

Josef Sorett
Response to “Exodus and Ethiopia,” by Laurie Maffly-Kipp
University of Chicago Divinity School, Religion and Culture Web Forum
January 15, 2011

Perhaps it's a tad-bit personal, but I want to begin by simply expressing appreciation for the opportunity read and respond to, “Exodus and Ethiopia,” from Laurie Maffly-Kipp’s most recent book, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African American Race Histories*. This short chapter offers a wealth of information and insights, both historical and historiographic. I found myself wanting to quickly read on to the rest of the book. Yet I also felt pulled into the chapter’s footnotes, and towards the seductively dusty texts and archives that the author mined prior to penning her monograph. As a start, it’s worth noting the contribution this chapter makes to the field of American religious history, in general, and African American religious history, in particular. That the chapter effectively addresses both of these academic conversations is its decided strength, even as we might admit that to attempt to do anything otherwise would be to begin with a faulty premise. That is to say, African American religious history is American history; and an adequate account of the latter is untenable if one neglects to address the former, and vice versa, even if the line between the two is asymmetrical at best. Still, it is the voices of African Americans at the center of “Exodus and Ethiopia,” so it is here that I’ll focus my more substantive comments.

Wallace Best’s 2005 book on religion in migration-era black Chicago, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, begins with the grand statement, “The history of African Americans is in large part a religious history.” While many scholars of African-American history want to resist this meta-narrative, there is much evidence to support the claim. Laurie Maffly-Kipp seems to agree. As her book’s title infers, the history of race is religious, and the history of religion raced. Or, more pointedly, race and religion are co-constitutive of one another in the modern world. “Exodus and Ethiopia” focuses then, specifically, on two of the most familiar sacred stories through which African-Americans have narrated their lives and the worlds around them. As scholars like Albert Raboteau and Eddie Glaude have shown, Exodus has been a dominant trope within the American context. Yet it has been deployed in multiple directions, as enslaved Africans and their ancestors have inverted the national myth of America as Canaan-land. With a view to northern states and Canada, or emigration to Africa, blacks have been clear that the United States was not unequivocally a “Promised Land.” Ethiopia, for obvious reasons, has figured more powerfully in relationship to the continent, aka “the mother land.” Here the chapter recalls and extends Charles Long’s

theoretical efforts years ago, circa 1971, when he insisted that scholars of religion recognize that Africa for black people in the U.S. was both “historical reality and religious image.”

“Exodus and Ethiopia” indeed carries out this task with historical precision, as Maffly-Kipp shows how particular black leaders “narrated Africa” at particular moments in time and space—in this case, late-nineteenth-early-twentieth century North America. Yet she complicates previous academic treatments of these themes, showing that neither Exodus nor Ethiopia can be delimited simply to location or destination in the African Diaspora. It is simultaneously both/and, as well as neither solely here nor there. As such, this chapter helps to map a moral geography embedded in what Barbara Savage has termed “the politics of black religion.” This topic alone merits further treatment, but Maffly-Kipp puts so much more on the table.

Word-count restraints will not allow me to delve deeply into all that “Exodus and Ethiopia” engages. Still, I want to highlight a few more items for consideration. First, Maffly-Kipp reveals the many different analytical categories (i.e. race, religion, ethnicity, nation, class, gender, region) that are tied up together in the ways black Americans have imagined and experienced Africa, even as readers are aided in the task of analytically disentangling some of these from others. Second, she illumines subtleties in the discursive politics—theological and cultural—attached to competing (yet inter-connected) interpretations of travel from one Atlantic outpost to another. For instance, when do we call this pan-Africanism, imperialism, colonization, missionary work? Or, all of the above?

A last point. Maffly-Kipp insightfully locates all of these variables within the context of an emerging marketplace. In addition to saving souls and/or redeeming the race, the historical actors at the center of “Exodus and Ethiopia” were keenly aware of their audiences, the standing discourses on race and Africa, and the accoutrements attached to different narrative strategies for connecting these entities. That is to say, there were a range of rewards for individuals—both black and white—who trafficked certain ideas and images (whether romanticized or retrograde) of Africa to consuming audiences at the turn of the twentieth century. By no means does this reduce religious narratives of Africa, or raced accounts of religion, simply to profit-motives. Rather, it calls attention to the always already multivalent quality of religious and racial performances—and their attendant faith claims and fantasies, anxieties and aspirations. It is no small irony that this same moment in American history has been cited by scholars as both “nadir of race relations” and “negro renaissance”—the best and worst of times.

Finally, in detailing the stories of a handful of black narrators of Africa, “Exodus and Ethiopia” calls attention to what I like to think of in my own work as a broader *search for right relationship* within black communities and their cultural practices. If Wallace Best is correct that African American history is largely religious (and I tend to agree), this chapter confirms that it has never been a singular story. As such, the language of a *search for right relationship* attempts to counter and re-imagine the way questions of authenticity and orthodoxy—often uncritically paired to privilege a certain Afro-Protestantism—have dominated the study of African American religion(s). In this regard, the *search for right relationship* resists imposing some alternative, yet still normative, understanding of black religious identity. Rather, it foregrounds the manner in which religion serves as a site of contestation in American society, and it is sensitive to the fact that religious and racial identities and discourses provide spiritual resources at the same time that they serve as sites and sources of agency, oppression and social recognition. Ultimately, Laurie Maffly-Kipp’s wonderful chapter does this well. That is, and forgive the run-on, it invites us to more fully encounter the complexities and contradictions inherent to the infinitesimal efforts of African Americans to assemble the resources of race and religion in a manner perceived to most adequately address the demands and desires of any given day.