

# At Exodus as the Door of (No) Return

KENNETH NGWA

kngwa@drew.edu

Drew University Theological School, Madison, NJ 07940

---

## *Charting Paths and Maps*

In the wake of the elections in the United States—elections during which many issues were raised and debated, including race and ethnicity, migration and immigration, gender, masculinity and sexual assault, nationality and religion, ability and disability, exceptionalism and decency, healthcare and trade, criminal justice reform and police violence, environmental justice and income inequality, and so on—poets and political pundits; scholars, teachers, students, and clergy; psychologists and counselors; comics and playwrights have been working hard to “make sense” of it all. As I tried to argue after Michael Brown’s shooting death, some practiced routines of communal responses to the traumas of deadly, racial animus are sadly becoming predictable: a funeral service where the Bible is read and referenced in search of hope and justice; and a legal process that rehashes the old, old question of equality before the law and the experience of that equality—if and when it comes—as a posthumous credo to console the weary hearts of victims. How that debate is formulated locally and globally is particularly poignant when specific bodies are always seeking and asking for justice, oftentimes feeling hollow from having witnessed how justice itself is *executed* in dead bodies lying motionless on the streets or in coffins.<sup>1</sup>

As I have interacted with many thinkers and students, I have found myself returning to Jan Assmann’s concept of mnemohistory as a useful trope for grappling with the mental, physical, political, and emotional exhaustion that comes with activating distinct kinds of memories and traumas and losses and hopes and institutionalizing them through a public ritual (read: election process). Grounded in a history-of-religions approach to biblical studies, Assmann’s concept deploys

<sup>1</sup>See Kenneth Ngwa, “Ferguson, Bible and the ‘Long Division’ of Race,” [http://wabashcenter.typepad.com/antiracism\\_pedagogy/2014/09/fergusson-bible-and-the-long-division-of-race.html](http://wabashcenter.typepad.com/antiracism_pedagogy/2014/09/fergusson-bible-and-the-long-division-of-race.html).

methodological insights from literary and narrative theory, along with Freudian psychoanalysis on trauma and Halbwachsian social theories on structures of memory. A subfield of historical studies, mnemohistory is, in its most simplified formulation, “reception theory applied to history.”<sup>2</sup> The hermeneutical vehicle that carries this theory is cultural memory—understood as probing the depths of time and the phenomenological “archive” of human existence; it is distinguishable from other forms of memory (e.g., bonding memory) by encompassing “the age-old, out-of-the-way, and discarded” events of the past. In other words, cultural memory “includes the noninstrumentalizable, heretical, subversive, and disowned.”<sup>3</sup>

But what does it mean to institutionalize the “noninstrumentalizable, heretical, subversive, and disowned”? And what constitutes the heretical and noninstrumentalizable, in terms of content and process of identity formation? In other words, how have acts of racial violence in the United States and around the world contributed to assessments of what is heretical and what is not? These questions of endangered belonging; of racialized history, politics, religion, and culture strike me from multiple directions, often not in isolation but in tandem. This multipronged force of community fragmentation and formation, forged in response to violent genealogies to which my identity is linked by the force of political history or of narration or of education or of religious heritage or of membership and citizenship, compels me to make hermeneutical moves that grapple with the twin experiences of alienation and erasure and their rootedness in history and storytelling.

In her captivating book *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand remembers when, as a thirteen-year-old, she tried to help her grandfather remember “what people we came from.” They worked through a few possible African ethnic names but settled on none. That unresolved search and conversation, on this side of the Atlantic, opened a small space in Brand and, over time, came to “reveal a tear in the world.” In Brand’s words:

I would have proceeded happily with a simple name. I may have played with it for a few days and then stored it away. Forgotten. But the rupture this exchange with my grandfather revealed was greater than the need for familial bonds. It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.<sup>4</sup>

More than physical spaces across several countries along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, the doors of no return have become a powerful symbol of ruptured identity in African diasporic studies—not just for those who were forcefully removed from

<sup>2</sup>Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>3</sup>Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>4</sup>Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage, 2001), 4–5.

their homes and placed on slave ships but also for those who remained, for whom the doors they never entered nevertheless represent a gateway to unclaimed and unclaimable loss of familial kin and community, captured and taken. Identity is forever fractured. And the fracturing is coded in bodies and stories—official and unofficial—but also in the structures that hold these doors. Diaspora is haunting. And its institutional embodiment in the constructed slave castle's architecture performs the story of fracture and its layers of nightmare premised on political, religious, and racial patronage: the governor's residence at the very top, a chapel at the middle level, and dungeons at the bottom, all designed to compel the captured mind and body to bend and even break (cf. Exod 6:9).

How does one look through these doors from either side of the Atlantic? Perhaps the more pressing questions in light of acts of violence against black and brown bodies on the streets and in churches, schools, nightclubs, and in light of the expanding prison and military industrial complex and ongoing drumbeats of war, and in light of environmental degradation and poverty—are these: How have/did the ideologies that governed these doors travel to the New World and define local and global politics today? And “what kind of citizen are we willing to be”?<sup>5</sup> And how does one engage the Bible, given its role in the construction of these haunting structures and narratives that populate global spaces?<sup>6</sup>

In *The Genesis of Liberation*, Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr. examine antebellum African American appropriations of the Bible as authoritative Scripture and the methodologies that allowed them to create alternative narratives about self and to participate in the political project of Western civilization, which used Scriptures to enslave them. For Powery and Sadler, the Bible was spiritual and political, and failure to interpret it in the context of religious and political imagination would have been “counterproductive” for African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in *The Stolen Bible*, Gerald West provides a historical panoramic assessment of the complex processes by which Africans encountered the Bible as an imperial document but over time, through various stages of interpretation and embodiment, appropriated the Bible as a central document in their lives—indeed, as an icon.<sup>8</sup> These two publications represent long-standing creative engagements with hermeneutical doors of no return, carved out with the Bible and the gun.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Tim Lake, in a private conversation with me.

<sup>6</sup>See Tod Linafelt, ed., *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust*, BibSem 71 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000); and Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, “Bak's Impossible Memorial: Giving Face to the Children,” *ARTS* 20 (2009): 93–123.

<sup>7</sup>Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 2–3.

<sup>8</sup>Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*, BibInt (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>See the intersections of Bible, religion, culture, and gun violence (war) in Akiki K. Nyabongo's *The Story of an African Chief* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1935).

These hermeneutical moves are guided by rhythms of life that emerge from deep spaces and traditions. It is a merging of history and story through interpretive repositioning grounded in *having seen or encountered and somehow survived the formlessness of alienation and the void of erasure*: “I saw the earth/land and behold, formlessness and void” (Jer 4:23). Survival, regeneration, and even progress cannot be fully understood except in relation to that which is lost, not simply as transition but as trauma survived. Accordingly, methods of interpretation and structures of existence are developed and embraced as contingency mechanisms, because always in the shadows are pernicious threats to communal existence. The ancient biblical writer, faced with the traumatic act of geopolitical transition that created alienation and erasure, emerged as a subject-historian and perhaps even as a poet, not unlike a modern biblical scholar grappling with trauma—the physical and psychic wound of fragmentation and survival.<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith has argued that the historian, unlike the philosopher or the theologian, has no places where to stand “apart from the messiness of the given world,” so that, for the historian, there is “no real beginning, but only the plunge ... at some arbitrary point to avoid the unhappy alternatives of infinite regress or silence.”<sup>11</sup> Marginalized persons experience this plunge at some arbitrary point as traumatic, as the experience that makes engagement with the door of no return and the development of identity around alienation and erasure so compelling and haunting.

### *Political and Biblical Worlds: Strange and Familiar Kin*

In the 2007 movie *The Great Debaters*, the lead character (Professor Tolson, played by Denzel Washington) begins his education of the potential 1935 Wiley College debate team by quoting from Langston Hughes’s poem, “I, Too.”<sup>12</sup>

Set in the early 1930s, on the back end of the Harlem Renaissance and the emergence of the Negritude movement in Paris, the movie reflects shifts in black consciousness and intellectual creativity in the midst of major economic depression, racial segregation in the United States, emerging nationalist parties in Europe, impending war, and still ongoing colonial rule in Africa. Taken up and used to introduce and frame the movie, Hughes’s poem functions as another engagement with that haunting door to America. The movie engages theology, biblical studies, homiletics, law, language, literature, and philosophy; its topics range from self-pity to beauty; from economics (child welfare) to cultural expression and carnival; from gender and race to the importance of credible “sources” and “evidence,” both canonical/official (e.g., President Roosevelt’s fireside chats) and canonical/

<sup>10</sup>David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion*, SJLA 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 288–90.

<sup>12</sup>See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/47558>.

unofficial (“that look in a mother’s eyes when she can’t feed her kids”). Professor Tolson’s words to his debate prep team are pointed and sharp: “Debate is blood sport. It’s combat. But your weapons are words.” Potential members of the debate team are invited to enter the “hot spot” where the rigor of intellectual research is matched with a critically embodied analysis of the effect of gender and race discrimination, politics, and history.

In one of these “hot spot” moments, reference is made to what might be the most famous line from James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, spoken by the character Stephen Dedalus: “History ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”<sup>13</sup> But what exactly is this nightmarish history? It is the history that gives rise, for example, to the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement, and to Standing Rock, and to the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements in South Africa, and to refugees fleeing wars in Syria and Central African Republic, and to school girls captured by Boko Haram in Nigeria, and to terrorist attacks and drone attacks, and to promises to build walls between peoples, and to profiling Muslims, and so on.

In this global geopolitical context of racial, ethnic, ecological, and gendered violence; of political alienation, terrorism, and erasure, I return to a hermeneutic of trauma-hope. It is a hermeneutic premised on the philosophy of Ubuntu, the complex Bantu-derived concept of political, social, psychological, and spiritual communal belonging most famously popularized and enacted by Desmond Tutu during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>14</sup> Much like the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, the notion of Ubuntu involves the hard work of piecing together fragmented and endangered identities into a web of interconnectedness and social bonding that strives toward healthy being and belonging.

### *Exodus: Community Formation around Alienation and Rupture*

In *Theorizing Scriptures*, Vincent Wimbush has argued for a “differently oriented interpretive practice” that is focused not on “the exegesis of texts but the fathoming of human striving and behaviors and orientations, with their fears, aspirations, low points and high marks, as they are represented in relationships to ‘scriptures.’ It has to do with excavating the work and the consequences of such that we make ‘scriptures’ do for us.”<sup>15</sup> One such excavation revolves around a key verse in Exodus: “There arose a king who did not know Joseph” (Exod 1:8). Far from being a simple literary ploy connecting Exodus and Genesis, this phrase functions

<sup>13</sup>James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1961), 34.

<sup>14</sup>See Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009).

<sup>15</sup>Vincent Wimbush, “TEXTures, Gestures, Power: Orientation to Radical Excavation,” in *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. Vincent Wimbush, Signifying (on) Scriptures (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1–20, here 1.

to demarcate an epistemological and hermeneutical fault line, carved or reopened by a dreadful circumstance! The emergence of a new governance premised on institutional amnesia triggers traumatic memories and anxieties among marginalized persons. The sense of alienation and erasure inherent in this new political structure is experienced not just in the form of Orientalism, which Edward Said named,<sup>16</sup> but also in the form of institutionalized and authorized violence. In his initial theorizing of the African postcolony, Achille Mbembe called this existential reality “illicit cohabitation” made fraught by the colonizer and the colonized sharing the same living space; in her contributions to the intellectual culture of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston framed it as being “kinfolks to the Pharaohs.”<sup>17</sup> Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, Mbembe diagnosed and named this form of governance necropolitics: “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who will die.”<sup>18</sup> To be on the receiving end of this power structure; to belong to a community political or otherwise where institutionalized necropolitics infuses and structures routine rhythms of life and citizenship; and to work toward survival, in spite of these challenges, is to inhabit and embody an epistemological and hermeneutical identity of trauma-hope.<sup>19</sup>

If disruptive social and political events create distortions that reshape identity through transformation (even erasure) and displacement, then the biblical myth of adoption constitutes a narrative expression of that profound shift and survival. To set the stage for such a myth, the biblical story portrays Pharaoh as the institutional embodiment of cultural amnesia—he did not know Joseph—and as the first character to theorize about an exodus, conceptualized as an event of wartime alliances and population movements that redefines geopolitical identity. Speaking to his counselors about the Hebrews, Pharaoh says, “in the event of war, they may join forces with our enemies, fight against us and go up from the land” (Exod 1:10). Pharaoh’s hypothetical scenario, as the political embodiment of governing power, backed by institutional, deliberative, and legislative power, performs multiple social, political, and geographical functions. It ruptures Hebrew identity from “national” identity and history (“they” versus “us”); it links this ruptured or fragmented identity and history to alien adversaries (“our enemies”); and finally it remaps geopolitical existence and belonging (“go up from the land”). Pharaoh’s

<sup>16</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 62 (1992): 3–37, here 4 (in his later work *On the Postcolony*, *Studies on the History of Society and Culture* 41 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001], Mbembe dropped this expression); Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (New York: Harperperennial, 1991), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11–40, here 11.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Ngwa, “The Making of Gershom’s Story: A Cameroonian Postwar Hermeneutics Reading of Exodus 2,” *JBL* 134 (2015): 855–76.

hypothetical scenario constitutes the founding and perennial political challenge for the marginalized community.

In the face of racialized necropolitics, exodus (as engagement with the door of no return) is fundamentally an act of rediscovery of otherwise forgotten experiences or erased identities. This rediscovery emerged in Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* and is defined as much by a sense of deep loss as by obsessive search for the sublime—what Freud called intellectual progress—both of which reveal textures of individual and collective identity.<sup>20</sup> Exodus, as a motif and as a story, is rooted in rugged terrains of violently destroyed, abandoned, and remapped geographies, histories, and belief systems, as well as in the ingenuity of individual and collective brilliance, imagination, and innovation. This exploration at the interface of political constructions of racial/ethnic and national affinities has preoccupied studies on Freud's sense of identity as a Jew and his approach to Judaism, global geopolitics, and anti-Semitism.<sup>21</sup>

Freud's hermeneutic was historical, contemporaneous, and complex. Issues of religion, race, nationality, displacement, and survival intersect in *Moses and Monotheism* and found contextual urgency with Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938. Within months of that violent political reality, Freud and his family fled Vienna to London, where he published what turned out to be his last book. Two chapters had already been published in 1937, so Freud's thinking on Moses and the exodus was not completely new. But the third section of the book provides the religious and political context that fueled its composition:

Formerly I lived under the protection of the Catholic Church and feared that by publishing the essay I should lose that protection and that the practitioners and students of psycho-analysis in Austria would be forbidden their work. Then, suddenly, the German invasion broke in on us and Catholicism proved to be, as the Bible has it, "but a broken reed." In the certainty of persecution now not only because of my work but also because of my "race" I left with many friends the city which from early childhood through 78 years, had been a home to me.<sup>22</sup>

Endangered and displaced, Freud returned to *Moses and Monotheism* and embarked on a daring project around trauma, memory, identity formation, religion, and survival. Attuned to historical-critical scholarship that flourished on the premise of identifying narrative fragments in the biblical text and using those fragments to postulate traditions about possible distinct communities, Freud made his hermeneutical move: narrative gaps and discrepancies in the biblical text are covert evidence of historical processes of violence and fragmentation. He then postulated an

<sup>20</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katharine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1939).

<sup>21</sup>Yosef Hayim Yerusalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003).

<sup>22</sup>Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 69–70.



analogy between narrative violence and real violence: “The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in doing away with the traces.”<sup>23</sup>

The door of (no) return is carved, again. Its distortions are understood in the double sense of changing the appearance of something and wrenching apart or putting it in some other place, that is, as erasure and alienation.<sup>24</sup> In this scenario, legislation and narration are war by other means, repeatedly reenacting the door of (no) return but also seeking to ground resistance to oppression. The scholarship is activist, in the mode of Mr. Tolson’s in *The Great Debaters*.

### Conclusion

The interpretive significance of probing exodus as a wartime scenario, that is, as a scenario in which stories are developed and decisions are made about who lives and who dies, raises critical questions for Exodus interpretation: How do violence and communal responses to violence shape the narrative content and significance of Exodus and exodus storytelling? Which bodies are dying, and how are they dying, and where are they dying—dying as a result of official discourse, policy, and practice? And which bodies are spatially displaced? As one gazes into this door of (no) return, adoption functions as a social act of counteralienation and survival that performs more than a singular political act of putting Moses and Pharaoh in the same house. Adoption also compels a conceptualization of the traumas of erasure and alienation as profoundly ironic and indeed tragic acts of self-amputation that bind the oppressor and oppressed across generations and geographical regions. To navigate and survive the dual threads and threats of communal *erasure* and *confinement*, evoked in Pharaoh’s exodus scenario and anti-exodus policy, requires more than engagement with epistemological breaks with a past built on political and institutionalized oppression; to navigate and survive this dual thread and threat also requires hermeneutical repositioning—reengagement with biblical texts and reengagements with communities under duress, marginalized by episodic and systemic acts of alienation and erasure. This, for me, is an ideological project around trauma-hope. It works for communal regeneration and strives for improved quality of life.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.