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Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy

For scholars of early African-American literature, the question of influence can be particularly vexing. American writing about Africa and Africans preceded the emergence of the first African-American writers by a century or more. On the basis of this written record, the old historicists could claim that religion made a Phillis Wheatley; only belief in artistic genius or a commitment to the idea of resistance prevents new historicists from saying the same, not only about Wheatley but about eighteenth-century Black poet Jupiter Hammon as well.¹

The origins of Black political discourses have proven similarly resistant to historicist unraveling. When did Africans in America begin to describe themselves as a “people”? How did geographical formulations such as “Africa,” “Ethiopia,” and “Egypt” become keywords and conceptual touchstones of early Black nationalism? Robert Alexander Young’s *Ethiopian Manifesto* (1827) and David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) are generally acknowledged as primary print instances of Black nationalism or literary Ethiopianism, but the intellectual prehistories of the *Manifesto* and the *Appeal* remain the subject of speculation and debate. W. E. B. Du Bois claimed that “the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and Egypt the Sphinx” was a remnant of “Egyptian” and “African” ideas preserved by the diaspora’s “scattered” “tribes.”² Following Du Bois, some scholars continue to affirm the “veiled” origins of Black nationalism, Ethiopianism, and Egyptophilia as the products of “instinct,” “ideology,” or “experience.”³ Others have attempted to specify textual sources for these traditions. St. Clair Drake emphasized the influence of Biblical “proof texts” on the development of Ethiopianism. More recently, it has been suggested that “African-Americans first got the idea” of a glorious African past from eighteenth-century natural histories excerpted in the American Colonization Society’s *African Repository* and reprinted in *Freedom’s Journal* (1827-1828) (Dain 146-47).

Three lately republished and repopularized eighteenth-century speeches—John Marrant’s *Sermon to the African Lodge of the Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons* (1789) and Prince Hall’s *Charges to the Lodge at Charlestown* (1792) and *Metonymy* (1797)—suggest a more extensive and complex history for Ethiopianism.⁴ Prince Hall established the African Lodge of Freemasons in Boston in the 1780s and invited celebrity evangelist John Marrant to serve as its chaplain. In the *Sermon* and the *Charges*, Marrant and Hall expostulated a vital and portentous genealogy of African America. Their public claims to a common Black history and destiny—to the legacy of Ancient Egypt and the

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prophetic future of Ethiopia—prefigure and precede similar claims by David Walker and Robert Alexander Young. These three speeches document an early and little understood chapter in Black intellectual history, and they posit a much earlier point of inception for literary Ethiopianism than that generally agreed upon by scholars of the discourse.

Marrant's *Sermon* and Hall's *Charges* also reveal the influence of early American mysticism on the development of Ethiopianist tradition. Prince Hall's initiation into Freemasonry in 1775 admitted him to a parallel universe where Hermeticism, Egyptophilia, and Kabbalism flourished alongside, if not intertwined with, Enlightenment rationalism.⁵ By the time he invited John Marrant to give the 1789 *Sermon* to the African Lodge, Hall had spent fourteen years wending his way through the fraternal networks and dusty bookshelves of New England Freemasonry. His researches in the mystical vernacular prepared him to compose an *unnatural* history of African America, a counternarrative to eighteenth-century empiricisms and "natural histories" which classified Africa as a cipher, perpetually primitive and unintelligible.⁶

More than an archival resource, Freemasonry was also a venue for the exercise of cultural authority. Freemasons believed that their Lodges were not just fraternal gathering places but functioning models of the universe itself, like the temples of Solomon and Ancient Egypt. Initiates learned key words and gestures which qualified them to pass from the prosaic and profane world into the realm of mystery, the Holy of Holies. Master Masons were entitled to guide initiates through these rites of transformation and were considered possessors of a second sight, like magis, seers, or alchemists. As the founding Grand Master of the African Lodge, Hall signified on conventional Freemasonry by transforming the signs, symbols, and secretive practices of the Masonic temple into a

template for race consciousness. Moreover, he institutionalized an affiliative system which ensured the continuance and propagation of this wisdom. This essay will examine the composition of John Marrant's *Sermon* and Prince Hall's *Charges*, and it will investigate Hall's African Lodge of Freemasons as a point of origination for Ethiopianist tradition.

Prince Hall's life history, like the history of Black Freemasonry, has been a subject of some debate. William Grimshaw's 1903 *Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People of North America* initiated the popular story that Prince Hall was born in Barbados to a white father and free mulatto mother "of French descent," that his family fled the "terrors" for America, and that Hall later became a Methodist minister. Contemporary scholars of Black Freemasonry have observed inconsistencies in Grimshaw's account and for the most part rejected it. Historian Charles Wesley, working from a compelling set of archival documents, claims that Prince Hall (1738?-1807) was made a slave to the household of Boston leather tanner William Hall at age eleven and was married on November 2, 1763, to Sarah Ritchie, a servant in another Boston household. Shortly after Ritchie's death in 1770, Prince Hall was manumitted. A number of men named "Prince Hall" appear in Boston marriage records after 1770 and in the records of the Revolutionary War.⁷ One of these men was aboard the *Charming Polly* when it was captured in 1777 and subsequently spent three months with Black abolitionist Paul Cuffe under British imprisonment in New York (Wesley 38).

The details of Prince Hall's Masonic life are more certain. Hall was one of fifteen free Blacks initiated into Masonry by the members of Irish Military Lodge No. 441, on March 6,

1775. In the tax records of post-War Boston, Hall appears in connection with a number of business enterprises as a leather, tanner, caterer, merchant, and “grandmaster,” or honorary Masonic official. Hall’s shops—located first on Water Street under the sign of the “Golden Fleece” and later “just opposite the Quaker Meeting House, Quaker Lane”—served as staging grounds for the sometimes theatrical public activities of Boston’s Black Masons. On December 30, 1782, Boston’s *Independent Ledger* reported that “Saint Black’s Lodge of Free and Acc-pt-d M-s-ns” made a ceremonial procession to Hall’s Water Street house, “where an elegant and splendid entertainment was given upon the occasion” (31). Hall later filed a correction with the printers:

Our title is not St. Black’s Lodge; neither do we aspire after high titles. But our only desire is that the Great Architect of the Universe would diffuse in our hearts the true spirit of Masonry, which is love to God and universal love to all mankind. These I humbly conceive to be the two grand pillars of Masonry. Instead of a splendid entertainment, we had an agreeable one in brotherly love. (qtd. in Wesley 210)

Ever conscious of the powers of self-promotion, Hall also directed the vigorous publication activity of the African Lodge, distributing Marrant’s 1789 *Sermon* widely among his Masonic affiliates and advertising the sale of his 1797 *Charge* in the *Boston Gazette* (August 28, 1797).

Hall’s approach to Massachusetts politics was similarly high-profile. In January 1787, Hall and seventy-three other African-American men presented an emigrationist plea to the State legislature, explaining that conditions in Boston

induce us earnestly to desire to return to Africa[,] our native country, which warm climate is more natural and agreeable to us; and where we shall live among our equals and be more comfortable and happy, than we can be in our present situation; and at the same time, may have a prospect of usefulness

to our brethren there. (qtd. in Wesley 66-68)

The petition came at a time of renewed interest in African colonization, anticipating by one month the embarkation of the British-sponsored Sierra Leone project. In America, the colonization argument dismantled by Anthony Benezet in 1773 was revived with the publication of Thomas Clarkson’s *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1785) and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia* (1787). William Thornton, later a Jefferson appointee to the Patent Office, traveled the New England lecture circuit in the late 1780s to promote his own colonial scheme. Along the way, Thornton met with New Divinity minister Samuel Hopkins, who was seeking resettlement for the members of his “African Union Society” (Carlisle 10-11). Early American advocates of colonization like Jefferson, Thornton, and Hopkins shared little by way of ideology except a common view of the African as essentially alien. On this point, Prince Hall differed. In October 1787, ten months after petitioning for emigration, he returned to the legislature demanding public education for Black children. Arguing that the tax dollars exacted from Black workers should not be withheld from their families, Hall claimed for African Americans the “no taxation without representation” logic of the American Revolution and implicitly the full rights of citizenship. The State of Massachusetts rejected Hall’s logic and his petition.

Although denied full citizenship by the State, the members of Hall’s African Lodge found fellowship of another order. In April 1787, twelve years after receiving a provisional permit from the Irish military Lodge and three years after making application to the Grand Lodge of England, the African Lodge of Boston received its official charter. Some white American Freemasons debated—and continue to debate—the legitimacy of the chartering document and of the Lodge itself. Many claimed that Prince Hall’s 1775

initiation into an Irish Military Lodge was invalid because Irish Freemasonry itself was illegitimate. In the 1720s, working-class Irish Masons living in London were barred from entry to the city's more aristocratic English Lodges. English officials claimed that Irish Masonic rituals were irregular and that the Irish Lodge itself was "clandestine"; the Irish countered, claiming to be the "Antient" practitioners of the craft and therefore not subject to "Modern" English regulation.⁸

Predictable dissent did not deter the African Lodge from putting its Masonic connections to political purposes. For example, in February 1788, Prince Hall and twenty-two Lodge members petitioned the government of Massachusetts on behalf of three free Blacks kidnapped from Boston and taken to the West Indies for sale. News of the incident quickly circulated among white Masons and up through the ranks of power. Jeremy Belknap recalled, "One of [the three] was a sensible fellow and a Freemason. The merchant to whom they were offered was of this fraternity. They soon became acquainted. The Negro told his story. They were carried before the Governor, with the shipmaster and the supercargo" (qtd. in Davis 430). The State of Massachusetts intervened on behalf of the captives, who were released shortly thereafter. Upon their return to Boston, the three were escorted by Prince Hall to the homes of their chief supporters. Belknap remembered the impact of such a visit in a letter to a friend: "Really, my dear sir, I felt, and do still feel, from this circumstance, a pleasure which is a rich compensation for all the curses of the whole tribe of African traders, aided by the distillers, which have been liberally bestowed on the

clergy of this town for their agency in the above petition" (qtd. in Davis 430-31). Belknap's "pleasure" in the accomplishment of the petition and his pointed denunciation of the savage "tribe of African traders" witness to Hall's efficacy as an organizer among Bostonians, Black and white.

In a time when free Blacks could count on few guarantees of person or property and slaves could count on none, the secret was something the African Lodge could claim as its own.

Political networking among friendly Masons, though influential, was not the only factor at work in this instance. Belknap's letter reveals that the key to the captives' release was their ability to engage the attention of their would-be traders and "tell their story." It is likely that the kidnapped Black Freemason accomplished this by means of "signs and tokens," performing the gestures by which members of the Order could make their affiliation known to each

other. Certain gestures could also serve as distress signals, obliging fellow Masons to come to the aid of a "Brother." Masonic lore recounts many instances in which fellow Masons breached the boundaries of nations, parties, or factions in the name of mutual assistance. Perhaps fraternal duty obliged the slave merchant, also a Freemason, to respond to the gestures of the captive, or perhaps his initial inquiry was motivated only by curiosity. Nonetheless, the "signs and tokens" of Freemasonry were powerful enough to open a discursive space which, after significant political persuasion, became an escape route.

These "signs and tokens" proved a powerful political tool in the Lodge's internal operations as well as in its external affairs, because these gestures could be used both to open avenues of discourse and to close them. Only those who knew the passwords and signals of Freemasonry were welcome

into a regular Lodge meeting, and although these “secrets” were not difficult to discover—printed exposés of Freemasonry abounded in the late eighteenth century, sometimes doubling as or adapted from Masonic primers—Lodge officials could deny admittance to any whose credentials seemed questionable. Segregationist social habits and widespread prejudice against the reputedly “clandestine” African Lodge further bolstered the Black Freemasons’ ability to regulate membership and attendance. Thus, the “Africans” of this organization could exercise a degree of self-governance unparalleled among the proliferation of similarly named groups in the Northeast. The “African Societies” of New York and Pennsylvania, for example, were not societies of “Africans” but of anti-slavery whites; others, like Samuel Hopkins’s “African Union Society,” organized African Americans according to the political or religious agendas of a few white leaders. The difference between the African Lodge and its more paternalistic counterparts was further underscored by the Lodge’s mutual assistance ethos.

Even the “signs and tokens” of Freemasonry could be considered properly African. Masons worldwide claimed that their ritual practices—secrecy, ceremony, hierarchy—derived from an ancient Egyptian order, a history to which the members of the African Lodge could make a double claim. The occluded or “occult” character of this history lent itself to active speculation and creative elaboration. Thus, the Egyptian “roots” of the Order came to be a recognized and celebrated dimension of Prince Hall Freemasonry.⁹ Harry A. Williamson, this century’s most prolific scholar of Black Freemasonry, compiled volumes of genealogical observations, such as this:

Of all the ancient legends that of Isis, Osiris and Horus of Egypt is very closely linked with certain ceremonies of our Order. In fact, those members of our Craft who are students of Occult Science state the esoteric ceremonies of

Freemasonry are of Egyptian origin but that following the enslavement of the Hebrew people in Egypt, Moses, because of his position of great power gradually transformed those ceremonies from Egyptian to Hebrew traditions, and that is the reason one finds so much of Judaism in our ceremonies. (127-28)

Through elective identification and conscious study, Black Freemasons built a genealogical tradition for themselves, articulating and re-articulating the line of descent through which the wisdom of the ancients passed on to American Blacks.

Marrant and Hall delivered their *Sermon* and *Charges* on days set aside by Masonic tradition for public celebration of the Order’s “ancieny,” the Feast of John the Baptist, June 24, and the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, December 29. New England Masons usually celebrated these days by making processions through town in their ceremonial aprons, gloves, and jewels and by delivering speeches on the history and progress of their Lodges. On this public occasion, Marrant and Hall rehearsed the African Lodge’s genealogy before mixed audiences—both Masons and non-Masons, Blacks and whites, insiders and outsiders. Their speeches play the divide between a public Blackness and a secret African brotherhood, between race as a social signifier and race as a privately felt experience, and between the particulars of a general Masonic history and the potential energy of a re-collected genealogy.

Over the course of this lecture series, Hall gradually developed a unique symbolic system. In the tradition of the Alchemists, Kabbalists, Rosicrucians, and mystics of the Enlightenment era, he drew from a number of theological and occult writings to fashion his genealogy. Hall’s letter books reveal some of his sources: Immediately after Marrant’s *Sermon*, Hall wrote a thirty-five-page entry of “Remarks on Mr. John Edwards compleat History or Summary of the Dispensations and Methods of Religion

from the Beginning of the World to the Consummation of All Things" and "The Lives of Some of the Fathers and Learned and Famous Divines in the Christian Church from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Wesley 214). Jonathan Edwards's *A History of the Work of Redemption, containing the Outlines of a Body of Divinity, including a View of Church History* (published 1773) was a favorite text among the proponents of dispensationalist history and New Divinity. The influence of abolitionist arguments by New Divinity minister Samuel Hopkins and historical writings by Josephus is also manifest in the sermons. But Hall maintained a critical relationship to his source materials in his writing as in his politics. His goal, after all, was not just the collection and systematization of an African legacy but the divination of a properly African-American mode of being, a consciousness.

John Marrant's *Sermon to the Brethren of the African Lodge of the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons, Preached at the Request of Grand Master Prince Hall*, is a "coming out" piece for the African Lodge. Marrant, an American-born free Black, won fame as a preacher in George Whitefield's trans-Atlantic Huntingdon Connection. His ordination sermon—a narrative of Marrant's dramatic conversion and captivity among the Cherokee and Creek Indians—was published in London in 1785 and enjoyed numerous reprints on both sides of the Atlantic. As an emissary of the Connection, Marrant spent three years preaching in and around Birchtown, Nova Scotia, a community of Black Loyalist exiles. Birchtown afforded Marrant space to develop a Zionist covenant theology which centered on displaced Black peoples as the subjects of a prophetic history. In 1788, Marrant left Birchtown for Boston, bringing his vision and his celebrity with him. He met Prince Hall

in March 1789 and lodged with the Masonic leader during several turbulent months of public preaching and persecution; sometime during his stay, Marrant was initiated into the African Lodge of Masons.

Prince Hall undoubtedly recognized the value of Marrant's name when he asked the Methodist minister to deliver his ceremonial address at a Lodge-sponsored celebration of St. John the Baptist's day, June 24. Hall also enlisted two prominent white Masons, Thomas and John Fleet, to print and distribute the sermon. The full title of the published text—*A Sermon Preached on the 24th Day of June 1789, Being the Festival of St. John the Baptist, at the Request of the Right Worshipful the Grand Master Prince Hall and the Rest of the Brethren of the African Lodge of the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons in Boston by the Reverend Brother Marrant, Chaplain*—and the design of its title-page highlight the name of Prince Hall and indicate the Grand Master's heavy involvement in the production of the sermon. Clearly, the experienced Mason and the Methodist minister collaborated in the development of the speech, which reflects the influence of their respective traditions.¹⁰ Following Masonic feast day tradition, it presents the genealogy of the Masonic Order from its Biblical beginnings; like a sermon, it interprets and applies the significance of ancient pre-text to the present occasion. Preacher Marrant opens the sermon, taking as his text Romans 12:10: "Be kindly affectioned one to another, with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another." The scripture recalls the instructions of Paul, a man himself divided between Old and New Testaments, to Christian converts cultivating a sense of community. Paul's declaration "We, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:5) might have served earlier American preachers as a tool for church discipline. Some might also use we as an exegetical

shortcut, applying this scripture to any group of churchgoers. But on June 24, 1789—a public feast day open to Masons and non-Masons, Blacks and whites—Marrant could not assume homogeneity in his audience.

Negotiating these social complexities without negating them, Marrant preached to an ambiguous “we.” Masons might hear it as a fraternal overture, African Americans a declaration of brotherhood. A non-Masonic white auditor might interrogate his or her own relationship to the “body” of the address. In each case, Marrant’s method underscored his message: community is the product of conscious affiliation and collective identification. He explains, “First, my Brethren, let us learn to pray to God through our Lord Jesus Christ for understanding, *that we may know ourselves*; for without this we can never be fit for the society of man, we must learn to guide ourselves before we can guide others” (4; emphasis added). Self-knowledge here concerns not the singular subject but the community, be it Masonic or African-American. So too are mutual assistance and respect “required of us as Christians, every one of which are like so many links of a chain, which when joined together make one complete member of Christ” (5). This is not the Great Chain of Being, the bondage of slavery, or a symbol inherited from Masonic tradition, but rather a sign of interlocked interest and conscious affiliation.

The figure of the chain models both the emerging Lodge community and the composition of Marrant’s *Sermon*. He follows this introduction with a traditional demonstration of “the ancency of Masonry,” drawing out the chain of descent through which the Craft was passed down to the African Lodge. In each generation from Adam, Marrant finds an example of brotherly affection, applies it—sometimes with a radical shift in tone—to the present, and closes the link by returning to his patrilineal framework. The design is chiasmic, both in the

formal sense of the term and in the Black vernacular tradition of repetition and reversal.¹¹ It allows Marrant to signify, quite seriously, on the parallel histories of the Masonic Order, the Old Testament patriarchs, and Western “civilization” itself. Every stage of this history is rendered meaningful to members of the African Lodge.

As Marrant tells it, Creation rests on principles of mutuality and respect. God, “the Grand Architect of the Universe,” made man “to converse with his fellow creatures that are of his own order, to maintain mutual love and society, and to serve God in comfort” (5-6). Twice Marrant emphasizes this appointed order. Abruptly, his tone changes:

Then what can these God-provoking wretches think, who despise their fellow men, as tho’ they were not of the same species with themselves, and would if in their power deprive them of the blessings and comforts of this life, which God in his bountiful goodness, hath freely given to all his creatures to improve and enjoy? Surely such monsters never came out of the hand of God in such a forlorn condition.—Which brings me to consider the fall of man. (6-7)

Ceremony gives way to uncompromising critique as Marrant’s focus shifts from history to the present. Calling the “despisers of their fellow men” “monsters,” he asserts the deviance of both racism and of the polygenetic view of the human species. This degeneracy belongs not to Creation but to the Fall; those who live above it may inherit not only an ancient wisdom but also their original estate.

The location of Eden invited much speculation from adepts of the eighteenth century. A prevailing view mapped its borders at the Ganges, Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates, and Marrant concurred. More controversial was his improvement on ancient authorities like Galtruchius and Josephus: Marrant locates Paradise at “the principal part of African Ethiopia” and situates members of the African Lodge as its natural heirs. He writes,

These [rivers] are the four grand landmarks which the all-wise and gracious God was pleased to draw as the bounds and habitation of all nations which he was about to settle in this world; if so, what nation or people dare, without highly displeasing and provoking that God to pour down his judgments upon them.—I say, dare to despise or tyrannize over their lives or liberties, or incroach on their lands, or to enslave their bodies? (8-9)

To colonize, invade, enslave, or abuse the “nations” of this “African Ethiopia,” even those scattered across the African diaspora, is to act against the order of Creation.

Marrant elaborates upon this correlation, linking Africa with civilization and racism with degradation. The slave trade, the fall of Lucifer, and the temptation of Adam and Eve prove in parallel examples that “envy and pride are the leading lines to all the miseries that mankind have suffered from the beginning of the world to this present day” (9). Especially potent is his re-vision of Cain as an oppressor of Africa and Abel as his oppressed victim:

Envy at [Adam’s] prosperity hath taken the crown of glory from his head, and hath made us his posterity miserable.—What was it but this that made Cain murder his brother, whence is it but from these that our modern Cains call us Africans the sons of Cain? (We admit it if you please) and we will find from him and his sons Masonry began, after the fall of his father. (9)

Some Christians had identified Cain as the “Adam” of racial distinction, claiming that the “mark” with which God punished him was genetically revisited on his descendants as a skin of blackness. Marrant attributes this racist mythology to the envy of a degraded people. “Our modern Cains,” he calls them, echoing Phillis Wheatley’s disdain for “our modern Egyptians.”

After reversing the story of the curse, Marrant continues to rework the legacy of Cain according to Masonic legend. Masons looked to Cain as a founder of the Craft, as an engineer of weights and measures, and as the

builder of the city of Nod. His son Tubal-Cain is credited with the invention of brass and metal-working (Genesis 4:16-22). If “Africans” are “the sons of Cain”—Marrant quips, “we admit it if you please”—learning and authority run in the family:

Bad as Cain was, yet God took not from him his faculty of studying architecture, arts and sciences—his sons also were endued with the same spirit, and in some convenient place no doubt they met and communed with each other for instruction. It seems that the all[-]wise God put this into the hearts of Cain’s family thus to employ themselves, to divert their minds from musing on their father’s murder and the wo[el]ful curse God had pronounced on him, as we don’t find any more of Cain’s complaints after this. (10)

Marrant uses the example of an educated Cain to shame the Massachusetts politicians, some of them probably seated in his audience, who denied free Blacks access to public education. In October 1787, the African Lodge had petitioned the legislature that schools supported with Black workers’ taxes be opened to Black children. Denied this petition and an education, the so-called “sons of Cain” were cut off from even their mythological legacy.

Folk belief placed a mark of racial distinction upon Noah’s son Ham, charging him with the preservation of “blackness” during the time of the Flood. Some claimed his color was punishment for violating Noah’s privacy; others suggested that the source of Canaan’s color was Ham’s spouse, Egyptus (Genesis 9:18-27). Marrant remembers Ham as the vessel of a greater legacy: Through him the secret wisdom passed on to Cush and Nimrod, to Ethiopia, to Babylon, and across North Africa:

From Shinar the arts were carried to distant parts of the earth notwithstanding the confusion of languages, which gave rise to Masons['] faculty and universal practice of conversing without speaking and of *knowing each other by signs and tokens*; they settled the dispersion in case any of them should meet in distant parts of the world who had been before in Shinar. (12-13; emphasis added)

Upon his initiation into a Lodge, every Mason learned these “signs and tokens,” manual gestures signifying one’s affiliation with and rank within the Order. Only those who could perform these gestures correctly were admitted to a regular Lodge meeting. “Signs and tokens” also allowed Masons meeting abroad to identify each other reliably as such or oblige fraternal bystanders to deliver aid. Marrant takes an example of this mode of communication from the biblical story of Benhadad and Ahab, leaders of the warring Syrians and Israelites:

[Benhadad] sends a message to Ahab king of Israel to request only his life as a captive; but behold the brotherly love of a Mason! No sooner was the message delivered, but he cries out in rapture—is he alive—he is my brother! Every Mason knows that they were both of the craft, and also the messengers. (11)

In this story of captivity and rescue, the audience would have recognized the likeness of the kidnapped African Lodge member who used Masonic hand signals to negotiate a way out of the slave trade.

Signs and tokens demonstrated both the global character of Masonic fellowship and its ancience as well. In these gestures the ritual core of Masonic affiliation perpetuated itself through time and space. According to Marrant, the sons of Ham carried the Order through its crucial years after the scattering of nations at the Tower of Babel:

Thus the earth was again planted and replenished with Masons the second son of Ham carried into Egypt; there he built the city of Heliopolis—Thebes with an hundred gates—they built also the statue of Sphynx . . . the first or earliest of the seven wonders of arts. (13)

Ham’s brother Shem and his descendants could not be credited with these accomplishments, as they instead “diverted themselves at Ur in mathematical studies, teaching Peleg[,] the father of Rehu, of Sereg, Nachor, and Terah, father of Abram” (13). Abraham came from “a learned race of mathe-

maticians and geometricians,” Marrant explains, but his Chaldean education was incomplete without the practical wisdom of Masonry:

The descendants of Abram sojourned in Egypt, as shepherds still lived in tents, practiced very little of the art of architecture till about eighty years before their Exodus, when by the overruling hand of providence they were trained up to the building with stone and brick, in order to make them expert Masons before they possessed the promised land. (13-14)

Apologists had long excused slavery as a means of educating a “heathen” people; dispensationalists like New Divinity minister Samuel Hopkins strained to see a Christian purpose in it. Marrant’s interpretation of Israelite slavery takes Providence out of the hands of slaveholders and mainline theologians and designates the Kingdom, not a Christian education, as the destiny of the enslaved. It also posits Freemasonry as a stopping place on the way to the “promised land.”

As he writes the hand of God into history, Marrant writes so-called “Gentile nations” out of it. It is God who inspires all learned progress and who chooses as his instruments the descendants of Ham—Canaanites, Phoenicians, Sidonians renowned for “their perfect knowledge of what was solid in architecture.” These were the nations called upon by King Solomon to construct his celebrated temple. Marrant remembers that Solomon sought out the legendary Hiram Abiff, king of Tyre and a key figure in Masonic lore, “for some of his people . . . to cut down and hew cedar trees, as his servants understood it better than his own” (15). In so stating, he signifies on another pro-slavery myth. To be “hewers of wood and drawers of water” was Joshua’s curse on the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:23–27), a curse some claimed was realized in American slavery. Marrant claims otherwise: “Nothing more can redound to [the] honour” of these sons of Ham than their labor on Solomon’s temple (15).

Masons viewed Solomon's temple as the apex of achievement and patterned their own Lodges after its design. Marrant presents its construction as a template of interracial brotherhood. He recalls that "70,000 men who carried burdens, who were not numbered among Masons," men "of different nations and different colours," worked together on Solomon's temple "strongly cemented in brotherly love and friendship" (16-17). Even the completion of the temple and the dispersion of the workers across the globe and through the ages did not diminish their loyalty to one another: "These are the laudable bonds that unite Free Masons together in one indissoluble fraternity" (18).

Certainly this "laudable" ideal did not accord with the experience of the African Lodge. Many white American Freemasons denied the legitimacy of the Lodge and refused to admit Black Masons to their meetings, preferring skin color over signs and tokens as a means of selection. Responding to this racist permutation of Masonic practice, Marrant asserts that those who refuse their brothers violate the basic principles of the Order:

Let them make parties who will and despise those they would make, if they could, a species below them and as not made of the same clay with themselves; but if you study the holy book of God, you will there find that you stand on the level not only with them, but with the greatest kings on the earth, as Men and as Masons, and these truly great men are not ashamed of the meanest of their brethren. (20)

The Masons of history stand with the African Lodge, Marrant claims. The prejudicial views of their contemporaries are only an unstudied, unnatural, and temporary aberration.

From ancient history, Marrant draws examples of "Africans who were truly good, wise, and learned men, and as eloquent as any other nation whatever," including Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, and Augustine (20). History also provides evidence of the temporary quality of slavery and refutes any

attempt to naturalize the condition to African peoples: "We shall not find a nation on earth but has at some period or other of their existence been in slavery, from the Jews down to the English nation, under many Emperors, Kings and Princes." On this point, Marrant cites Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*:

In the life of Gregory, about the year 580 . . . he passing [through Rome] saw many young boys with white bodies, fair faces, beautiful countenances and lovely hair, set forth for sale; he went to the merchant their owner and asked him from what country he brought them; he answered from Britain . . . Gregory (sighing) said, alas! for grief that such fair faces should be under the power of the prince of darkness. (20)

"Darkness" is a condition of slaveholders, not slaves—to this the "white bodies" and "fair faces" of young enslaved Britons attest. Perhaps the "fair faces" of America's British colonists demonstrate that masters have not always been masters and that slaves might not always be slaves. Marrant does not say this much. But he does present a view of history in which connections between blackness and slavery or between whiteness and privilege are consistently broken. Neither blackness nor whiteness should be read as symbols, he argues, for "all that is outward, whether opinions, rites or ceremonies, cannot be of importance in regard to eternal salvation, any further than they have a tendency to produce inward righteousness and goodness" (24; Romans 2:25-29). Returning to his point of origination in Paul, Marrant exhorts his audience to deny their illusory prejudices and honor "eternal" truths. He concludes, "We shall all, I hope, meet at that great day, when our great Grand Master shall sit at the head of the great and glorious Lodge in heaven" (24). Thus he seals the bonds of brotherhood and the last link of his sermon.

His is a message of clarity, delivered with a necessary degree of indirection. It was proper to Freemasonry

and critical to the security of the emerging free Black community to leave the connections occluded. Indeed, the constructed quality of the story—its complicated nexus of biblical and historical reference, its playful relationship to those pretexts, its skillful reversal and revision—defies conventional explication. To look into it is to find not answers but patterns, not systems but similarities and differences. Its references point beyond the meaning of this text, to other texts, to a world of instincts and clues whose value is in their fecundity, not their verification. This is the world of signs and tokens, the world to which members of the African Lodge announced themselves legitimate heirs.

What audience members actually heard in Marrant's *Sermon* would be determined by their own presuppositions about Marrant, about the Lodge, and about African Americans in general. In crafting a consciously African-American genealogy, Marrant played at a practice of critical revision, or revelation, that would come to be a hallmark of Black theology. The Reverend James Cone explains, "Since the biblical story of God's dealings with his people can be told in various ways, the chief concern of the people is not the information the preacher includes in his message but rather *how* he arranges that information into a story and how he relates it all to the daily lives of the people" (148). The constructed quality of the story, its textuality, serves the community's need for self-possession.¹² What Gates says of the protective function of the Black vernacular, Cone says also of the story:

Story is not only easy to understand and to remember, it is often deceptive to those who stand outside the community where it was created. White slave masters were no brighter than our contemporary white theologians who can only see in black religion what their axiological presuppositions permit them to see. (150)

Many in the audience would suspect the legitimacy of Marrant's story,

just as many had already contested the legitimacy of Black Freemasonry by calling it a counterfeit or an imitation, as Jefferson had judged Phillis Wheatley's poetry. Prince Hall and John Marrant set out to answer these charges by verifying the genealogical connection between the African Lodge and the Ancient Order. In the process, they found that the mystical kernel of civilization could be shown to have resided always with Africans. Some would contest the accuracy of this genealogy, but few could deny its force: the power that comes with a remembrance of one's primordial place in history.

When Prince Hall reconvened the Lodge for a public St. John the Baptist Day's discourse three years later, in 1792, he opened his remarks by remembering John Marrant: "It is requisite that we should on these public days, and when we appear in form, give some reason as a foundation for our so doing, but . . . this has been already done, in a discourse delivered in substance by our late Reverend Brother *John Marrant*" (1). Marrant returned to England and died in 1791; his 1789 *Sermon* provided the groundwork for Hall's *CHARGE Delivered to the Brethren of the AFRICAN LODGE On the 25th of June, 1792. At the Hall of Brother William Smith, In CHARLESTOWN*. Hall announces that his own task is to "raise part of the superstructure" of Masonic fraternity: "the duty of a Mason" to "the great Architect of this visible world" who "governs all things here below by his almighty power, and [whose] watchful eye is over all works" (1).

This "all-seeing eye of God," commemorated most famously on the printed currency of the United States of America, represented to eighteenth-century audiences an omniscient and sovereign Divine. For Hall, God was not the absentee landlord idealized in Deist philosophy, but rather a present power and a constant witness. Correspondingly, the 1792 *Charge* focuses on the visible activities, the

"duties" of the Lodge. He advises members on issues of decorum, reminding them their behavior will demonstrate to "spectators" that their celebration of St. John the Baptist's Day is not "a feast of Bacchus," but "a refreshment with Masons" (12). The very title of the *Charge* reflects Hall's concern for image: he had secured as a meeting place the Charlestown, Massachusetts, hall of William Smith, a prominent white Freemason whose name on the frontispiece would bolster the credibility of the meeting. Hall's stated themes of duty to God and loyalty to country would do the same. The *Charge* was designed for the critical eyes of the public as much as for the all-seeing eye of God.

But it was the unseen forces of chaos that most occupied the public during the turbulent years of the so-called "early Republic." The African Lodge sustained a double weight of suspicion: any gathering of Blacks could be seen as insurrectionary, let alone a formally organized secret society. Freemasons specifically had been associated with a number of uprisings, both Black and white. The chroniclers of the 1741 New York City slave rebellion remembered the ominous appearance in the 1730s of a group of Black men "assum[ing] the Stile and Title of FREEMASONS" (Jordan 130). The leaders of Shay's Rebellion (1786) had joined the Masons during the Revolutionary War; during the Rebellion itself, Daniel Shay and fellow Regulators Elijah and Luke Day attended a Masonic meeting together. Doubtlessly aware of the dangers of association, Hall wrote to Massachusetts Governor Bowdoin, volunteering the "help and support" of the African Lodge in putting down Shay's Rebellion and explaining that Freemasonry "forbids our having concern in any plot or conspiracies against the state where we dwell" (Davis 431). He reaffirms this pledge in the *Charge* of 1792 and declares that "we have no hand in any plots or conspiracies or rebellion, or side or assist in them."

Careful to separate the African Lodge from "the bloodshed, the devastation of towns and cities that hath been done by" the rebels, Hall nonetheless expresses concern for the affected parties. "What heart can be so hard as not to pity those our distress brethren, and keep at the greatest distance from them?" he asks. "However just it may be on the side of the oppress, yet it doth not in the least, or rather ought not, abate that love and fellow-feeling which we ought to have for our brother fellow men" (1-2). Hall will not weigh the "justness" of the rebellion against his "pity" for those who suffer its violence. Nor will he particularize, for the present, his loyalty to the African-American community. Instead, he presents duty to "brother fellow men" as a consequence of duty to God: "For if I love a man for the sake of the image of God which is on him, I must love all, for he made all, and upholds all . . . let them be of what colour or nation they may, yea even our very enemies, much more a brother Mason" (4). Speaking for an "us" that is importantly indeterminate and powerfully overarching, Hall asserts a duty more pressing than partisanship.

Similarly exceptional are the benevolent exemplars Hall puts before his audience for imitation. Ebedmelech, the Ethiopian eunuch, "made intercession" for the captive prophet Jeremiah; Elisha preserved his Syrian captives, though the Israelites wanted to "kill them out of the way, as not worthy to live on the same earth"; and Abraham "prevent[ed] the storm, or rebellion that was rising between Lot's servants and his" by dividing their land claims (4-5). Each story highlights the personal effects of war, "rebellion," and captivity; each addresses the boundaries of race, class, or caste as well. But in these three anecdotes a number of possible godly responses to politicized difference are modeled, from the subversive humanity of Ebedmelech to the wise governance of Abraham. And no option is recommended above the others. Hall

leaves the application to his audience, a knowing and necessary tactic in a time of suspicion and supervision.

But the high visibility afforded the Lodge on this occasion also gave Hall the opportunity to expose discrimination endured by its members and perpetuated by state officials and fellow Freemasons:

I hope you will endeavour to follow [these examples] so far as your abilities will permit in your present situation and the disadvantages you labour under on account of your being deprived of the means of education in your younger days, as you see it is at this day with our children, for we see notwithstanding we are rated for that, and other Town charges, we are deprived of that blessing. (9-10)

Four years after the Lodge petitioned the state for access to public education, the injustice was still uncorrected. So Hall publicly turned to a higher authority for redress, encouraging his brethren to seek out their own means of education and to "look forward to a better day."

Biblical prophecy promised that day would come: "Hear what the great Architect of the universal world saith: *Aethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto me*" (10). Here Hall cites the Ethiopianist vision of Psalms 68:31, "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." Subsequent generations of Black writers and preachers would return to this verse as a discursive touchstone and a common refrain. Scholars once located the first print instance of American "Ethiopianism" in the 1820s, but Hall's *Charge* extends the recorded history of this discursive tradition. Thirty-five years before the publication of Robert Alexander Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto* (1827), Prince Hall preached that Ethiopia was always already forthcoming. The State of Massachusetts may have been able to claim the tax dollars of its African citizens, but it could not repress a foretold conclusion. He continues:

But in the meantime let us lay by our recreations, and all superfluities, so

that we may have that to educate our rising generation, which was spent in those follies. Make you this beginning, and who knows but God may raise up some friend or body of friends, as he did in *Philadelphia*, to open a School for the blacks here, as that friendly city has done there. (10)

Hall did not preach a mystical, "other-worldly" hope but rather an activist "this worldly" faith. Just as David Walker made a direct "appeal" to "the colored citizens of the world," Hall "charged" his audience with responsibility for their destiny as a community. He called upon them to "make a beginning," and he promised that prophecy would be fulfilled.

Hall also used the public forum of his St. John the Baptist's Day speech to expose white Freemasons who had refused to welcome members of the African Lodge into their fellowship. Taking a page from Masonic history, he reminds his audience that the "Order of St. John" had built temples across northern Africa and then asks:

. . . whether at that day, when there was an African church, and perhaps the largest Christian church on earth, whether there was no African of that order; or whether, if they were all whites, they would refuse to accept them as their fellow Christians and brother Masons; or whether there were any so weak, or rather so foolish, as to say, because they were Blacks, that would make their lodge or army too common or too cheap? (11-12)

He does not answer his own question. But he observes that the labor of Black soldiers was welcome in the Revolutionary Army, where Blacks and whites "marched shoulder to shoulder, brother soldier and brother soldier, to the field of battle" (12). Many of the leaders of that war, including General Washington himself, were prominent Freemasons. That the same men should refuse full fellowship to Black Freemasons in peace time was, Prince Hall implied, a violation of the duties of their Order. Prejudice against color was a violation of the will of God, the "all-seeing."

Hall's Deist contemporaries might appreciate his characterization of an omniscient, "all-seeing" God. Still, there were significant differences between a Deism grounded in the apparent order of things and Hall's prophetic witness. Rational minds might mistake color-coded surveillance for a substantive vision; Hall looked forward to millennial revelation. A postscript poem to the *Charge* so states:

Then shall we hear and see and know,
All we desir'd and wish'd below . . .
Then burst the chains with sweet surprize,
And in our Saviour's image rise. (13)

At the end of time, the temporary codes of color would resolve themselves into more significant images. It is, finally, this imaginary and not a more particular kind of nationalistic or partisan duty, that Hall charges his audience to observe.

If the public image of the African Lodge drew scrutiny and sometimes hostility from whites, it also drew great interest from African Americans. During the mid-1790s, Black community organizations took root in Philadelphia, Providence, and Boston and extended their branches between these cities to create networks.¹³ Absalom Jones and Richard Allen founded two independent Black churches in Philadelphia—St. Thomas Protestant Episcopal Church and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church—in July 1794. Peter Mantore, a free Black of that city, asked Prince Hall to charter a Masonic Lodge there in March 1797. Mantore explained, "The white Masons have refused to grant us a Dispensation, fearing that black men living in Virginia would get to be Masons, too. . . . If we are under you, we shall always be ready to assist in the furtherance of Masonry among us" (qtd. in Davis 425). Hall formally organized the Lodge on September 22, 1797, appointing Absalom Jones its Master and

Richard Allen its treasurer. That same year, Hall chartered a third African Lodge in Providence for the benefit of Masons who routinely traveled to Boston for meetings.

Hall's *Charge Delivered to the African Lodge, June 24, 1797, at Menotomy* reflects his growing concern with the work of organizing the Black community. It was designed to build on and complete Marrant's 1789 *Sermon* and his own 1792 *Charge*, to add to the "foundation" a second "pillar" of the African Lodge: "Our duty to sympathise with our fellow men under their troubles" (3). When Hall says sympathy, he does not mean to follow the then-fashionable conventions of sentimentality. His rhetoric does at times reflect the influence of its proof-texts. For example, he encourages his audience to "weep with those that weep" (5) and refers to the rescue of "the captives among the Algerines" (17), which Hall might have known from Susanna Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797), or published variants thereof. But he does not propound the universal (if flimsy) humanism of sentimentalism. Instead, Hall devotes his *Charge* to the particular situation of the African Lodge and its responsibility to the Black community.

The 1797 *Charge* is less a public discourse than an internal review focused on the conditions, resources, and needs of African Americans. Hall first surveys the spectacle of slavery and the slave trade, sampling language from Proverbs 12: "Let us see them dragg'd from their native country, by the iron hand of tyranny and oppression, from their dear friends and connections, with weeping eyes and aching hearts, to a strange land and strange people, whose tender mercies are cruel" (4). He also attends to the free Blacks in New England:

Daily insults you meet with in the streets of Boston; much more on public days of recreation, how are you shamefully abus'd, and that at such a degree, that you may be said to carry your lives in your hands; and the

arrows of death are flying about your heads. . . . Helpless old women have their clothes torn off their backs, even to the exposing of their nakedness. (10)

Both enslaved and free Blacks are set apart by their suffering. Hall presents them as a chosen people: like the Israelites at Passover, they find the "arrows of death" flying about them; like Noah, they are stripped of their dignity. Their suffering does not prove the world's general sickness, but their own destiny as a people at the center of a specific sacred narrative.

Millenarians like Samuel Hopkins reckoned slavery and African redemption as scenes in a broader theologico-historical drama. Hopkins, the leader of Rhode Island's "African Society," was undoubtedly known to Hall through mutual acquaintances. It appears that Hall was also acquainted with Hopkins's publications: The 1797 *Charge* reiterates some points from Hopkins's *Treatise on the Millennium* (1793) and specifically adopts Hopkins's correlation of the slave trade with the commerce of Babylon described in Revelations 18. But Hall did not share in Hopkins's belief that African colonization would hasten the return of Christ. Instead he put the millennium in the hands of Africans themselves:

And if I mistake it not, it now begins to dawn in some of the West-India islands; which puts me in mind of a nation (that I have somewhere read of) called Ethiopians, that cannot change their skin: But God can and will change their conditions, and their hearts too; and let Boston and the world know that He hath no respect of persons; and that that bulwark of envy, pride, scorn and contempt; which is so visible to be seen in some and felt, shall fall, to rise no more. (5)

The Haitian revolution demonstrated that redemption was not a "change of skin" but a "change of heart." And the hearts most in need of change were those enthralled by a racism so virulent as to make itself "visible." In the millennium, racism will "fall, to rise no more," Hall

promises, while Ethiopia will soon "come forth":

Remember what a dark day it was with our African brethren six years ago, in the French West-Indies. Nothing but the snap of the whip was heard from morning to evening; hanging, broken on the wheel, burning, and all manner of tortures inflicted on those unhappy people . . . but blessed be God, the scene is changed. . . . Thus doth Ethiopia begin to stretch forth her hand, from a sink of slavery to freedom and equality. (11-12)

Hall gathers the Africans of the Western diaspora under the sign of Ethiopia and the promise of Psalms 68, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." Haiti may have been the first to "stretch forth her hand," but American Blacks, slave and free, would have their day as the wheel of time turned.

Hall claims for his growing catalog of African Lodge exemplars a number of biblical "Ethiopians." These include Jethro, called by Hall "an Ethiopian" and a Mason, who taught his son-in-law Moses "how to regulate his courts of justice, and what sort of men to choose for the different offices" (6-7); the Ethiopian eunuch baptized by Philip, a "great monarch" who did not "think it beneath him to take a poor servant of the Lord by the hand, and invite him into his carriage"; and the Queen of Sheba, of whom the founder of Freemasonry, "our Grand Master, Solomon," "was not asham'd" when he led her "by the hand . . . into his court, at the hour of high twelve, and there converse[d] with her on points of masonry" (9). Neither would these worthies be ashamed to stand with their latter-day brethren. Carefully, Hall affirms in his brethren a comparable capacity for distinction.

Hall recognizes that African Americans denied access to public education were developing their own intellectual resources in "thinking, hearing and weighing matters, men, and things in your own mind, and making that judgment of them as you think reasonable to satisfy your minds and give an

answer to those who may ask you a question" (12). He also celebrates the literary achievements of the non-literate, those who "repeat psalms and hymns, and a great part of a sermon, only by hearing it read or preached," and the divinatory skills of Black sailors:

How many of this class of our brethren that follow the seas can foretell a storm some days before it comes; whether it will be a heavy or light, a long or short one; foretell a hurricane, whether it will be destructive or moderate, without any other means than observation and consideration. So in the observation of heavenly bodies, this same class without a telescope or other apparatus have through a smoked glass observed the eclipse of the sun: One being ask'd what he saw through his smoaked glass, said, Saw, saw, de clipsey, or de clipseys. And what do you think of it?—Stop, dere be two. Right, and what do they look like?—Look like, why if I tell you, they look like the two ships sailing one bigger than tother; so they sail by one another, and make no noise. (12-13)

In this passage, one of the earliest representations of the Black vernacular by an African American, Hall lovingly promotes his community's achievements. "As simple as the answers are they have a meaning," he declares, "and shew that God can out of the mouths of babes and Africans shew forth his glory" (13).

That this glory manifests itself by non-rational means is, of course, no accident. The advocates of Reason could see little "enlightenment" in "Black" peoples and disdained ways of knowing familiar to those deprived of formal literacy, libraries, or technological improvement. But Hall claimed that those who see through a "smoaked glass," as through the veil of blackness, could "foretell" movements and perceive "meaning." Even an eclipse had its significance—as an indication of change on the horizon or as a witness to the changeable, ever-turning nature of the world itself. In such moments, the "jack tars" had the upper hand on the wheel of time, because the idea of cataclysmic change was simply too dis-

ruptive to factor meaningfully into the static-state systems of Enlightenment thought.

Hall encourages his African brethren to recognize their powers of divination as a source of political strength. The unseen world could prove the seat of their resistance. Thus he exhorts Lodge members to keep their secrets, using the example of two successful robbers who betray each other under circumstance of fear:

... if [a man] was truly bold, and void of fear, he would keep the whole plunder to himself: so when either of them is detected and not the other, he may be call'd to oath to keep it secret, but through fear, (and that passion is so strong) he will not confess, till the fatal cord is put on his neck; then death will deliver him from the fear of man, and he will confess the truth when it will not be of any good to himself or the community. (13)

The good of the "community," Hall explains, will not be served by confession, or by oath-breaking, or by fear. The secret must be kept within the veil.

As to the content of that guarded secret, contemporary readers cannot be sure. We may suspect that Hall had a plot in mind; we may hope the Lodge was then formulating strategies of resistance. More powerful, though, is the existence of the secret itself. In a time when free Blacks could count on few guarantees of person or property, and slaves could count on none, the secret was something the African Lodge could claim as its own. It was a seedling for the concept of self-possession. What was unknown and unseen they could secure for themselves through second sight, a sense educated, according to Hall, "by our *searches and researches* into men and things" (18; emphasis added). The prestige of the visible world would prove, in time, a mere distraction. Hall concludes the *Charge* on this point, with a poem he claims to have "found among some papers":

Let blind admirers handsome faces
praise,

And graceful features to great honor
 raise,
 The glories of the red and white
 express,
 I know no beauty but in holiness;
 If God of beauty be the uncreate
 Perfect idea, in this lower state,
 The greatest beauties of an human
 mould,
 Who most resemble him we justly
 hold;
 Whom we resemble not in flesh and
 blood,
 But being pure and holy, just and
 good:
 May such a beauty fall but to my
 share,
 For curious shape or face I'll never
 care. (18)

Human "faces" and the "red and white" tokens of nationalism counted only as "curiosities." And for all their seeing, the scopophiliacs of the Enlightenment could still never know "the uncreate / Perfect idea in this lower state." The secret of that all-powerful God dwelt in "holiness," revealing itself only to those willing to stand within the veil.

Read as a suite, the 1789 *Sermon* and the *Charges* of 1792 and 1797 present a number of suggestive possibilities. Perhaps they were designed as a series of initiation lectures, each one preparing the members of the African Lodge for the Masonic Order's three symbolic degrees: Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master. Prince Hall framed the lectures as steps in a building process: Marrant's *Sermon* provided a foundation of "anciency," Hall's 1792 *Charge* introduced the pillar of duty, and his 1797 *Charge* established a second pillar, sympathy. Within the context of Freemasonry, these pillars represent the two columns in the porch at Solomon's Temple—one pillar is named Jachin, meaning strength; the other is Boaz, meaning establishment (1 Kings 7: 21, 2 Chronicles 3:17). Kabbalists and mystics have interpreted them as active and passive principles, the binary and the unitary, the

spiritual and the material. Together, they form the portal to the Holy of Holies; between them hangs the veil, which marks the divide between worlds.

In Masonic temples, initiates learned the secrets to passing through this veil and thus from the profane into the sacred. Perhaps Prince Hall and his African Lodge recognized in this ritual configuration of space and symbol a semblance of their own passage through the profane logic of racial formation. Empiricism might reduce their common condition to the consequence of skin color, but by their "searches and researches" into mysticism, theology, and history Hall and Marrant constructed a more significant vision of their community. They redrew the veil of Blackness around their African brethren and counted all who stood within it as participants in the unfolding of a mystery, a common consciousness, and a culture.

To insist that Hall and Marrant played an originary role in the history of Black nationalist discourse would be to simplify and overstate the case: Their speeches do not articulate the radical separatist tenets of a fully elaborated Black nationalism, and there is little evidence that Black nationalists of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries looked to Hall and Marrant as progenitors. Still, as organizers and preceptors of the African Lodge, Hall and Marrant collected a critical mass of Black political and cultural resources. First, they established a social space which belonged uniquely to Black people.¹⁴ Premises of secrecy ritualized in Masonic practice safeguarded the sanctity of this space and its potential as a site of political organization. The membership rosters of Prince Hall Masonry provide one indication of this political potency: almost every free Black male political leader of the nineteenth century—from David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, and Martin Delany to W.E.B. DuBois, with the noteworthy exception of Frederick Douglass—was initiated into Prince Hall

Freemasonry.¹⁵ There is also evidence that the influence of the African Lodges extended beyond the Masonic Hall. Scholars of African-American quilting have recently discovered provocative connections between quilt patterns, Masonic symbols, and a code used to direct slaves to the Underground Railroad (Tobin and Dobard). These findings underscore

the value of Prince Hall Freemasonry not only as a social space but also as a discursive resource. Hall and Marrant institutionalized a crucial African-American lexicon—a lexicon of gestures, keywords, phrases, and concepts—which would be revised and reinvigorated by succeeding generations of preachers, writers, and activists.

Notes

1. Many literary critics have, in fact, written off Jupiter Hammon as uncritically derivative; for a notable rebuttal, see Phillip Richards.

2. W.E.B. DuBois describes the Black Church as “the most characteristic expression of African character” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (157); in *The Philadelphia Negro*, he claims that “the Church really represented all that was left of African tribal life, and was the sole expression of the organized efforts of the slaves” (197); and in *The Negro Church*, he writes, “There can be no reasonable doubt . . . that the scattered remains of religious systems in Africa to-day among the Negro tribes are survivals of the religious ideas upon which the Egyptian was based” (2).

3. Sterling Stuckey credits Pan-Africanism to an “almost elemental, instinctual recoil from the constraints of a narrow nationalism” and to the “detrribalizing process” of the slave trade (1n). Wilson Jeremiah Moses claims that Ethiopianism “sprang organically out of certain shared political and religious experiences of English-speaking Africans during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (“Poetics” 411); see also Moses’s *Classical Black Nationalism* and *The Wings of Ethiopia*. In his study of David Walker, Peter Hinks concludes that the early Black nationalists were “as indebted to . . . ideological assumptions about black character and slavery as they were to the still very limited body of archeological, anthropological, and historical knowledge about early Egypt and Africa” (192).

4. Marrant’s 1789 *Sermon* appears in Potkay and Burr. Variants and excerpts of Prince Hall’s 1797 *Charge* have appeared in several anthologies of Black writing, but Dorothy Porter was the first to republish both the 1792 and the 1797 *Charges* verbatim in her landmark collection *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837*.

5. The influence of Ancient Egyptian mystery on Enlightenment-era esoterica has been argued most famously, and most aggressively, by Martin Bernal. Even critics of Bernal’s thesis acknowledge the powerful presence of Egypt in eighteenth-century thought; see Palter.

6. On the ideological implications of Enlightenment-era classification, see Jordan 482-511 and West 50-65.

7. Records show at least four “Prince Hall” marriages in the vicinity of Boston during the late eighteenth century. There is evidence of possible paternity as well. Baptismal records for the New North Church show a Prince Africanus, son of Prince and Flora, baptized on November 14, 1784. Primus Hall (b. 1756) claimed himself the son of Prince and Delia Hall in an attempt to secure his deceased father’s Revolutionary War pension. Hall’s last marriage is his most certain—death records show that he was survived by a Sylvia Ward Hall, to whom he was married on June 28, 1806. See Wesley 141-44.

8. Charges of clandestinity and irregularity, bolstered by racism, would follow Prince Hall Freemasonry into the twentieth century, drawing defenses of the Order from Black and white Masonic scholars. The first was Martin Delany’s *Origin and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry; Its Introduction into the United States, and Legitimacy Among Colored Men. A Treatise Delivered Before St. Cyprian Lodge, No. 13, June 24th, A.D. 1853—AL 5853* (1853). See also Upton, Grimshaw, Crawford, Voorhis, and Walkes. Voorhis later rescinded his published work because it drew from Grimshaw’s “enhanced” representation of Prince Hall’s life and early Freemasonry.

9. On the Order’s self-styled Egyptianism, see Horton and Horton 126-27.

10. Jeremy Belknap addressed a copy of the *Sermon* to a friend with a note explaining that “Prince Hall claims the whole of this composition as his own except the beginning + the end.” In a letter to another friend, Belknap writes that those who heard the sermon “say it is much improved since the delivery. This I can easily believe from what I observed myself when I heard [Marrant] preach” (Potkay and Burr 74).

11. On chiasmus, repetition, and reversal, see Gates xxiv–xxv and 153–54.
12. Felder, Copher, and Wimbush also discuss critical revision as a feature of Black theology. Françoise Lionnet has identified similar practices of recontextualization in Zora Neale Hurston's anthropology.
13. On the development of kinship networks and social organizations, see Frey, Reed, and Horton and Horton.
14. Women were routinely denied admission to most Masonic Lodge meetings. They did, however, participate in the public activities of the Lodge and in the more intimate work of sewing their male relatives' Masonic regalia. A Masonic women's auxiliary, the Eastern Star, was established in the nineteenth century.
15. A more comprehensive catalog of notable nineteenth-century Black Freemasons includes Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, and Booker T. Washington. Maurice Wallace has argued the connection between Masonic ritual and processes of masculine self-construction among African Americans.

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