

Let My People Live

An Africana Reading of Exodus

Kenneth N. Ngwa

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Prologue: When Your Children Ask You	1
From Anecdote to Interpretive Metaphor	4
Obama and Africana Exodus Hermeneutics: A Riposte to Erasure, Alienation, and Singularity	9
Exodus and the Interpretive Shawl of Memory and Imagination	11
Introduction: Hermeneutics after Erasure, Alienation, and Singularity	13
Exodus: An Interlocuting Story and Motif	13
Meaningful Interlocution: Africana and Clustered Narration	18
Exodus: Movement Motif and Story	22
Back to the Future: Exodus and Ubuntu Hermeneutics	28
1. Tears of Redesign: Birthing Exodus and Badass Womanism	35
Exodus and Badass Womanism	38
Exodus as a Badass Womanist Story	47
2. Triple Consciousness and the Exodus Narrative	55
Triple Consciousness, Biopolitics, and Scripturalization	58
Triple Objects of Africana Exodus Engagements: Slave Ship, Slave Castle, and Postcolony	62
From “Let My People Go” to “Let My People Live”	78
3. A Postcolonial Africana Reading of Exodus 2	81
Introduction	81
Gershomite Identity and Exodus	84
The <i>Ogbanje</i> : Gershom’s African Kin	88

Three Scenarios of <i>Gershomite-Ogbanje</i> Subjectivity in Exodus 2	92
Conclusion	108
4. Afroecology and Exodus	111
Introduction	111
Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement	112
Hermeneutical Reflections	115
Exodus Plagues: A Narrative Ecological “Prelude” to Wilderness	119
Afroecology and Exodus	122
Conclusion	129
5. Miriam: The Water-Woman and Exodus Ecology	133
Introduction	133
Contra Necroecology: Miriam and Exodus 2:1–10	139
The Greening of Miriam in the Wilderness: Numbers 12	143
The Death of Miriam: The Dangers of an Erased Exodus Future	148
A Poetics of Exodus Environments: Exodus 15:20–27	150
Conclusion	153
6. Facing and Backsiding the Mountain	155
Introduction: Narrativizing the Mountain	155
Africana Framing of the Mountain	157
Facing the Mountain	160
Rupture and Redesign in the Mountain Area	162
Hermeneutics on the Backside: Bonded beyond Lacunae	169
The Future of the Past: Body-Carrying Bodies	170
Can Liberation Happen in Egypt and at the Mountainside?	175
Can Liberation Happen through/with the Law?	178
Can Liberation Happen in the Ritual Space?	182
Conclusion	184
Conclusion: Let My People Live	185
Bibliography	193
Index of Scripture	201
Index of Subjects	205

Introduction

Hermeneutics after Erasure, Alienation, and Singularity

EXODUS: AN INTERLOCUTING STORY AND MOTIF

How does one live and interpret after erasure, after alienation, and after singularity? In articulating the hermeneutical rationale for *The Africana Bible*, Hugh Page Jr. describes the book as “an interlocutor with scripture.”¹ The *edited volume*, not just the individual authors, is the interlocutor and interlocution. The volume does more than provide traditional commentary on the biblical text; it simultaneously examines how interpretive meaning flows out of and back into the text, as readers engage it. Still speaking of *The Africana Bible*, Page writes:

One of its major functions is to empower readers to ask questions and to consider further the meaning and implications of the First Testament and cognate writings for communities that revere them, that have been shaped by them, and that—in some instances—have been destabilized by interpretations of them.²

Central to my appropriation of this hermeneutic of interlocution is the prioritized attention that the biblical Exodus story *and* Africana exodus theories on identity formation give to forms of power that facilitate and authorize access to, and control of, individual, communal, and cosmic

1. Hugh R. Page Jr., et al., eds., *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 4.

2. Page, *The Africana Bible*, 5.

life force, *nephesb*. At the outset of Exodus, we encounter interlocution around Pharaoh's hypothetical but deeply harmful claims about the children of Israel: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they may increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land" (Exod. 1:10). Pharaoh's wartime scenario constitutes the epistemological and policy location for the emergence of triple consciousness in Exodus. First, Pharaoh's scenario ruptures citizenship into binaries that evolve into ethno-nationalist oppression of the Hebrews and his policies of erasure. Second, Pharaoh's scenario links ruptured identity and history to marginalized or alienated subjects, framing these marginalized subjects as enemies. Third, his scenario remaps geopolitical existence and belonging as a form of singularizing move or departure. As the political embodiment and narrative symbol of governing authority, Pharaoh's hypothetical wartime scenario—backed by institutional, discursive, and legislative power—performs political, social, and geographical functions that undermine Exodus and its embodiments in the "children of Israel"—those who, in exilic and postexilic settings, ask the question, "What does this service mean to you?" and thereby push Exodus' meaning beyond the interests of ethno-nationalism, global conflict, or imperialism.

Interlocutions about the "cradle of the nation"—to evoke Julius Wellhausen's phrase—and about Exodus' portrait of Pharaoh, unfold at the intersection of the "war camp" and the "birth stool."³ David Lamb has shown how taunts, insults, parries, and ripostes functioned in pre- or postwar ideology in ancient Near East and biblical texts.⁴ It is not just the jarring nature of erasure, marginalization, and singularity—the "shock and awe" of war, to use a disturbing metaphor popularized at the start of the Iraq war in 2003—that is critical to my interlocuting analyses; it is also that the story of Exodus can be read as a signifier of the triple consciousness that results from colonial, racist, and imperial productions of war camps and birth stools.

In such colonial, racist, and imperial landscapes, Pharaoh's official policy advocating that Hebrew boys be killed in Egypt morphs into

3. Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1958), 24; Claudia D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QHXI, 1–18* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 60–71.

4. David T. Lamb, "'I Will Strike You Down and Cut off Your Head' (1 Sam 17:46): Trash Talking, Derogatory Rhetoric, Psychological Warfare in Ancient Israel," in *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritche Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 111–30; Lamb, "Compassion and Wrath as Motivations for Divine Warfare," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem*, ed. H. Thomas, J. Evans, and P. Copan (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 133–52.

threats on the life of the exodus community in the Wilderness, and into the traumas of near extinction in the Mountain, and into the conquest narratives about Canaan, and into foreign wives being sent away in a postexilic space-time. Once produced, the violence of endangered life attaches itself to the flows (the birth stools) of the story. That is how the expulsion of Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, from Abraham and Sarah's household, her distress in the wilderness, and her and Ishmael's near-death experience also reads, interlocutionally, with the developing national story. As children of Hebrew women faced death in the waters of Egypt, the child of the Egyptian mother faces death in the wilderness. Both stories sit at the intersection of socio-political identity around erasure-survival, both within the nation and beyond the nation.

Second, does alienation within the nation (experienced by Hebrew children) and alienation beyond the nation (experienced by Egyptian children) transition to permanent departure from notions of home and belonging—political, cultural, and geographical? Political/ethnic home (land) intersects with an ecological home (land) in exodus imagination and work. That intersection becomes the avenue for resisting the exploitation of ecosystems or the deployment of ecosystems as subsidies to the story's national political ends. Against exploitation of human and non-human life, the Exodus story's earthly and earthy focus—the rootedness of home in the earth—signifies that political liberation without ecological liberation is not only insufficient but also deficient and ultimately unacceptable.

And third, what risk does a partially displaced (diaspora-home) community and its earthy environments face if identity formation is modeled after the allure of imperial ideology that wrestles communal multiplicity into singularity, evident in Pharaoh's anxieties about the epistemological and demographic multiplicity that made up the exodus community (Exod. 1:7, 9; cf. 12:38)? How does community resist the costly allure of privileged singularized existence? The story of Exodus is not only multilocal, but also polyphonic and perennially communal. No single heroes are allowed and none ultimately survive the robust multiplicity that the story produces. Instead of colonial, patriarchal, and imperial singularity, the story produces an ethos of communal oneness—oneness with the divine, with others, and with the earth itself.

The Exodus story is about liberation's interlocution with a triple experience of *erased, marginalized/alienated, and confined/singularized* existence. This triple experience generates distinct but intersecting phenomena and processes around which the storyteller organizes the narrative: *oppression in Egypt, alienation in the Wilderness, and singularization*

in the Mountain. This narrative and spatial structure constitutes part of Exodus' interlocuting range across regions and generations. The narrative flow across regions and generations is also the reason why Exodus is ultimately not about moving a people from one location to another, but about the ability of such movement to bring liberation to Egypt, the Wilderness, and the Mountain, and therefore to the generations that inhabit those narrative spaces and places.

In Egypt, Pharaoh's escalating manifestation of triple distress takes many forms. First, it takes the form of ethnophobic necropolitics—the politics of death attached to a pathologized ethnic body. Pharaoh deploys his governing infrastructure to institutionalize enslavement and economic extraction and also to summon the work of the “Hebrew midwives” (Exod. 1:15) and redeploy its otherwise life-generating power toward implementing conditional existence for a targeted group: “If it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live” (Exod. 1:16). The history produced by pharaonic thinking and action degenerates to embittered existence and conditional existence. This degenerating history is structured around ethnic and gendered tropes and located at the site of non-pharaonic flow of multiplicity—the birth stool of the *Hebrews*.⁵ Pharaoh's rise to power and his form of governance are antithetical to the multiplicity of Hebrew life. And Pharaoh's history is one of introducing and formalizing death at the place of life. In the midst of pharaonic history, routine acts of life (birth, naming ceremonies, eating, drinking, movement) become symbols of the precariousness of conditional existence. This is where the first act of exodus radicalization takes place. The midwives refuse to become agents of death. But more importantly, they move the story beyond the confines of Pharaoh's deadly time zone, saying of the Hebrew women: “they give birth before the midwives arrive” (Exod. 1:19). The midwives decenter Pharaoh's necropolitics because the Hebrew women engender multiplying biopolitics.

But there is more to the story: Pharaoh's erasing action attaches itself to alienation. Pharaoh's decree to kill Hebrew boys compels Hebrew life and culture to go underground and into seclusion, from where they emerge to forge survival, chart paths of self-determination, and struggle against

5. Over a third of the uses of *Hebrew* in the Hebrew Bible are found in Exodus: 1:15–16, 19; 2:6–7, 11, 13; 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3; 21:2. Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 123 n465. Other occurrences include Gen. 14:13; 39:14, 17; 40:15; 41:12; 43:32; Deut. 15:12; 1 Sam. 4:6, 9; 13:3, 7, 19; 14:11, 21; 29:3; Jer. 34:9, 14; Jon. 1:9. Except for a few instances (Gen. 14:13; Exod. 21:2; Deut. 15:12; Jer. 34:9), the term is usually used in the presence of, or comes from the lips of, someone considered to be foreign. Shammai Engelmayr, “Ivri: Naming Ourselves,” *Judaism* 54, nos. 1–2 (2005): 13–26, has argued that the word is used to describe descendants of Eber who adhered to an exclusive belief in God. Thus, although all Hebrews would be Israelites, not all Israelites were Hebrews. Note the distinction between Hebrew and Israelite in 1 Samuel 14:21.

the transactional lure and carnival of national, colonial, and imperial patronage. This experience initiates a narrative flow around marginalization: Moses is born precisely at such a time, when Hebrews are not only endangered but also nursed in hiding—that is, denied the right to publicly create identity and use it to authorize communal belonging beyond Pharaoh's ethnocentric ideology of the nation-state. It is in this context of marginalization that the second act of radicalization takes place. Moses' mother and Miriam perform this radical act of placing the child in the public space. It is a move that takes the muffled cries of the marginalized subject to the public space where governing power manifests itself. This move brings the sounds of the marginalized/alienated to the hearing of the Egyptian Princess and, by extension, Pharaoh; and it ultimately brings these cries to Yahweh. A second consciousness is forming.

Third, in the flow of the story, marginalization/alienation attaches itself to singularity. Recognizing that Moses was one of the Hebrew children, and likely understanding his public presence and cry as a response to existing policy, the Egyptian princess adopts Moses after consultation with Miriam. Their dialogue ensures that Moses is placed in Pharaoh's court. The story verges on creating a single hero. Yet, this is where the third form of radicalization takes place. Unlike other exilic Hebrews that inhabit imperial courts as shadowy cupbearers (e.g. Daniel, Joseph), susceptible to imperial patronage and imperial forgetting, the Exodus narrator places Moses in Pharaoh's court as an adopted son—adopted from (but still resourced by) his biological and his ecological mother (he was placed among the reeds by his mother and drawn from the watery Nile). It is a risky move toward the epicenter of erasure. But in that move, in that flow, resourced from the community, access to power and authority is conceived as an acquired socio-genealogical and political right forged by the oppressed and marginalized, not a conferred political gift of the nation or the empire. As Judy Fentress-Williams has argued, Moses' identity is best understood as constructed, resourced, and grounded in community, not singularity, and shaped by the women in the story.⁶ Thus resourced, Moses will face the allure of imperial singularity in the Mountain, and he will effectively resist (Exod. 32:10–14).

This triple consciousness informs the interlocuting flows of the Exodus story, which begins as an account of the children of Israel moving into Egypt. Precisely, Exodus opens with a list of names of Jacob's children and their households. This is something of a generational and

6. Judy Fentress-Williams, "Exodus," in Page, *Africana Bible*, 82

intergenerational narrative kin-list on the move toward a place that is not altogether foreign, because, as the narrator indicates and the reader of Genesis knows, Joseph was already in Egypt. The story moves toward history, toward Hebrew life that precedes the rise of Pharaoh and anchors resistance to oppression. Although Pharaoh will attempt to ignore or erase that history, the Exodus community—or its story about exodus—begins as communal work of interrogating and transforming structures and systems that produce erasure, alienation, and singularity. This transformative flow seeks to turn the flow of exile into the flows of exodus. Questions emerge: Did the past produce the present? The note about Joseph's presence in Egypt (Exod. 1:5) functions to narratively preempt, contextualize, and ultimately undermine the otherwise totalizing effects of the collision of the past and the future. The children on the move represent a form of narrative interrogation that assumes familiarity with, and resistance to, erasing authoritarianism; familiarity with, and resistance to, the apathy of diaspora as partial loss and alienation; and familiarity with, and resistance to, the anguishing depths of unshared existence. The children's narrative and interpretive move in and out of the space-time of erasure, alienation, and singularity also signals Exodus' capacity to be multiply resilient in Egypt, the Wilderness, and the Mountain—to forge genealogical and interpretive constituency across time and space, and to assess the deep and broad cultural and environmental impact of a trek that comes to mean more than a journey. The imagined narrative and interpretive land that Exodus creates is “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8). As a postexilic story, this land is portrayed as a gift of the liberating deity. Yet, its material and embodied value as a product of exodus work depends on recognizing its ability to generate creative herstories (flows) before the arrival of erasure, alienation, and singularity.

MEANINGFUL INTERLOCUTION: AFRICANA AND CLUSTERED NARRATION

At the turn of the twentieth century, in the midst of what would ironically be known as the war to end all wars, or World War I, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a short essay examining the cause and impact of war, which he called “our chiefest industry.”⁷ Bringing history, race, religion, eth-

7. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Of the Culture of White Folk,” *The Journal of Race Development* 7, no. 4 (1917): 436.

nicity, economics, and psychology to bear on his analyses of colonial oppression, du Bois diagnosed the propensity to conquer and dominate others and linked that propensity to an ideological thrust that he called “the world-wide mark of meanness—color.”⁸ The meaning of the war, Du Bois argued, could not be divorced from the global constructions of meaning along and around color and race.

This world war is primarily the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share in exploiting darker races. As such it is and must be but prelude to the armed and indignant protest of these despised and raped peoples. . . . Is then this the end of war? Can it be so long as its prime cause, the despising and robbery of darker people sits enthroned even in the souls of those who cry peace? So if Europe hugs this delusion then this is not the end of world war—it is the beginning.⁹

This diagnosis of the souls of white folk came just over a decade after Du Bois had diagnosed and talked about the strivings of the souls of Black folk, the hermeneutical overlap between the two diagnoses unfolding around color; the worldwide mark of meanness articulated in 1917 was the latest articulation of “the color line” found in the *Souls of Black Folk*. “The problem of the twentieth century,” Du Bois had written, “is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker and lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the Islands of the sea.”¹⁰ When Du Bois wrote those words, effective colonialism was in full force, so his 1917 essay and its critique of the search for peace in Europe without attention to Europe’s colonizing madness was as much about the hypocrisy of unaccountable meaning-making in Eurocentric discourse about global distributions and regulations of citizenships as it was about the starting point of interpretation and the interlocuting stance that colonized communities adopt by necessity of anticolonial work and by generative posture.

The question, as Brian Blount has diagnosed and posed it in relation to biblical studies, is about the “meaning line”—the tension between standardized meaning and meaning potential, the methodologies that are granted power and prestige, and the troubling of the interpretive soul that reads otherwise. Working from Du Bois’s description of the color-line, Blount writes:

8. Du Bois, “White Folk,” 439.

9. Du Bois, “White Folk,” 444–45.

10. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg, 1996 [1903]), 7.

Instead of a color line, biblical operations proceed about a meaning line. Simplistically put, text meaning is determined through historical and literary engagement that uncovers text intent, or text meaning is ascertained through an engagement between the reader, reading out of her place, and the text as it is engaged in that space. There develops an interpretive veil behind which cultural interpreters are positioned and from which they must operate frequently in the shadows. . . . The meaning line is destructive to readers on both sides of it. All are Othered from each Other by its very existence. It is because interpretive power rests on the historical, literary scientific side that cultural hermeneuts are required to become at the very least bi-cultural, knowing their own space and its influence on text meaning as well as they know the historical and literary principles that allegedly unearth static text meaning. But this prescience comes with a cost. The necessity to acquire it threatens the very soul of the cultural hermeneut, who must occupy and absorb the space of the objective Other without losing hold of the spiritual mooring of his own space. . . . Scores of souls are thereby troubled.

The troubling, though, can also be efficacious. Du Bois recognized that wherever Others operated with sincerity across the color line, particularly when whites engaged empathetically out of the black space, there dawned the potential for just societal transformation. *Reading from an Other's space transforms not only how one reads but how one lives.*¹¹

This troubling of the historical and cultural interpretive soul means, in part, that in methodology and subject-matter, biblical hermeneutics travels a richly contested and varied road. Sometimes, it survives improbably, but it always seeks to transition from survival to thriving. In the face of devastating colonial, racist, ethnocentric, ecological, and patriarchal ideologies, practices, and structures, Africana biblical hermeneutics has emerged and forged its identity and subject matter from the margins of interpretive alienation, erasure, and singularization. But it is also taking shape in centers of cosmopolitan and global academic and governing power, as well as in research and teaching centers and institutions on the African continent and in the diaspora.

A key element of this interlocuting hermeneutic is cluster-storytelling. It is a method not unfamiliar in the exodus story, where Moses finds himself face-to-face with the divine in a burning bush. To initiate and structure liberation life after erasure, after alienation, and after

11. Brian K. Blount, "The Souls of Biblical Folk and the Potential for Meaning," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 1 (2019): 9, emphases in original.

singularity, Yahweh strategizes with Moses and proposes a method of cluster narration that partners with Aaron: “You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you what you should do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you” (Exod. 4:15–16). Multiple bodies and stories are linked up together in time and across time and space. Likewise, African/a biblical hermeneutics considers African/a epistemologies—creative theories and histories of religious, cultural, and political discourse—and the conditions and livelihood of African/a people to be invaluable and legitimate contexts and resources in biblical interpretation.¹² The task is enormous, not just because of the deep textures of history and genres of analyses that fall under the rubric of African/a, but also because the methodologies that define African/a biblical hermeneutics often navigate vexing problems of theorizing multiplicity as the starting point of analyses: the African/a interpreter begins with the Bible in its current canonical form but also begins with questions about the Bible’s origins and location in the ancient world, with questions about a version of the Bible’s reception history, and with the present context of the interpreter. The question of the meaning line is not about a menu of hermeneutical options to choose from; it confronts the hermeneut as inherently clustered. So the interpretive task is not guided and assessed by methods supposedly unencumbered by the subjectivities of contextual specificities and exigencies, or inherently averse to vocalizations put into the mouths of others. In cluster narration, somehow diachronic and synchronic voices and realities co-exist sequentially and concurrently. The meaning waves that emerge from such simultaneity produce interpretations that are both imaginative conjuring and historical analyses.¹³

By no means is this interpretive method unique to African/a readers and interpreters, but its formulation in African/a scholarship emerges, in part, as a riposte to global mappings and oppression of Africa-descended people, and in part in affirmative embrace of African/a identity—real and/or imagined—that is rooted in the narrative, poetic, religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions and creations of persons of African descent. From text-critical and typological analyses to postmodern approaches, African/a interpreters seek to engage texts,

12. Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’ a Mphahlele) and Kenneth Ngwa eds., *Navigating African Biblical Hermeneutics: Themes and Trends from Our Pots and Our Calabashes* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

13. See, for example, Andrew Mbuvi’s “African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 2 (2017): 149–78.

textual productions, and the histories that texts co-produce, but also the changing material and ecological resources of African-descended communities and epistemologies. The goal of such hermeneutics is to make interpretation accountable and liberative, not just interesting or novel. The task is to produce interpretation that is answerable to those whose lives and livelihoods are affected by particular methods of reading Bible and history; to excavate and compare source texts and then assess the processes of interlocution within and beyond the text.

David T. Adamo's edited volume *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* represents a textual form of communal interpretation, a form of cluster storytelling, that highlights Africana multiplicity.¹⁴ So too is the edited volume by Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Davidson, *Islands, Islanders and the Bible: RumInations*, which explores the possibility of reading biblical texts as islands, in fact, as archipelagic, and thus inviting reflection on hermeneutics as *talanoa*, story that is both fiercely independent and yet interdependent on other stories.¹⁵ These similes between readers and texts and spaces are not simply metaphoric; they have material interpretive significance. Interpretation itself is experienced and performed as "waves"—movements that have direction but also depth, specific story but also generic motif.

EXODUS: MOVEMENT MOTIF AND STORY

The work of interpretive interlocution being pursued here may be viewed in terms of the relation between Exodus as a story and exodus as a motif. As a story, Exodus is a grand narrative about Israel's experience of oppression, departure from Egypt, journey through the wilderness and the mountain, and eventual arrival in the land of promise. This story's divine, human, and non-human characters all contribute to communal experiences around ritual practices, legal disputes and resolutions, economic concerns and remedies, identity crises and covenantal agreements, and creative celebrations of ongoing successes. These experiences give the story its distinctive flavor; they make the historiography of the story relevant to particular peoples, places, and

14. David T. Adamo, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006).

15. Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Davidson, eds., *Islands, Islanders and the Bible: RumInations* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2015).

times. Those details about the story, however, also contain a motif of exodus. This motif attends to the ideological makeup and construct of the story—why the story is necessary in the first place; how the story comes to mean more than a journey; and how the story finds and makes an interpretive home beyond its originating place and time and people. As motifs, the narrative identifiers—Egypt, Wilderness, and Mountain—become ideological realities to engage, rather than simply vacate, in exodus work.

The relation between Exodus as a story and exodus as a motif may be exemplified by reference to Amos 9:7, which states: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the LORD. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caph-tor and the Arameans from Kir?” Israel has an exodus story, but so do other communities. Within Israel’s narration itself, a similar interlocution between story and motif is evident in the Mountain when Moses invokes Egyptian storytelling to dissuade Yahweh from destroying the community: “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘it was with ill intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’?” (Exod. 32:12). Here, Moses appeals to Egyptian storytelling to frame how exodus’ motif extends beyond liberation to include ongoing necessity to ensure communal survival from imperial and national threats. Amos refers to Others’ exodus stories, and Moses refers to other exodus motifs. There can be one exodus story with multiple motifs (Exod. 32:12) and one exodus motif with multiple stories (Amos 9:7).

This is an important insight for Africana hermeneutics, which recognizes interlocution between the story/stories and motif/motifs within the biblical text but also presses the question of the methodological implications of interpretive flows that enable one exodus story to hold multiple motifs, and one exodus motif to generate multiple stories. Such interrogation sits at the intersection of place, history, and hermeneutics, and it explains how one community’s liberation story or struggle for survival becomes an ally story-motif for another community or another generation. That is why a new generation of exodus children pose the interpretive question to a preceding generation: “What does this service mean to you?” How and why does a Black liberation struggle and theology in North America find resonance with Black liberation struggle and theology in South Africa? Why and how does a Black Lives Matter movement resonate with or differ from the civil rights movement in the United States? How do struggles for

minority rights by Anglophones in Cameroon resonate with struggles for freedom by Oromo protesters in Ethiopia?¹⁶

Similarly, Artapanus's *On the Jews*, Ezekiel the Tragedian's *Exagoge*, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Philo's *Life of Moses* all portray Jewish writers' reworking of Exodus-exodus (story-motif) to address the land of Egypt directly—as a specific land and an ideology to be vacated—but also as a place and an ideology to be reimagined and redesigned because of its role in shaping identity. As Nathalie LaCoste argues in regard to those Jewish writings, “the descriptions of Egypt they offer allow us to see changing perceptions of the physical environment in Jewish Literature.”¹⁷ In reimagining Egypt for Ptolemaic and Roman-era Jewish communities, these works shaped “a distinct form of Judaism” that continuously reexamined Exodus and expanded on its significance.¹⁸ They could hold onto the meaning of Exodus as a story but also extend its motif beyond exiting Egypt to transforming Egypt.

Centuries before the Ptolemaic and Roman eras, Amos' words about Exodus-exodus elevated an understanding of liberation movements rooted in justice-work that is legal and political. For Hosea (11:1), Exodus-exodus narration was about Israel as a child called out of Egypt: Israel's early self-consciousness was formed around memory of Egypt as simultaneously a place of origin and a place where departure/liberation began. For both Amos and Hosea, the liberation of one community finds affinity with the liberation of another community, not because of social and political happenstance or fortuity, but because each community, while articulating its liberation story, also comes to understand and allow for the inherent capacity of Other communities to do the same. That is what connects the story to the motif in ways that are meaningful and enduring. The capacity to recognize the qualitative and distinct value of Others' exodus stories without devolving into isolationism is the interpretive gift of the biblical prophets. Amos and Hosea help us to see and understand Exodus-exodus kinship in ways that are neither simplistic of original communities nor fantastical in their imagination.

What triggered these Exodus-exodus recollections for the prophets? Did experiences of violence and conquest by eighth century Assyrian

16. Siobhán O'Grady, “Divided by Language: Cameroon's Crackdown on Its English-Speaking Minority Is Fueling Support for a Secessionist Movement,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/cameroon-anglophone-crisis/>; “Death Toll from Clashes between Ethiopian Amhara, Oromo Groups Rises to 50-Residents,” Reuters, April 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/death-toll-clashes-between-ethiopian-amhara-oromo-groups-rises-50-residents-2021-04-20/>.

17. Nathalie LaCoste, *Waters of the Exodus: Jewish Experiences with Water in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 16.

18. LaCoste, *Waters of the Exodus*, 1.

military forces trigger early memories of an exodus motif as forced displacement, or did appeal to a nationalist exodus story and ideology mobilize and “justify” violence on the Other (a cipher for uncontrolled multiplicity)?¹⁹ Amos’ critique of a singularized appropriation of an exodus motif does not mean his rejection of the Exodus story’s capacity to produce a just and nonviolent nation. The prophet’s call for justice and righteousness to accompany the story is instructive because it gives voice and credibility to the use of the motif of justice (not just liberation) in prophetic literature and beyond.

This expansive prophetic ethos is evident in a narrative analyses of Exodus. Thus, William Propp finds the exodus story to be narratively satisfying in its capacity for resonance with several traditional motifs: (a) heroic tales in traditional folklore: in this formulation, Moses emerges as the main hero character coming to the rescue of a people that do not immediately embrace him; (b) Canaanite mythology about the storm god, Balu, who conquered the mythical sea and established his abode in the mountains. Here, Yahweh is the heroic character that overcomes mythical forces, but also historical and political forces of oppression; and (c) ancient rites of passage or initiation rites that transformed the social identity and function of the initiated. Here, Israel’s journey out of Egypt—sometimes portrayed as a pilgrimage—toward the wilderness brought them into a new relationship with Yahweh, into a new space and sense of self-consciousness. Overall, Propp concludes, there is not one hero, but three in Exodus: Moses, Yahweh, and Israel.²⁰ I argue for an additional heroic character: the earth/land itself, without which there is no complete story and no capacity to nurture the flow of life.²¹ In this multiply heroic story, transformation emerges as a function of the exodus community’s internal capacities to produce multiply, and the exodus motif’s ideological capacity to generate ripostes to recurring threats of erased, displaced, and singularized existence.

The story’s quest for life-enhancing existence exceeds embodiment in any single individual or deity or generation. For its part, the motif

19. See Michael Walzer, *In God’s Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 34–49; Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

20. William H. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 32–36. George Coats has written extensively on Moses as a heroic character. See, for example, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); George Coats, *The Moses Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

21. I am grateful to Ryan Armstrong for suggesting that I consider the phrase “heroic character of the earth” rather than simply identifying the land/earth as another hero in a long list.

produces a “narrative cosmology” of exodus kinship of divine, human, and non-human characters.²² This narrative cosmology is genealogically thick, spatially elastic, and politically mixed; it extends from Egypt as a site/time of birth as resistance to erasure, into the Wilderness as a site/time of survival as resistance to alienation, and into the Mountain as the site/time of belonging as resistance to singularity. It is the work of community belonging *through kinships of narrative strangers* in which Israel emerges as a mixed multitude (Exod. 12:38).²³ These Exodus-exodus kinship relations develop around specific narrative and social markers that also become a cluster of interpretive tropes.

First, ethnicity functions as a marker of malleable identity in Egypt and Midian, but it also defines the narrative “mixed multitude” of migrants and residents within a geopolitical landscape that stretches from Egypt to Canaan (Exod. 2:6, 19; 3:8, 17; 12:38). This ethnic malleability underlies communal narratives about “ethnic crossings” and anxieties about “mixed identities” in exilic and postexilic biblical texts (cf. the books of Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther). This malleability comes under particular duress during Pharaoh’s oppressive regime and later in the Mountain area when faced with imperial power that attempts to restructure the liberated exodus community into the image of a single privileged individual or ideology (Exod. 32). Questions of ethnicity continue to function as socio-political and ideological determinants of the quality of life for a historically marginalized community.

Second, questions about sustainable freedom are particularly acute around women and their mostly male children.²⁴ At the intersection of gender and ethnicity, notions of singularized patriarchal ubiquity are set against notions of matriarchal multiplicity as resistance to singularity. This is what we find in the ancestral stories about Sarah and Hagar, and their children Isaac and Ishmael. The determining question in those stories of intergenerational, interregional, and interethnic mixing, oppression, expulsion, return, and divine encounter is not “who is the father?” (the question about singularity) but rather, “who

22. I borrow the expression “narrative cosmology” from Jeppe Sinding Jensen’s essay “Framing Religions Narrative, Cognition and Culture Theoretically,” in *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*, ed. Armin W. Geertz and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 31–50. The expression refers to the total worldview—cognitive, social, and material—that is navigated, for example, in the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the *Hajj*.

23. Kenneth Ngwa, “The Exodus Story and Its Literary Kinships,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 125–36.

24. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

are the mothers?” or, more specifically, “what are the ethnicities of the mothers”? In Exodus, gendered language is mapped onto geographical spaces and subjected to patriarchal futures: Canaan, the land promised to the patriarchs is a “good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8, 17) but also, ironically, a land that devours its giant inhabitants (Num. 13:32); that is, a land subjected to singularizing ideology. In this gendered rendering of Exodus-exodus, generative motherhood (genealogical and geographical) is subsumed under a future construed as a gift to patriarchy. Exodus names and resists such limiting and gender binary futures by foregrounding the multiplicity of the Hebrew women, the midwives, and the Egyptian princess who are described as producers of demographic, epistemological, and political multiplicity (Exod. 1–2).

Third, politically, identity is intricately linked to violent geopolitical tussles that begin outside of, and then stretch into, the land of promise. As political boundaries emerge or break down; and as people are displaced in the wake of violence, regional identity transitions into transnational or internally displaced identity. This reality produces asylum-seeking Israel in the wilderness, en route to an old-new land (Exod. 6:6–8), a place affiliated with the erasure of other ethnic groups (Exod. 3:1–12; 14–15).²⁵ These shifting identities undergird multidirectional flows to the story, and frame the repeated back-and-forth between Yahweh and Moses over whose people Exodus-Israel is: Yahweh’s or Moses’? A people living in, and coming out of, Egypt, or a people remembering a time when their ancestors lived in, and came out of, Egypt? To recognize these shifting identities is to resist totalizing generalizations about Exodus-Israel and assumptions that Exodus-Israel is an insular community.

Fourth, ecologically, the land of Egypt is subjected to massive exploitation and devastation in the form of plagues. The devastation is enormous and compels people to move into the wilderness, where the water is bitter—as if it had taken on the subjectivity of the bitter experience of political oppression. In that world of eco-political bitterness, the survivability of marginalized communities and of the earth and its species is informed by the story’s response to political, theological, and ecological toxicity. To name, probe, and respond to this toxicity of thought, praxis, and space not as a consequence of some inherent inescapable flaw in natural ecosystems but as unethical

25. On Israel as asylum seeking, see, Jonathan Burnside, “Exodus and Asylum: Uncovering the Relationship between Biblical Law and Narrative,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 3 (2010): 254.

instrumentalizations of human and non-human life is to engage in Exodus-exodus thinking and becoming framed by ecological concerns. Once Pharaoh is removed from the scene, the community turns to the land more intentionally and fully as the primary subject to engage in the work of exodus. The people are described as belonging to the land—they are the people of the land (Exod. 5:4)—just as they are the people of Yahweh or Moses. It is as much a broken relation between humans and the land, as the broken political dynamic, that plagues the story. The emerging community cares as much about its obligations to the land as it does to the deity. Violations of divine precepts results in revulsions of the land (Deut. 27–28).

Fifth, resurgence and ongoing contestations in notions of “traditional” religion, within and beyond the geographical confines of Egypt, connect matriarchal and patriarchal traditions with the exodus deity (Yahweh) who, ironically, is tangentially linked with ancestral traditions (Exod. 3:13–18; 4:1–17; 6:2; cf. Gen. 21:15–21). These religious traditions become the bases for the communal move toward adherence to a deity proclaimed (“hear, O, Israel”—Deut. 6:4), a deity that demands oneness of devotion. The ability to align ancestral worship with exodus devotion is vital to communal survival in the face of a singularizing deity in the Mountain.

Clustered together, these identifiers—ethnic, gendered, geopolitical, ecological, and religious—weave a grand intergenerational and inter-regional narrative that addresses oppression (erasure), expulsion from land (alienation), and isolated (singularized) identity. To survive and eventually thrive, Israel becomes Exodus-Israel and transforms the traumas of oppression and expulsion and isolation into trauma-hopes and acts of liberation, regeneration, and revalorization that connect the story’s human and divine residents with the earth/land—locally and globally.²⁶

BACK TO THE FUTURE: EXODUS AND UBUNTU HERMENEUTICS

To say that Exodus-exodus has had life altering influence on modern history, religion, global politics, legislation, literature, ecology, war, migration, ethnicity, and race is to venture an understatement. To

26. Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Sarah J. K. Pearce, *Land of the Body: Studies in Philo’s Representation of Egypt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 103–27.

attempt to plumb the layers of that impressive, overwhelming history and historiography, with its varied attendant geographies, religious belief systems, and economic and political systems is to venture over-achievement. The breadth and depth of Exodus-exodus interpretation renders every interpreter and interpretation subjective, contextual, and limited. Yet, the motif of exodus requires a surpassing of singularized identity, the geopolitics of erasure, and marginalized existence. Such exodus overflow includes hermeneutics. The magnitude of textual analyses and reception histories surrounding Exodus accords hermeneutical grandeur to its interpretation, by virtue of the shared and contested meanings that make reception theory as consequential as historical-critical analyses.²⁷

Like every interpreter, my interpretation is not that of a disinterested reader of the Bible or of Africana history, culture, religion, and politics. Instead, it develops and endorses an activist mode for three reasons. First, it is an interpretive response to a history and an ideology that portrays Africa as a place of incessant death and decay, a recent iteration of which was Donald Trump's reference to African countries as sh*t-hole countries. Africana hermeneutics is not just about interpretive survival and creativity, structured around comparative analyses between the ancient text and modern Africana realities; it is also about hermeneutics as defiance and resistance against erasure—colonial, racist, gendering, ecological, or imperial. Second, Africana hermeneutics is an interpretive act that resists marginalization and creates new forms of being, belonging, and knowing not from methodological leftovers from so-called mainstream epistemologies, but from its own credible constructive resources. Third, Africana hermeneutics positions itself outside of singularizing blind spots of oppressive forms of nation-state, colonial, patriarchal, and imperial manifestations.

Whether Moses the man of Exodus-exodus was himself an Egyptian (as Sigmund Freud theorized in *Moses and Monotheism*) or a black African (as Zora Neal Hurston theorized in *Moses Man of the Mountain*) is of interpretive importance but is not fully determinant of the impact of thinking about Exodus-exodus in light of Africana experience. Of more importance is how to interpret the divine question to Moses in the burning bush, “What is in your hands?” (Exod. 4:2), and the deployment of that resource for the difficult work of liberation. From Musa Dube's *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, to Nyasha Junior's

27. Thomas Dozeman, Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, eds., *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

Reimagining Hagar, to Aliou Niang's *A Poetics of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, to Alice Yafeh's *Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics*, Africana biblical scholars labor in a tradition of interpretation that examines communal productions of meaning, freedom, power, and accountable living as quintessential antipathies of historical modes of dehumanizing confinement (enslavement and colonization and patriarchy) and attendant epistemological erasure, marginalization, and isolation of Africana and Black subjects, cultures, and religious thought.²⁸ To that end, Africana scholars and religious leaders have found in Exodus-exodus a story-motif of liberation or emancipation and empowerment. Having experienced violent erasure, dispersal, and isolation, African and African American readers turned to the story-motif, seeking an antidote but also, more importantly, seeking a new future. In *The Talking Book*, Allen Dwight Callahan writes about the homeopathic exegetical tradition of African American interpretation:

African Americans found the Bible to be both healing balm and poison book. They could not lay claim to the balm without braving the poison. The same book was both medicine and malediction. To afford themselves its healing properties, African Americans resolved to treat scripture with scripture, much like a homeopathic remedy. . . . Their cure for the toxicity of pernicious scripture was more scripture. The antidote to hostile texts of the Bible was more Bible, homeopathically administered to counteract the toxins of the text.²⁹

This homeopathic hermeneutic of squeezing generative and restorative exodus out of erasing and alienating exile often included the deployment of textual polyphony as a recipe for producing hopeful futures and experiences. As Rhondda Robinson Thomas argues in *Claiming Exodus*, African American appropriations of the biblical story between 1774 and 1903 were marked by remarkable fissures and fragments, pieced together from the Joseph story, the Moses story, and the Joshua story to mirror the complex realities that defined African American struggles for emancipation, justice, and equality. Thus, African Americans

produced narratives of fragmentation, discontinuity, and instability that reflect the ultimate insufficiency of the Exodus story to help

28. Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000); Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Aliou Niang, *A Poetics of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: God, Human-Nature Relationship, and Negritude* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019); Alice Yafeh, *Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics in 1 Corinthians 7: An African-Cameroonian Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

29. Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 40.

Afro-Atlantic peoples *fully* achieve their goals of freedom, equality, and opportunity. As they invoked the Exodus narrative, no Moses appeared to unite slaves and free blacks and demand that British kings and American presidents outlaw slavery and lift slaves from degradation. And no promised land loomed on the horizon where former black peoples and their brethren could permanently enjoy freedom and equality.³⁰

Instead of relying on a single heroic character, readers and interpreters turned to multiple texts, piecing together portions of the biblical text of Exodus, supplementing those stories with other biblical texts as well as episodes of secular history “to share their experiences and delineate their demands” for a more just society.³¹

In South Africa, one of the earliest proponents of Black Theology, Itumeleng Mosala, brought together analyses of the Bible and analyses of the land:

The task now facing a black theology of liberation is to enable black people to use the Bible to get the land back and to get the land back without losing the Bible . . . Black theology must employ the progressive aspects of black history and culture to liberate the Bible so that the Bible may liberate black people.³²

Attuned to cultural analyses animating religious communities in Cameroon, Jean-Marc Éla sounded a similar alarm against distancing biblical interpretation from the history and context of the interpreter: “for millions of Africans, the signs of a world in quest for freedom and justice are too evident not to attract the attention of churches that boast the Judaeo-Christian revelation or claim that the message of the exodus occupies a central place.”³³ Éla’s work, published two years after a violent, failed coup d’état in Cameroon, signaled how liberation from colonialism and authoritarianism had stalled in Cameroon and indeed come to a violent halt. Independence ceased to be an ongoing work of liberation and instead became a political trophy, ritualized in highly militarized annual ceremonies. In the face of postcolonial necropolitics, Éla argued that the African church needed to renew its purpose, confront “today’s Pharaohs,” and prioritize the “new aspirations of all

30. Rhondda Robinson Thomas, *Claiming Exodus: A Cultural History of Afro-Atlantic Identity, 1774–1903* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 7, italics in original.

31. Thomas, *Claiming Exodus*, 7.

32. Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 153.

33. Jean-Marc Éla, *The African Cry*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Orbis, 1986), 36.

the disinherited by bringing problems of women and men crushed by injustice into religious education, religious formation, and prayer.”³⁴ Biblical and political interpretation and power again converged around issues of life.

The applicability of these modes and methods of interpretation to the Exodus-exodus is multiple. In this book, I focus on the notion that Africana biblical interpretation routinely examines the deployment of power in the production and concrete distribution of freedom, not solely through liberation historiography, or solely through homeopathic attempts to turn exile into Exodus-exodus, but also through robust re-articulations that put the motif *before* the story in a hermeneutical form of exodus-Exodus. In this mode, the decolonial exodus movement, “let my people go,” is preceded by the precolonial exodus form, “let my people live.” From anticolonial movements across the African continent to movements against apartheid in South Africa to resistance movements against slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation in the United States, Africana subjects have understood and appropriated Exodus as a story that compels the transformation of ideologies and systems where Black people live (pre-, during, and post-oppression), rather than solely a call to move from one land to another. The story thus calls for a redesign of Egypt, the Wilderness, and the Mountain, which represent systemic structures where the Hebrew people lived and suffered but also where they worked to bring liberation. In these distinct places, the exodus community cobbles together new ideas to generate life and meaning that is enduring.

The philosophical and hermeneutical concept I will use to explore these issues is 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.³⁵ My use of Ubuntu as an epistemological and hermeneutical concept for reading Exodus is based on three framing issues. First, Ubuntu resources resistance against erasure. Communal interconnectedness enables an oppressed community to do the difficult work of forging geopolitical survival-liberation where the (former) oppressed and (former) oppressors share the same living space—a

34. Éla, *African Cry*, 38.

35. Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Image Books, 1999); Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009).

space where institutional identity still bears memories and forms of erasure. In this scenario where Exodus and erasure coexist, Ubuntu fosters a hermeneutic of trauma-hope. By foregrounding communal interconnectedness, exodus-Exodus as Ubuntu can address the legacies of oppression in their structured manifestations. The erased self returns, not as an imperial presence but as a rebirth, a transformation of death into life. Second, the concept of Ubuntu as personhood in community illumines a healthy response to alienation, the partial loss of self, and even the sense of disposal associated with displacement. Here, Ubuntu fosters communal memory as an act of repositioning that seeks to reclaim communal wholeness. The marginalized self can return to the future because the communal body remembers and re-members its displaced kin. Third, Ubuntu hermeneutics illumines a reading of Exodus-exodus as a story-motif where liberation is enhanced as the act of departure from singularized subjectivity. Communal well-being is approximated and created when the singularized body—divine or human—responds to the beckoning voice of community and embarks on a risky journey and process of hermeneutical repositioning.

Through these multiple techniques, I intend to move the meaning line in biblical studies articulated by Brian Blount by switching the hermeneutical frame from Exodus-exodus (story-motif) to exodus-Exodus (motif-story). The motif is not just a concept, it is a genre; it foregrounds a communally endangered body, examines and listens to its articulations of survival in between fractured histories and narrative lacunae, and persists to ensure that the story birthed from this motif is qualitatively different from the story to which the motif responds. That is, the switch from “let my people go” to “let my people live” means that liberation is more than a response to oppression. Africana life and hermeneutics include a response to oppression, and so accord with the epistemological and hermeneutical force of “let my people go.” The power and future of liberation—the power to transform unformed futures into formed futures—depends on making sure that those narrative lacunae speak, and that they speak not so much as perfectly designed stories with only occasional detours but as resilient voices that regenerate and produce new life and life-forms. In addition, Africana life and hermeneutics moves the meaning line by insisting that the qualitative value of its hermeneutical priorities and approaches to the biblical text exceed a response mechanism to systems of oppression and the centering of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and imperialism.

“Let my people live” shifts the paradigm because conquest and oppression and racism are not only avoidable evils, they also are unnecessary. That is what makes structural redesign imaginable, conceivable, and possible in exodus-Exodus interlocution.