways, both men simultaneously embraced and exoticized Africa, and both employed familiar racial narratives to inspire their audiences to action. Thomas Johnson had not spent more than half a year in Africa but always referred to himself in two ways: as the "ex-slave" and as the "African missionary." He literally put on the garments of the place he denoted as the "land of my fathers" and used maps to acquaint his audiences with the continent. His narrative was a tale of a people sunk in ignorance, in need of rescue just as Southern blacks like Johnson had been saved. He juxtaposed the shackles of enslaved New World Africans with the fetishes and

idols of the “enslaved” heathens in Africa. The implication could not have been clearer: African Americans had a particular obligation to rescue Africans from the bondage of life without Christ.⁵⁵

Sheppard’s double message drew on very different collective memories and yearnings. His white linen clothing and his daring deeds celebrated U.S. national notions of progress and the triumph of masculine prowess, in line with the European and Euro-American explorers he so admired. But in the continental interior Sheppard recovered the ancient and glorious civilizations that African Americans had always known existed, those African societies that would prove, once and for all, the temporarily obscured potential of the race. In retrieving that grandeur in physical form for African Americans, in artistry, textiles, and photographs, Sheppard delivered confirmation of their own illustrious history. The dramatic rendition of his initial encounter with the Kuba king who immediately embraced the missionary, believing him to be a reincarnated member of the Kuba elite, fulfilled the fantasies of many African Americans about what it would be like to return to the homeland. “You are ‘muana mi,’” explained the king, “one of the family.” Although he protested consistently, Sheppard later mused, “They knew me better than I knew myself.”⁵⁶

Sheppard and Johnson were exceptional performers, and we might be tempted to dismiss their theatrics as entertainment with little impact on the hearts and minds of most African Americans. But they represented only the tip of the African promotional iceberg. From Arkansas to Georgia and north to New York, black church members and college students alike heard stories about Africa in the 1880s and 1890s. They read articles on missions or Liberian politics in the *Christian Recorder* or in one of the local black newspapers. Students might have written an essay or read a book (most of which were written by missionary boosters) that imparted some sense of African geography and history. The local chapter of the Women’s Mite Missionary Society, the AME women’s organization that raised money to support workers abroad, would have provided information about missionaries and what they were accomplishing in Liberia or the Congo. These occasions would have created great anticipation and excitement over the arrival of the returned missionary, perhaps Alfred Ridgel, who came to town and gave a talk

about Africa and its importance for the local community. Perhaps the most striking news would have been the vivid and specific information about the African people, African cultures, and the land itself. Many African Americans, by the century's end, had never even seen an African. What did they look like? Where did they live? How did they dress? How did they act? The domestic demand for vibrant detail that brought Africa to life surged, and the diverse images that narrators employed as they described people, landscapes, and cultures created associations in the minds of their audiences, bringing them into common stories of a racial and religious sojourn.

Venturing to Congo in 1901, C. C. Boone later wrote a "little story" to refute the "many erroneous ideas held by the people at home in regard to African missions." Boone, a missionary and physician who received support from both the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Missionary Convention and the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society of Boston, explored like a scientist, noting the flora and the fauna, discoursing about endemic fevers and diseases, and enumerating the "desires and appetites" of the coastal inhabitants, which he concluded were "very much like our own. Some like one thing and some want another." Boone framed his discussion of Congo as a naturalized paradise. "Think of a land of perpetual spring!" he exclaimed about the climate and geography. "No African can look out over those wealth-laden bowers without saying, 'Breathes there a man with soul so dead who never to himself hath said, this is my own, my native land!'"⁵⁷ Just as Haiti was figured as the Eden of the New World, Africa represented the original paradise.

Boone also had a clear aesthetic appreciation for native Africans: "Their language is the most euphonic and beautiful of any language that I ever studied; Hebrew and Greek not excepted." For a Christian, of course, unredeemed nature presented its challenges, some of which Boone discovered after reaching Mpalabala, his inland station. The natives in the interior, for all Boone's curiosity about them, emerged in his account as part of the darker, wilder, and more unpredictable side of the natural order, far removed from the civilization of African Americans or even those Africans living in coastal areas. His job, as he saw it, was to bring civilization and Christianity, to tame nature. But the environment proved menacing at times. One day, Boone related, he journeyed back to the station at dusk and got lost, wandering in the jungle until well after dark. He tried not to panic, although he realized that

“I was then in an awful condition; wet, tired and lost amidst the leopards, wolves and heathen.” Spying a light in the distance, he came upon a group of natives who instead of helping him pulled out their knives. As Boone fled and struggled to make his way home, he described hearing the insistent beating of drums in the distance, a reminder that just beyond his small Christian town lay a vast expanse of moral and physical chaos.

Daniel Peterson’s comparison of natives to other organic matter was less ominous and more direct: “The minds of the natives and the land are just alike while uncultivated. The lands want ploughing up and sowing down with grain, and the different kinds of herd grass, and it is necessary to cross the breed of their flocks and herds.” Similarly, he argued, natives need the civilization of emigrants to cultivate them until “all become one people in manners, habits, and religion.” For both Peterson and Boone, Africans, like other elements of the natural order, needed training to develop in concert with African-American emigrants.⁵⁸

Extending the scientific metaphor, other narrators categorized various tribes according to their observable characteristics, such as dress, behavior, and language. On the one hand, this strategy complicated generalizations about the homogeneity of the continent and reintroduced African Americans to the notion of ethnic divisions within Africa. On the other hand, it also led to some oversimplifications, injecting a romanticized tribal consciousness into their accounts. William Sheppard instructed his audiences with helpful information and the latest racial categorizations, noting that the continent was divided into 683 tribes, “as they differ in name so they differ in habits, customs and conditions.” He went on to offer some generalities nonetheless. “I grew very fond of the Bakuba and it was reciprocated,” he reported. “They were the finest looking race I had seen in Africa, dignified, graceful, courageous, honest, with an open, smiling countenance and really hospitable.”⁵⁹

Whereas Sheppard and Boone described Africa as an untamed natural world, other narrators focused more intensely on African bodies. Crummell and Blyden had both emphasized the inherent beauty of African peoples; Crummell mentioned that “one of the first things which attracted my attention . . . was the general manly strength, symmetry and bodily beauty of the natives.”⁶⁰ Later authors idealized the African as an example of physical perfection. Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915), a traveling evangelist who worked

for a number of years in Liberia in the 1880s, was especially entranced by the women. In her *Autobiography*, first published in 1893 and reissued several times within the decade, Smith marveled at everything she saw. Her travels had taken the preacher to many exotic places since 1870, including Italy, India, and Burma. God had been preparing her, however, for her most important work: “He had to send me to India to educate me a little before He could tell me to go to Africa.” Although her principal labors kept her in Monrovia, in 1887 she visited Old Calabar, West Africa. There was much to be deplored, she thought, and the natives evinced no “sympathy with Jesus.” The women were treated especially badly, she noticed, and the multiple wives of the chiefs and kings could not even leave their compound without permission. But they were beautiful people, and Smith displayed clear admiration in her evocative descriptions. Most of the women had “good features” and were “beautifully formed.” Smith, with her plain, old-fashioned garb and commitment to a life of material simplicity, marveled at the rich silks and expensive accessories, especially those of the “head wife” of the king:

We looked out, and here came through the town all the women, and this same woman, the king’s wife, with two escorts on either side, and beautifully dressed; she had a handsome country cloth, with all sorts of colors, like Joseph’s coat, wrapped about her; she was bathed and greased; she had rings in her ears, and bracelets on her wrists; her fingers were covered with rings, and rings on her toes and ankles. She looked beautiful! . . . They have some kind of grass they dye black, and it looks very much like hair; and she had on a head dress of this, beautifully curled, and she looked as beautiful as she could be. Then she had a great, big umbrella, red, and blue, and green and yellow striped. Oh, but she was a swell! And they took her through the town; they danced and sang; children, little boys and girls, and women.⁶¹

Less significant than the details of Smith’s report are the associations that she and others made with what they saw. The queen’s garments prompted a biblical parallel: they were “like Joseph’s coat.” To represent this scene to her readers, Smith placed the event within a narrative framework that she—and they—knew well, the story of the coat of many colors that Israel had made for Joseph (Genesis 37:3). That an advocate of holiness Methodism, a tradi-

tion typically repelled by ritual activity, attended so closely to the formal observance of the monarch's entrance indicates the intensity of Smith's interest in the spectacle. Several other observers also noticed the "regal" demeanor of natives. When the AME bishop and ardent emigrationist Henry McNeal Turner toured Sierra Leone in 1891, he was taken by the sight of Muslim "priests." Despite his aversion to their religious practices, he found himself won over by their physical bearing, which he likened to that of royalty: "These black Mohammedan priests, learned to kill, walking around here in their robes with so much dignity, majesty and consciousness of their worth, are driving me into respect for them. . . . What fools we are to suppose these Africans are fools!" The lawyer and minister T. McCants Stewart, who had taught briefly at Liberia College a decade earlier, remarked that the women "carry themselves like queens. . . . There she stands; and you involuntarily repeat what the queen of Sheba may have inspired Solomon to say, 'Thou art black and comely.'"⁶²

There is a decided sense of awe in many of these accounts. Native Africans elicited a mixture of wonder, dread, and reverence from African Americans, and writers responded with an acuteness of observation that could be startling in its evocative power. Turner described a meeting with a woman known as the "Queen of the Gregree Bush," "with portly limbs, massive head, all bare except a cloth around the waist, hair done up in the most ornamental style, pure silver cuffs, leopard teeth tied and dangling to the elbows, fetish balls fastened to the rear part of the head, beads strung around the body, dressed to death after the fashion of the Gollah tribe." Turner, not one easily silenced, seemed at a loss for words to sum up the effect that the encounter had on him. "The woman looked frightful and pretty too," he concluded.⁶³

The link among Africans, ceremony, and royalty broadly conceived had both personal and religious resonances for many African Americans, filling them with a conflicting set of emotions. Memories of ancient African kingdoms had long inspired black leaders, and the ceremonial accoutrements of the Haitian political structure animated intense interest even among those African Americans most committed to the blessings of evangelical piety and representative democracy. The scriptural logic of the Ethiopian prophecy, a passage that many African Americans took as sacred mandate, pointed directly to the prediction that "princes shall come out of Egypt." On a personal

level, too, many black leaders in the nineteenth century traced their own family heritage to princes or kings in Africa. Was it such a leap, then, to link the race itself with a form of divine right? Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, authors made the association clear to their audiences: this is our land. These are our families. Just like our ancestors, and just like our cousins, we are majestic, regal, and dignified.

Lurking as a subtext beneath many of these accounts was a growing debate, fueled by Euro-American historians, ethnologists, and others, about the “natural capacity” of the negro. Scholarly discussion about racial ability had a long and mostly ignoble history, but by the 1890s biologically based theories of race had hardened the terms of the argument. The emerging science of eugenics and the swelling violence toward African Americans in the Southern states cast an ominous shadow over blacks’ hopes for eventual equality. Accusations of permanent inferiority were never far from the minds of black leaders, and such indictments shaped the ways missionaries narrated Africa. On board the ship that took him to Africa in 1891, Henry McNeal Turner overheard a conversation among a group of Europeans. “They all decided that Africa was forever doomed,” he wrote, “that white men could not well live there and the black man, whether in Africa or elsewhere, was a failure. They could not understand why God should give the negro the richest spot on earth, and that her people should be the poorest specimens of humanity in the world. They reasoned the negro out as fit for nothing but to play, drink whisky and steal from the white race.”⁶⁴

Surely much of Turner’s championing of Africa’s greatness and his recounting of its peoples as the finest in the world was framed as an implicit counter to those shipboard insults. Alfred Ridgel also expressed open rejection of white indictments when he included in his account an extended section on history. “Prejudice and hatred for the negro race have actuated modern historians to use their utmost endeavors to rob the sons of Ham, not only of Africa, but of every other laudable achievement which they have gained,” he lamented.⁶⁵ As much as African Americans drew on the intensity of a longstanding historical paradigm by affirming the nobility of their own origins, they were also persistently responding to the stated and unstated criticisms of Euro-American racial “science.”

Demonstrations of African bodies as dignified and proud stood as a material refutation of these charges, and so it is no wonder that missionary promoters soon began bringing Africans back to the United States. Such display was, to be sure, part of the script of imperial exploration and discovery, beginning with Captain James Cook's delivery of a native Tahitian to the shores of England in the late eighteenth century. The testimony of a converted native had also played a powerful role in fueling the Protestant missionary movement to Hawaii in the early nineteenth century, when Henry Obookiah charmed the citizens of New Haven, Connecticut, with his "simple" Christian piety. But the display of proud *African* bodies, many missionary proponents assumed, incontrovertibly refuted white claims of inferiority. Moreover, it offered African-American audiences both a physical reunion with the past and the promise of a noble future. Time ran in several directions simultaneously when Etna R. Holderness, a Christianized Bassa woman from the interior of Liberia, spoke before the Congress on Africa at Gammon Theological Seminary in 1895. In between speeches by anthropologists, missionaries, philologists, and educators, Holderness told "the story of her past life" and her conversion to Christ. Her testimony presented a tale of progress from heathenism to Christianity, but her physical presence, that of a striking, very dark skinned woman dressed in modest and respectable Western garb, also promised racial reunion and redemption, a metamorphosis into a proud African Christian body—collectively and individually—free of the historical taint of enslavement.⁶⁶

Not all Africans, of course, were like Etna Holderness, who appeared to meld African physical nobility with Christian civility. More often, stories of Africa depicted an untamed wilderness that called for improvement and even rescue. Most missionaries evinced extreme discomfort with the realities of life in Africa and chose, as did white missionaries, to live at both a geographic and a cultural remove from their native charges. Sheppard's arrival at his station in Luebo was typical: to shield him from the intense heat, the newly arrived missionary was rushed from one cool house to another, and he lived and ate with other missionaries rather than with native Africans. Despite his frequent jocularly with locals, Sheppard's narrative often depicts natives as menacing strangers hiding in the jungle or as servants, rendered invisible by status differences. In like manner, C. C. Boone detailed how the missionaries shipped in all of their food to Mpalabala from Mont-

gomery & Ward in Chicago rather than eat indigenous items, and he complained frequently about the troubles that he and his wife had with the servant “boys.”⁶⁷

Many missionary narratives contained vivid images of unconverted Africans—without the trappings of Western clothing or even any dress at all. If the appeal of Etna Holderness is understandable because it demonstrated the malleability of the African character and its potential for being civilized, it is perhaps less obvious why African Americans would also produce and consume images of African savagery. Yet black as well as white spectators flocked to speeches, congresses, and meetings wherever Africa was mentioned, including the 1895 address on “Africa and America” advertised in the pages of the AME *Christian Recorder* and given by Dr. Joseph E. Roy, president of the World’s Fair Congress on Africa in 1893 and field secretary for the American Missionary Association. “This unique representation of the progressive and educated Negro in America,” the paper reported, “as contrasted with the native African in his uncivilized state, has been in great demand ever since it was presented at Chicago.”⁶⁸

Even at their most “uncivilized,” the display of African bodies had critical psychic import for African Americans. Whereas Holderness demonstrated the power of Christian civilization to transform the individual—and thereby the collective—body, the photographs of warriors and cannibals bespoke a different message, but one no less crucial to the reimagining of African-American communities. *We are their better selves*, these representations seemed to suggest; *we are what they can become*. But even more than simply representing the gulf between African Americans and Africans, Christian and heathen values, or the glories of African ceremonialism, the exhibition of dark-skinned bodies—quite frequently nearly naked figures—communicated about race and sex. Late Victorian America expressed profound disquiet with black sexuality, an anxiety that emerged most malignantly in the racial stereotypes of fiction, cartoons, and other iconography that depicted black men as near-beasts consumed by lustful desires for white women. Black women, in turn, fought consistently against their own typecasting as oversexed and “unladylike.”⁶⁹ Missionary literature furnished race authors with an opportunity to counter those negative images, to replace them in the popular imagination with new representations.

Even photographs of bare-breasted women and men with waist-strings

could be transformed from potentially pornographic material to childlike and unself-conscious purity by being placed in a narrative of unspoiled innocence rather than wanton sexual license—and could thereby serve as an antidote to illustrations of black bodies mauling whites or swinging from trees.⁷⁰ Just the fact that African Americans found ways, however minor, to manage representations of African bodies reflected a significant shift of cultural power.

Gender also figured centrally in these narratives, inasmuch as African male bodies symbolized a masculine vigor that black Americans associated with collective racial politics. As in the rhetoric of Haitian emigration, African-American observers linked both masculine and race pride to the establishment of a nation, a physical space that would make manifest collective political power. Liberia had been founded not simply as a refuge for oppressed blacks but as a place for blacks to develop “real manhood in every sense of the word.”⁷¹ William Heard’s second published volume on Africa made the link between masculine power and nationality even more explicit and countered the unstated assumption that enslavement called into question the potency of a community. He began his history of the founding of Liberia with the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, and continued with the observation that every nation had endured periods of subjection, including the early American settlers, many of whom were indentured servants.⁷²

For Stewart and other missionaries, this masculine, racialized nationalism was thoroughly Christian. In his 1886 history of Liberia, Stewart heralded the advent of what he termed the “Christian Negro Nationality” in Africa. Africa had been the protector of Christianity in the ancient world, he asserted, “when Herod threatened to destroy its divine Founder.” Now, African-American Christians needed in turn to reach out and help save the continent. Liberia was the natural gateway for such a movement, given its distinguished national history. With a “brave and heroic spirit,” the early American settlers of the country had fought against their greatest obstacle, “a trying, a hostile, a deadly climate.” He likened the eminence of the first Liberian president to that of both Toussaint L’Ouverture and George Washington. The negro had to redeem Africa himself, Stewart insisted. Whites could help, but they would never be able to “evangelize the Ethiopian” without the

guidance of African Americans.⁷³ Thus Christianity and racial nationalism would work hand-in-hand, driven by the strength of black male leadership.

Other authors expressed concern about the potential for religious conflict between American “redeemers” and African natives. C. C. Boone’s and Alexander Camphor’s laments, for example, suggest that for them, one of the most salient facts about natives was not racial similarity but religious difference. Kinship or not, these evangelists were in the business of saving souls. As Alexander Priestly Camphor put it, “Millions of little lambs . . . are lost in the thickets of heathen Africa, only waiting the tender Shepherd’s care.”⁷⁴ Those working among Americo-Liberians could at least rely on a minimal amount of Christian influence (although some complained about the lack of piety among the settlers), and several rarely ventured beyond the Monrovia city limits. Amanda Berry Smith worked in Liberia for five years before she toured any inland areas. But those like Boone and Sheppard whose work took them into “uncivilized” regions, and others who moved beyond the emigrant settlements, found the differences between Christians and non-Christians to be stark. They shared the widespread American sense that “civility” and Christianity were closely affiliated, and that matters of comportment such as modest dress, physically and emotionally restrained behavior, and the ability to eat at a table with a knife and fork were indications of morality. In a particularly notable and telling intercultural encounter, C. S. Smith visited King Bell of Cameroons Town in the early 1890s, offering as gifts his “Knight Templar accouterments and a banner representing the AME Church and its Sunday School Union.” This present communicated clearly the legacy that Smith wished to carry—literally and figuratively—to the motherland.⁷⁵

To attribute missionary responses in any simple way to cultural discomfort and Christian condescension would be to miss the complexity and pathos of their encounters with Africans. Sheppard found in the Kuba kingdom renewed ties with family, and he enthusiastically assumed the role of the reincarnated Kuba monarch. C. C. Boone, although he eschewed indigenous foods, attributed some of the forms of civilization he saw in Congo to ancient African societies rather than to the influence of white culture.⁷⁶ Africans and African Americans were kin. The question was, what kind of relationship did they have to one another? And how would they ultimately knit together this family? This tension was one of the great paradoxes that

emerged from the African enterprise: black leaders, Christians all, viewed natives simultaneously as long-lost kin and long-lost sheep.

In response, African-American missionaries used narratives to parse the “essence” of African virtue from the chronology of history. One could simultaneously admire African bodies or luxuriant personal adornment and still lament the dark ignorance in which natives were (temporarily) mired. Their descriptions of religious differences displayed the most intricate understandings of this tension. After all, missionaries narrated these accounts to raise money for and awareness of Christianization, so they could not openly admire indigenous practices or Islamic rituals. But in important respects, their narratives changed the significance of religious difference by plotting it temporally in new ways. We might envision this best on a graph, in which time is measured along one axis and distance from the religious ideal of Christianity on another: African customs could be simultaneously admirable (at this particular point) and ignoble (because they were spatially so removed from Christianity). One could both appreciate and lament the state of the natives, and in turn understand that the differences between Africans and African Americans were chronological rather than moral. One people, separated by time and space, had proceeded along two separate spiritual paths. But in the narratives of missionaries they could once again be reunited.

African-American missionaries used this technique in a variety of ways, some more elaborately than others. Two examples illustrate the range of approaches. Alexander Priestly Camphor labored for eleven years as the president of the College of West Africa in Monrovia beginning in the late 1890s. A child of the Deep South in the first years of Emancipation, Camphor was born on a sugar farm in Louisiana and trained at a Freedman’s Aid school. From there he went to New Orleans University, and later to graduate work at Gammon Seminary, Columbia University, and Union Theological Seminary in New York. Like many other missionaries, Camphor later reminisced that Africa had entered his heart and imagination at an early age. While studying at New Orleans he helped form a “Friends of Africa” chapter and served as its first president. At Gammon in the mid-1890s, Camphor participated in the height of the African missionary push. Shortly after graduation, he became an educator and missionary for the Methodist Episcopal Church and received an appointment in Monrovia. During and after his African sojourn

he spoke frequently to groups in the United States about his experiences in Liberia and eventually published numerous books and essays.⁷⁷

Like Thomas Johnson, Camphor believed that the mission to Africa would recapitulate in religious form the emancipation of African Americans, and that black Christians were under a special obligation to enact this rescue.⁷⁸ As part of his training at the missionary-minded Gammon, Camphor excelled in rhetoric that encouraged the American bearers of light to bring the gospel to darkest Africa. The winner of the first prize in the seminary student competition for his hymn of 1894, Camphor elaborated in his composition on the binaries of freedom versus bondage, sight versus blindness, and knowledge versus ignorance:

Africa, 'tis named, that country,
Far away from this bright shore,
Far removed from light and knowledge,
Far remote from Christian lore;
There, for many, many ages,
Ling'ring still in blackest night,
Africa, dark land of hist'ry,
Void of light, is void of light.

How can we remain contented
In illuminated homes,
While our brother gropes in darkness,
And in heathenism roams?
Should not his complete salvation
Be our earnest, prayerful plea,
Till that long-neglected country
Shall be free, yes, wholly free?⁷⁹

After reaching Liberia, Camphor continued to maintain a sharp distinction between the "civilized" African Christians and the "superstitious" Muslims and pagans. His descriptions of local practices evoked a gothic sensibility as he portrayed the "dark and grewsome [sic] recesses" in which "the natives assemble for sacrifice and worship." Camphor's images suggested a people helplessly trapped by their own blindness: "Attracted by the awe

which the mountain and huge rocks inspire, and the dark mystery which lurks about the spot, the Gibi people in their deep need for God imagine that they find Him here. In their groping search for some higher power than themselves, they make pilgrimages and offer sacrifices in this mountain, claiming protection and achieving victories over their enemies in war.” His florid rhetoric notwithstanding, Camphor clearly wanted to elicit sympathy of a sort—not in the form of identification with the groping, blinded Gibi, but in the guise of compassion on the part of the American rescuer who could save those helpless victims: “Moral and spiritual night rests like a pall upon the people and continent. Rescue must come from without. Africa, in its superstition and degradation, can not save itself. With outstretched hands she pleads for help.”⁸⁰

Despite his conviction of spiritual superiority on the temporal plane, Camphor found points of moral connection. Contrary to popular opinion, he noted, Africans shared many laudatory qualities with African Americans, such as familial affection: “The close observer will find that there is a tender relation existing, especially between mother and children. We witnessed scenes that were pathetic and touching when parents had been separated from their children and were united again. Mothers take their children in their arms and lavish upon them the same affection that a civilized mother would.” Presumably those domestic traits, so near to the heart of evangelical Protestants, would make for an easy and natural transition to Christianity; Camphor’s evocation of familial sentiment urged his readers to see Africans as recognizable relatives rather than as unsaved heathens. Camphor filled his accounts with stories of individuals, tales that illustrated (without moral judgment) the myths, legends, and folklore of African peoples, but that also pointed to parallels with more familiar customs in the past. He asserted, for instance, that the naming practices of African groups were like those of the ancient Hebrews.⁸¹ Camphor suggested that Africans displayed in nascent form the same qualities possessed by their New World cousins. He therein urged emotional and relational linkages, ushering Africans and African Americans into a common moral universe.

From a distinctly different direction, Henry McNeal Turner (1834–1915), a native of Abbeville, South Carolina, and bishop in the AME Church, portrayed Africans as both familiar relatives and exotic strangers. The two men’s

political positions on race, in some respects, could not have been more different. Unlike Camphor, who worked energetically within the biracial setting of the Methodist Episcopal Church and who rarely raised the matter of race overtly, Turner spent his career as a politician and minister advocating racial equality and protesting the racist conventions of the postbellum South. Whereas Camphor urged Christian missions to Africa, Turner by the 1890s advocated African emigration, which he saw as the only practical solution to a hopelessly oppressive situation in the United States.

Turner had been in the spotlight ever since his involvement in the celebration surrounding the embarkation of the *Azor*, one of the first ships of settlers to sail for Africa after the end of Reconstruction. He delivered a stirring speech to the crowd that inundated the wharf at Charleston, South Carolina, that day in 1878, and his words—sometimes witty, often biting, and always impassioned—had been rousing Southern blacks ever since.⁸² In October 1891 he finally had the chance to visit Africa on an extended tour, and during his journey he wrote a series of letters home for public consumption. Turner's observations began on shipboard, where his first encounters challenged the prevalent racist assumptions that Africans (like African Americans) were uneducated and uncultured. He was deeply impressed by the "regular African" from Lagos he met, a young scholar who spoke five languages and read four, including Greek, Latin, and Arabic. But the landing in Sierra Leone disheartened him, as the crew members who rowed out to greet them were naked except for their small waistcloths. "Things look gloomy here," he said to his companion. Turner's emotions continued to seesaw as he encountered evidence both of Christian progress ("men and women rushed upon me and exclaimed, 'Glory to God, Hallelujah!' etc., till I was melted with tears") and of what he took to be heathen degradation.⁸³

Turner nonetheless proceeded, in the certainty that Africans were highly teachable, "ready to lay down any habit, custom and sentiment for a better." Despite his professional interests in evangelization and his theoretical commitment to Christianity, Turner could not help being emotionally captivated by the unconverted Africans he met. While he was staying at the home of J. R. Frederick, the presiding AME elder, a local Muslim "bishop," as Turner called him, came by to pay his respects. "He came in splendid robes and looked grandly," he recounted. "He is a man of rare learning and his bear-

ing was kingly. I tried to look big, but felt small, in his presence.” These human interactions gradually transformed his opinions of Islam. Turner, like Amanda Smith, was especially impressed by the Muslims’ abstention from alcohol and regular patterns of prayer and individual reading, practices that fit well with his own Methodist inclinations. He finally concluded that Islam served as a precursor to the evangelization of Africa, the “morning-star to the sun of pure Christianity.” The placement of Islam in a larger, racially specific chronology allowed Turner even to countenance polygamy, at least in the short run: “Say what you please about the Mohammedans and their plurality of wives (which of course no Christian can endorse), I verily believe that God is holding these Mohammedans intact, and that they will serve as the forerunners of evangelical Christianity.”⁸⁴ Unlike Blyden, Turner did not advocate a universalist faith as a result of his high opinion of Islam. He remained convinced that Protestant Christianity would ultimately triumph and bring Africa to its rightful destiny.⁸⁵

The issue of polygamy also prompted another distinction. *Faith* was one thing. Acceptance—or at least tolerance—of “heathen” religious *practices* proved a more difficult prospect, if only because many customs did not originate in the Abrahamic traditions or resemble anything that missionaries, Turner included, could categorize as “religion.” Because narrators did not have any handy system with which to classify “heathen” practices, they described particular *activities*, such as healing, dancing, and feasting, in great detail. The terms that they used to characterize indigenous religions or practitioners frequently came either from anthropological discourses of the day (“witch doctor,” “evil spirits”) or directly from the Bible, referring to the terms employed by the Israelites to describe the worship of other peoples (those who worship a “wooden or brass god”).⁸⁶ In either case, missionaries almost universally condemned indigenous practices.

Turner carefully distinguished between the “visible sciences” practiced by the “white man” and the “invisible sciences” employed by Africans. Each community, in its own way, controlled and manipulated those forces with which it was familiar. And he concluded that one was not necessarily superior to the other: “I believe that the black man is acquainted with secret agents in the realm of nature that the white man has never dreamed of, and will offset any telegraph, telephone or phonograph ever invented by white

men.” Lest anyone think that he was thereby advocating indigenous religious practices, Turner later elaborated: “the African is not a pagan, but a child of superstition; he worships no wooden or brass god, but believes more strongly in the invisible forces than we do; so it is an easy matter to have him transfer his faith from superstition to Christ Jesus the Lord.”⁸⁷ Having a basis of belief in some forces already, Turner reasoned, Africans would unproblematically shift their allegiances to Christianity.

As an AME bishop, of course, Turner believed that not all Christianity was alike. With ever an eye toward denominational interests, Turner argued that the AME Church was the best organization for Africa. “There is no church on earth that can grow like ours if we will half work,” he reported. “The heathen kings will drive out other denominations, so I am told, and declare our church the church of their kingdoms.” He was not alone in mapping ecclesiastical interest onto the continent. Just as denominational infighting had marked the Haitian missionary enterprise, so did Africa present a field fresh for rivalry. Alfred Lee Ridgel, a fellow AME clergyman and the presiding elder of the Liberia Annual Conference in the 1890s, believed that only a black-controlled organization could Christianize Africa, and only a black Methodist church was appropriate, since Africans “like the Methodist fire.”⁸⁸ Conversely, Alexander Crummell expressed his conviction that the Episcopal Church was by far the most suitable for Africans. In these instances and others, Christian infighting complicated the racial affiliations that so attracted African Americans to missionary work.

For both Turner and Camphor, narrating African religions involved an intricate mapping through time and space. As was true for other African-American writers, their ethnographic observations were informed by a keen historical awareness, understandings of the past and its bearing on the present that shaped what they saw and dictated how they reinterpreted their experiences for domestic audiences. Thus biblical models, ancient African precedents, denominational affiliations, and American national stories all came into play as African Americans worked to understand the call to their homeland. Yet their accounts were also molded by an awareness of diaspora. Their reports sought to explain how American blacks and Africans had been separated and how they eventually could be reunited—spiritually, culturally, and geographically. Missionary encounters with Africans, however, reveal both

intimacy and distance, a profoundly ambivalent mix of impressions that had to be narrated into the story of racialized Christian progress. How else could the Israelites live together peaceably in Canaan?

By the first decade of the twentieth century, with Jim Crow at its acme and dozens of blacks being lynched each year, the outlook for African-American collective survival in the United States once again looked bleak. The initial euphoria of Reconstruction had been followed by a steady decline in political fortunes, as blacks systematically were shut out of public life in Southern states. Many fled westward and northward to escape the choking confines of Southern racism and economic hardship. In this atmosphere of dimming hopes at home, the light of Africa shone even brighter for race leaders like Henry McNeal Turner, who, after serving as a Union Army chaplain and helping to found the Republican Party in Georgia, gradually gave up on the United States as a suitable place for African Americans to thrive.

These declining hopes coincided with a broad Christian missionary interest in Africa that had its heyday in the two decades just prior to World War I. For many Protestant evangelicals, Africa stood as one of the chief benchmarks of worldwide Christian progress. For African-American Christians in particular, its significance meshed well with earlier understandings of the African past and future. At the 1895 Congress on Africa, E. W. S. Hammond, editor of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (New Orleans), depicted the continent of Africa as the center of world attraction, and his narrative connected its destiny with familiar historical elements. "In Africa we have all the elements out of which to construct such a civilization that will evoke the admiration of the entire civilized world. In ancient history, its place in prophecy, its place in the commercial world, its place in literature and art and science, has already attracted the attention of the great powers of the earth." In a final dramatic flourish, Hammond also reminded his audience of the scriptural importance of Africa, for it was "on this great continent, Israel's matchless leader and lawgiver received that training which made him the most conspicuous character upon the pages of either sacred or profane history."⁸⁹

But Hammond's dramatic focus on past and future eclipsed the primary significance of Africa for contemporary African Americans. Africa was a his-

torical drama, and its narration provided a site for social unity and coherence for a people torn apart both abroad and at home. For if the gap between African Americans and Africans loomed large, the chasm separating African Americans by class, religion, and region remained a considerable obstacle to racial unity. As Alfred Lee Ridgel and others pointed out, American blacks were far from united themselves. "We, as a race, have not as yet learned the importance of *unity* and race love," he wrote in 1898. "I am sure that many who pose as race leaders and wiseacres upon the negro question, have not studied the subject sufficient to arrive at intelligent conclusions." Ridgel believed that establishing a Christian civilization in Africa would both prove the worth of the race to whites and religiously save Africans. But perhaps even more important, the task itself would redeem African Americans:

To my mind the negro in foreign lands must return home and become renegroized, if you please, before he can fully appreciate himself and his people. For nearly three hundred years the American negro has been away from home; two hundred and forty-seven years of this time he served as a slave, subjected to the most inhuman treatment; whipped, sold, terrorized in numberless ways; in every instance he was reminded of his inferiority, as reckoned from the white man's stand-point. He was taught as a slave that the most commendable thing he could do was to be an honest, obedient negro to the laws of master and mistress; everywhere he turned the white man was lord and ruler; finally, with such strong environments, many of the weaker minds succumbed to the almost inevitable and formed the opinion that *God* created the white man to rule and the negro to serve. Such convictions are dangerous to the race, for when the negro becomes satisfied to occupy a secondary position in the affairs of the world, his aspirations will never rise higher. Under such conditions we would virtually be a slave. Voluntary slavery is far more dangerous and destructive than compulsory slavery. One controls the mind, while the other controls the body.⁹⁰

Ridgel's words reveal the many ways in which he believed that a common racial history, a past that had been stolen from slaves in the New World, would change collective consciousness and unite the race. Not unlike Malcolm X,

who a half-century later would call for the expurgation of Euro-American customs, values, and history from African-American life, Ridgel articulated a conviction that communal memories mattered greatly. Much was at stake in Africa, even before Christian expansion could succeed: masculinity, self-respect, and race pride. History had to be rewritten in the minds of African Americans, as well as Christianity etched into the hearts of Africans, before Canaan could be reborn.