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Synopsis of the Meeting

Richard Newton

On February 5–7, 2026, the Institute for Signifying Scriptures (ISS) convened in Tuscaloosa, Alabama for its seventh annual meeting. In this hybrid event, seminar participants engaged in seminar discussion and transgressive examination around the theme, “Diaspora.” The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama welcomed us and provided a layered field site for excavation. Students from UA’s Religion in Culture MA program enhanced our program by facilitating online and in-person engagement. This report shares highlights from this memorable event.

Our circle welcomed both in-person and online participants from around the United States. Some participants were new to ISS; others were longtime members. Sonya Harwood-Johnson, Director of UA’s Gorgas House Museum, introduced us to Woods Quad, the historic antebellum predecessor to the modern UA campus where our meeting would take place. Steven Ramey, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, greeted us, sharing how ISS has enhanced the Department’s interest in the study of social formation and discourse. Dean Joseph Messina of the Barefield College of Arts & Sciences congratulated ISS on the work done and to be done, wishing us well as our meeting opened.

Richard Newton (University of Alabama) delivered a keynote address entitled “Decoding Diaspora: Scripturalectics of Resilience.” He acquainted us with his family’s scrapbook of newspaper

clippings from a serial column called *Facts About the Negro*, a *Ripley's Believe It or Not*-style serial on Africana contributions to world civilization. This serial was penned by journalist and folk historian Joel Augustus Rogers, who penned such serials from 1934–1966. Newton introduced the scrapbook as an example of what Houston Baker called the “post-trauma poetics” of diasporic peoples and placed Rogers’s *Facts* in conversation with Zora Neale Hurston’s *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”* as part of a genre Genevieve Sexton has called “testimonial text(s).” Newton then invited us to read Rogers’s *Facts* darkly and signify the resources it provided for dealing with the aftermath of violent socio-cultural dispersion. We then went to Gorgas House Museum to experience a multimedia exhibition called *Decoding Diaspora*. Curated by Richard Newton and his students, the exhibition included archival materials, 3D-printed objects, digital mapping, hypertext timelines, and podcasting. Engaging the scrapbook in these ways helped participants consider Rogers’s response to the pressures of diaspora. Sonya Harward-Johnson encouraged us to further consider these pressures in relation to the Civil War and Civil Rights histories represented by Gorgas House.



Tat-siong Benny Liew (College of the Holy Cross) responded to Newton’s remarks and led us in a discussion on diaspora and its

many representations. Among his questions, Liew asked us to think about the utility of the metaphor of “decoding.” We discussed how our own scripturalization entails presuppositions about a correct past, true belonging, and proper social location. Diaspora serves as an opportunity to critically assess our cultural programming. The group then discussed the tensions between academic historicism, folk memory, and social resistance.

Jacqueline Hidalgo (University of San Diego) hosted a live recording of “Scriptures Everywhere!” ISS’s monthly podcast. We discussed the Introduction of the seminar text, Stephen Best’s *None Like Us: Blackness, Aesthetics, Belonging* (Duke University Press, 2018). Building on Best’s own interrogation of the politics of archival construction, we examined scriptures as both diasporic cause and diasporic effect.¹

To help us bring abstractions into view, students from the UA Religion in Culture MA program took us on a tour of the city. “Tuscaloosa: Dispersion, Disruption, and Diaspora” signified on our conference locale as a layered scriptural formation. The students took us to the Richard Shelby Federal Building and Courthouse to see its Grecian architecture and Caleb O’Connor’s *Points in Time* mural series. We then visited Capitol Park, which sits at the intersections of the ruins of the Alabama state capitol, a point on the Trail of Tears,



1. You can listen to that conversation and other podcast episodes at <https://signifyingscriptures.org/podcast>.

and a lynching site memorialized by the Equal Justice Initiative.

Saturday, February 7 offered a full day of engagement with Best's work. Rachel E. C. Beckley (University of Kansas) underscored the role of erasure in the archives of the metropole. Beckley brought attention to transgressive understandings of home at the site of her work in Lawrence, Kansas. From displacement of Indigenous peoples to Manifest Destiny to late-modern encampments, home seems never apart from histories of violence. She argued that Best's understanding of diaspora would benefit from a more complicated understanding of "home." Beckley's ethnography of her neighbors' experience—especially with medical institutions and law enforcement—troubles the contractual terms assumed in social constitutions. Ownership, custody, right-mindedness, and belonging were all shown as tentative and fraught ideas negotiated in diasporic relations.

Tamara Siuda (Claremont Graduate University) brought our discussion of Best to a close, but not without first bringing into relief the anxiety provoked by Best's provocations. At times, Best's critiques seemed, to some, dismissive of the value of diasporic formations. His rejection of the pasts to which we are indebted appeared too haphazard in that its rebuke of violent dispersion and archival mastery would also relinquish our holds to orienting sites like histories of progress, guiding myths, and filial pieties. Siuda posited that a binary approach would lead us astray. Instead, she called us to appreciate Best's reliance on aesthetics. He likens Blackness to a frame within which the mundane becomes profound and the beautiful is revealed to be profane. The conceit of Blackness—and the diasporic situation—is that it cannot exist as either one or the other. More formally it emerges from the oscillation between the two, an affect of our own proximity, relationality, and situatedness to the frame. The frame is an unsettling, disturbing commitment to persistence in spite of violence, a palimpsest history that records and overwrites our very reasons for being. Best invites us to remember that frames can and may need to be broken if free agency is truly our

pursuit.

Our seminar closed with a discussion of ISS's future. Facilitated by Vincent L. Wimbush (ISS Founding Director), we registered the richness of the conversation, the importance of our hybrid mode, and commitments toward future seminar meetings. Participants expressed interest in more programming in the interstices—including continuation of the “Scriptures Everywhere!” podcast, and a return to more dynamic uses of the ISS website. And in our final dinner reception, we gave thanks for company and recommitted ourselves to the work ahead.

it.”⁹ What significance can there be if signs can be signified in infinite ways? Appadurai qualifies this relativity of meaning by teasing out the political facets of readership—the implied reader, the actual readers, those persons “read off,” etc.¹⁰ On the matter of diaspora, he has “the feeling that there is a kind of unresolved question here, about how these different ideas of the reader, the respondent, the viewer and the consumer, etc. can be brought into a fruitful relationship, without it all being reduced to some kind of ‘zero sum’ game.”¹¹ For Morley, this nuance can be brought out through an “encoding/decoding model” that observers how “the text has a structure! It is not equally open to any old reading that you might want to make of it. It’s more resistant to some readings.”¹² What I find particularly refreshing in their exchange is Morley’s insistence that some people’s readings of texts and home are more powerful than others precisely because of the politics of cultural resources, management, and access that Appadurai attempts to name.¹³ The title of a relevant Vincent L. Wimbush essay comes to mind: “It’s Scripturalization, Colleagues!”¹⁴

The context of Morley and Appadurai’s conversation was a 2008 conference on “Reading After Empire.” Ironically, I learned of this conference *post facto* and in print. The literary scholar Derek Attridge summarized one of the key questions of that forum about diasporic literature: “How do we read responsibly ‘when a work crosses geographical and linguistic boundaries [so that] the cultural context within which it was produced and within which it was first read...differs from the cultural contexts within which it is received’?”¹⁵ I encourage readers of *The Abeng* to explore the special 2011 issue of *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 73, no. 1. I suspect they will find much to ponder.

9. Morley, “Decoding Diaspora and Disjuncture,” 47.

10. Morley, “Decoding Diaspora and Disjuncture,” 51.

11. Morley, “Decoding Diaspora and Disjuncture,” 48.

12. Morley, “Decoding Diaspora and Disjuncture,” 51.

13. Morley, “Decoding Diaspora and Disjuncture,” 47.

14. Vincent L. Wimbush, “It’s Scripturalization, Colleagues!” *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 2 (2015): 193–200.

15. Attridge’s conference afterword is echoed in James Procter, “Introduction: Reading After Empire,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 73, no. 1 (2011): 7.

At the same time, I submit that the question Attridge posed may be further generative when we observe diasporic literatures as data of our scripturalization. We could signify the question in a manner that homes in on a people, asking how we read responsibly when a *people* “crosses geographical and linguistic boundaries [so that] the cultural context within which they were produced and within which *they* were first read...differs from the cultural contexts within which *they* were received?” Here, we should learn from Jacqueline Hidalgo’s study of scriptural technologies as homing devices.¹⁶ Thinking with cultural theorist Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*,¹⁷ Hidalgo argues that such an approach brings us to fathom “human social constructions,” “human projects and productions,” and their varied “consequences.”¹⁸

In different terms, this is the kind of inquiry we were invited to engage in by Vincent L. Wimbush in his address, “Meaning of Movement, Movement of Meaning: or, Reading Darkness as Marronage” during the Institute for Signifying Scriptures’ 2024 seminar meeting, which commemorated ISS’s 20th anniversary, as well as the 25th anniversary of the African Americans and the Bible Conference that year.¹⁹ I left that conference enriched and challenged to consider how to investigate what we make of our human condition in light of the pasts which we have preserved and through which we have managed to persevere.

It also enthused me to reimagine a project I had been working on for some time in light of the issue of diaspora. In February 2026, I hosted the “Decoding Diaspora Research Symposium” at the University of Alabama as a month-long gathering that queried the linkage between identity, memory, and peoples. It united cultural historians, curators, cultural critics, coders, K–12 students, and

16. Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, “The Bible as a Homing Device: Two U. S. Latine Case Studies.” *Religions* 16, no. 6 (2025): 696.

17. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).

18. Hidalgo, “The Bible as a Homing Device,” 696.

19. See the meeting report, Lalruatkima, “Marronage and Movement: Twenty Years of the Institute for Signifying Scriptures,” Institute for Signifying Scriptures, <https://signifyingscriptures.org/iss-annual-meeting-2024-report/>.

the local community to theorize on our social constitution. This symposium commenced with the ISS's seminar meeting on the theme of diaspora, and it did all this through a transdisciplinary approach to a curious dataset—a mysterious scrapbook in my family's possession. You can access this dataset at <https://decodingdiaspora.org>.

That Decoding Diaspora centers around something so seemingly personal tells you something about me. In many ways, I come from a tradition that understands intellectual history as a fancy way of talking about the relationships that define us. What we know is shaped by those we claim to know and who claim to know us, and by whom we may only hope to be known.

I invite you to wrestle with the implications of two haunting questions and their implications—"Who're your kin? Who're your people?" I am reminded of an utterance recorded in the Gospel of Mark: "A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house." [Mark 6:4 KJV]

On Diaspora

The story of Decoding Diaspora, as well as the question of diaspora, begins with the notion of home, and the fear and trepidation that comes with recognizing home's limits. We likely all have memories of places, moments, and features that we return to in order to make sense of ourselves, but they are different than moving through home, or even away from home, in real time. As novelist Salman Rushdie remarked about Dorothy's home in *The Wizard of Oz*, there is no place like it.²⁰ Nevertheless, home can be useful for dreaming with and against. Thus, we might begin to think of diaspora as a chance to consider a category of stories people tell when they find themselves unsettled, displaced, and without a home.

During Christmas break in 2013, I returned to Sugar Land, Texas, and the home where I was raised. I had finished a draft of the dissertation that would become the 2020 Equinox book, *Identifying*

20. Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz*. *BFI Film Classics* (British Film Institute, London 2012).

A. Rogers and illustrated by A. S. Milai. Its provenance was the early 1960s, according to the *Pittsburgh Courier* masthead, but its style was much older. It was clearly a riff on World War I and World War II-era *Ripley's Believe It Or Not!* cartoons; however, its content was provocative, containing Afrocentric vignettes from world history.

Each page usually contained three illustrated vignettes, and there were some 100 pages of them in the scrapbook. What was strange is that the “racecraft” within was not typical of what we thought we knew about my grandmother, Lucille Rice.²¹ It was so blunt, forward, and pointed. It did not read like Grandma Rice, a good Methodist, staunch integrationist, and supporter of education. And yet in the margins of this scrapbook, I found her handwriting. She clearly identified with what she had read in the clippings. On one page she wrote, “This book is old and so am I.” On others, she inscribed her address or her own name or the names of relatives. I had seen the same marginalia in her Bible after she had passed.

Now, everyone in my family knew that my grandmother had suffered from dementia for decades, but we also knew better than to write off her scribblings. After all, she had prayed us through all sorts of travails with her writings. She had survived more change in this country than we could dream of—her husband fought in World War I, her kin in the 320 Barrage Balloon Battalion (which cleared the way for the Allied advance at Normandy during World War II). She was of course present for the Civil Rights Movement, and watched the televised landing of a man on the moon.

You could not just write or read her off—at least not very easily.²² Regardless of whether my grandmother’s writing was on account of dementia or some arcane discipline, I am now of the mind that she was practicing what cultural critic Audre Lorde called self-care: that is, a political act of self-preservation.²³ What led me to that conclusion was my final conversation with her oldest daughter, my aunt Frances L. Dyer.

21. Karen Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Verso Books, 2012).

22. cf. Morley, “Decoding diaspora,” 51.

23. Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Ixia Press, 2017 [1988]), 130.

Aunt Frances was a career nurse and my grandmother's caretaker. At first, my aunt agreed with my mother's assessment that Lucille Rice would never have signed on to *Facts About the Negro*. But then—upon reflecting on me and my now previously-mentioned book—she recalled a moment in 1976, when ABC television announced it would debut a miniseries adaptation of Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* to showcase Black history to a wider American audience. According to Aunt Frances, when Grandma Rice heard this news, she said, "Hmph... They won't tell the real story." Upon hearing this, I remembered that Lucille Rice had also seen the scars of a relative who, in her telling of it, "had been whipped worse than anything we would hopefully ever see."

When I returned to Claremont Graduate University, scrapbook in hand, I showed Vincent L. Wimbush, my classmates in the Critical Comparative Scriptures program, and some participants in an ISS Brown Bag Lunch what I had found in the archive. In that intellectual home, I remember being encouraged to continue to think about my mother's haunting question: "What do I make of this book?"

The question deserves pause. When we enter the archive, we must watch for signs of what philosopher Jacques Derrida termed "archive fever": the idea that we go into ivory halls with rose-colored glasses, predisposed to find something revelatory when what is actually in the archive is only funhouse mirrors—reflections and refractions of what we presuppose—bouncing off new historical finds.²⁴ If this is the case, we must prepare not for clarification and illumination, but for a critical appraisal of power which Vincent L. Wimbush has called "reading darkness."²⁵

For the scrapbook, this was especially the case, given the Black diasporic situation from which it emerged. Literary theorist Stephen Best argues that "the history of the Black Atlantic comes

24. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1966).

25. Vincent L. Wimbush, "Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures," in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush (Continuum, 2003), 1–43.

into existence only through loss and, in turn, can be sustained only through more tales of its loss.”²⁶ This is how the façade and contents of the archive are built. The archive is never the home of the past. It is a monument to the complicated politics of our human condition. Literary critic Houston Baker Jr. distinguishes between archive fever and reading darkness in a compelling fashion. With Derrida, Baker reminds us of the etymology of the archive and the Grecian notion of *archeion*, the master’s house. The *archeion* is a storehouse of canon law, authorized texts, tools of regulation, “myths of origin,” and the prizes of conquest.²⁷ But then Baker turns to the archive of Zora Neale Hurston to underscore a different kind of working with the past. “History’s everyday use is to mold written self-defenses against the ever-beating seas of the repressions and suppressions of fractured memory.”²⁸ Baker calls this order of archive a “post-trauma poetics” and defines diaspora as a scenario where one creates new connections between home and the past while under duress.

We might look to the example of Hurston’s *Barracoon: The Last Known “Black Cargo.”*²⁹ Written in 1927 and posthumously published in 2018, it is Hurston’s ethnographic study of Africatown, Alabama, and especially concerning Oluale Kossola, also known as Mr. Cudjo Lewis. Lewis was the last survivor of the *Clotilda*, a slave ship used in the mining of Black flesh. The *Clotilda* set sail in secret in 1860, fifty-two years after the US Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves. After the *Clotilda* arrived in Mobile, Alabama with human cargo ordered by plantation owner Timothy Meaher, its captain, William Foster, torched the ship to hide the evidence of this transgression. While the existence of the *Clotilda* has long been part of the folklore of Lewis’s descendants, who purchased Meaher’s

26. Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Aesthetics, Belonging* (Duke University Press, 2018), 67.

27. Houston A. Baker Jr., “Intuiting Archive: Notes for a Post-Trauma Poetics,” *African American Review* (Spring 2016): 1.

28. Baker Jr., “Intuiting Archive,” 3.

29. Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Last Known “Black Cargo”* (Amistad Press, 2018). See also Season 1 of the ISS podcast, *Scriptures Everywhere!*, hosted by Jacqueline Hidalgo, as the series of conversations there focuses on Hurston’s *Barracoon* (<https://signifyingscriptures.org/podcast/>).

land in 1865 following Union liberation, many doubted the veracity of their claims to Africa.

In 2018, when I was on campus for a job interview at the University of Alabama, I recall sitting at Hotel Capstone down the street, watching the television news announce the finding of the *Clotilda* wreckage. Thus began all sorts of archival and commercial excitement. In hindsight, it is hard not to sit with my grandmother's caution: "but they won't tell the real story."

That is part of what makes Hurston's work so interesting. When read critically, it primes us to reconsider what historian of religion Bruce Lincoln called "regimes of truth": the stories in which we find ourselves.³⁰ Hurston's *Barracoon*, Haley's *Roots*, and Rogers' *Facts* all belong to a genre of myth Genevieve Sexton calls "testimonial texts," a dizzying narrative conflict where the authors seem to need to face an atrocious past, and access a history that is in so many ways impossibly inaccessible, in order to make sense of their present.³¹

If we see diaspora as site of innovative relations with both the past and with post-trauma poetics, then perhaps we might better understand the scriptural technologies around us. Lars Pharo defines scriptural technologies as the development of writing techniques for practical objectives but also for change or to influence one's environment.³² Thinking in concert with the case made by ISS, scriptural technology is a way humans heuristically brace discourse, or the ideological work we make words do for us and to others, and that work ensures that expressions have effect.

All this to say, I grew interested in the ways my grandmother and presumably other mid-20th century African Americans found "a real story" in Rogers's *Facts*. By real, I mean something along the lines

30. Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2005): 10.

31. Genevieve Sexton, "The Last Witness: Testimony and Desire in Zora Neale Huston's *Barracoon*," *Discourse* 25, nos. 1–2 (2004): 191.

32. Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo, "Authorities of Scriptural Technologies in America," in *Scripturalizing the Human: The Written as Political*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush (Routledge, 2015), 39–53.

of Charles Long's argument on Black significations: an emboldening of "the ways in which names are given to realities and peoples during this period of [post-Enlightenment] conquest; this naming is at the same time an objectification through categories and concepts of those realities which appear as novel and 'other' to the cultures of conquest."³³ Rogers's *Facts* helped people like my grandmother's kin to work through disinformation and disorientation about the place of their Black flesh in some empire's new world.

Whatever truth one may find in Grandma Rice's dementia, there can be no mistaking her being afflicted with the "diasporic condition." Historian Michael A. Gomez elaborates that this condition is:

often an unsettled (and unsettling) experience in which the question of "belonging" is unresolved: Africa, as a land of origin, is in many ways unrecoverable; whereas it is a challenge to fully regard an oft-hostile host environment as "home," and under such circumstances, diaspora is experienced as a continuum of liminality, along which communities and individuals—linked as much by common experience as by genetic makeup—are located at various points.³⁴

My grandmother's scrapbook provides us with an opportunity to diagnose the dis-ease symptomatic of diaspora while also registering, in its carriers, the scripturalectics of resilience.

But to do this, we must inoculate ourselves from "archive fever," wherein we see this scrapbook and say, "Ah, a scripture," forgetting the psychic baggage and historical cargo that accompanies it and us. Instead, we should acknowledge how the phenomenon of the scrapbook appears with what Casey A'hearn has called "readiness to hand"—seeming fittedness or rightness for the user.³⁵ Furthermore,

33. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Davies Group, 1999 [1986]), 4.

34. Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*, Second Edition (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

35. Casey Logan A'hearn, "The Public's Response to the Book of Mormon: A Critical Phenomenology of Scripture," *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts* 15, no. 1 (2024): 55.

I submit that resisting the (dis)ease of the archive cannot happen without a decoding of the cultural program—in this case, Diaspora—in which the scriptural technology finds application. In so doing, we might begin to learn from, to quote the Johnson brothers' anthemic lyric from "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the lessons that "the dark past has taught us."

J. A. Rogers: A Case Study

Joel Augustus Rogers was born in empire, at the fraught site of Negril, Jamaica in the British West Indies. He was born around 1880; the precise year is unclear in the historical record. Rogers was the child of an itinerant Methodist overseer—not an ecclesial bishop, but a plantation supervisor. His parents were also ardent supporters of education, and he identified them and himself as of mixed race. He may have done a stint in the British navy in some capacity, but this, too, is unclear in the historical record. What is more certain is his 1906 arrival in the United States—specifically Chicago, where he had hoped to study at the famed Art Institute. This did not come to fruition for the young Rogers. What became certain, by his own account, is that the discourse on race in the United States operated differently than he had come to understand from his home in Jamaica.

Rogers would begin figuring out his way in the disorienting United States while serving as a train car steward known as a Pullman Porter. While there are many ways one could tell Rogers's story, his early curriculum vitae and biography exemplify fixation with the past, with empire, and with all manner of body politics. In 1917, he published *From Superman to Man*, a travel dialogue between a Pullman Porter and a white politician. It is worth noting that Rogers's book was published twenty-one years before Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuman's Action Comics #1, entitled *Superman: Champion of the Oppressed*. Rogers was working in an earlier, though related *zeitgeist*: taking a rationalist approach to dismantling the notion of the white *übermensch* that would find its most conspicuous

presentation in the Third Reich.

In 1919, Rogers signified his own race science argument in *As Nature Leads*, a case for routinizing what was then called miscegenation. He claimed that race-mixing was part and parcel of the long history of human development. *As Nature Leads* and his later works were entrepreneurial, self-published efforts. Rogers would come to fund his writing with contract work as a journalist in New York City. In 1921 he joined the migration and renaissance for which places like Harlem became remembered. He found steady work writing for Marcus Garvey's *The Negro World* and *Daily Negro Times*, *The New York Amsterdam News*, and most consistently, *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Rogers's work focused on shaping the consciousness of Black people and their modern plight. This entailed documentation of movements like Garvey's exploits in Pan-Africanism, W. E. B. Du Bois's reading of the color line, Black GIs fighting for Double Victory, the installation of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, and the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

Rogers's journalistic efforts reflect three important currents in the evolution of his thinking about the Black Atlantic and African Diaspora:

(1) His writings were critical of white supremacy as a local and global project. He wrote against the Ku Klux Klan and European fascists, especially in Italy.

(2) His travel to national and international metropolises put him in proximity to archival sites that would inspire his approach to Africana history. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Rogers published massive anthologies that centered the contributions of Black people—massive tomes including *World's Greatest Men of African Descent* (1931), *World's Greatest Men and Women of African Descent* (1935), and *World's Great Men of Color* (1946)—along with shorter pamphlets like *100 Amazing Facts About the Negro* published in 1934. All

But Rogers's most effectual work arguably came by way of the newspaper serial. When he returned from Europe in 1934, he launched "Your History," the spiritual predecessor to *Facts About the Negro*, the clippings in my family's scrapbook. It was published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, which was read in Black enclaves throughout the United States. In 1935, two New Orleans schoolteachers shared their thoughts on the importance of Rogers's history. I relay this find of Thabiti Asukile's from *The Pittsburgh Courier*:

1. It may be preserved in scrapbook form. (Its appeal to children is striking). 2. It may well grace the bulletin boards of progressive lodges, libraries, civic clubs, and schools. 3. It serves as an impetus to encourage the further study of Negro history. She adds: "I am certain that with your fund of journalistic experience, that you will readily agree that often an illustrated feature or cartoon achieves greater results than a page of dry paint. (Especially when it is easily assimilated and digested "at a glance.")"⁴⁰

I found myself feverish when I first read this, as I was well on my way studying Rogers's *Facts* when I came across this excerpt. Here was a precedent for my grandmother's scrapbook.

Scripturalectics of Resilience

On one hand, I was surprised about my own misreading of my grandmother's politics, for the reasons I mentioned earlier. But then again, she and Rogers were of similar worlds. She too was counted among the people called Methodists. Her husband and her sons fought for Double Victory in World War I, World War II, and Korea. She was a staunch supporter of education: she and my grandfather led efforts to hire a schoolteacher and buy books for Black children

40. Asukile 2010b, 334. He references the newspaper article "History Teacher Accounts 'Your History' Feature as One of Finest Things in Courier: New Orleans Man Gives Some More History as He Lauds Work of J. A. Rogers and George L. Lee" from *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 19, 1935.

in segregated Sedalia, Missouri. They both had suspicions about the whole story being told. That story is what ISS has come to call scripturalization—never separated from its history of violence. Furthermore, we could elaborate on the specific machinations employed to carry out and accommodate that violence. Wimbush has called these “scripturalectics,” and what I find compelling about his theorizing is his attention to the violence of normalization, especially evident in the mimetics of minoritized peoples.⁴¹

At times, these mimetics use the rhetoric of resistance as a way of carving out difference between the perpetrators and the victims of violence. And while I think it important to register matters of positionality and accountability, those who are said to survive within regimes of scripturalization reify the violence of the regime. That is at least part of what makes scripturalization novel, insidious, and effective. When I read the scrapbook, I do not see a testimony of resistance. I see efforts to decrease the power of the scriptural regime by equipping diasporic agents to endure the violence and (for better or worse) redirect it. This is what I call the scripturalectics of resilience.

My grandmother’s identification with Rogers’s *Facts* suggests, to me at least, the appeal of his scripturalectics of resilience as a sort of diasporic vaccine against modernity’s pestilence: specifically in this case its Negrophobic necropolitics, the pathological fear and revilement of Black flesh. In this regard, her scrapbook might be read for its post-trauma poetics. By practicing a method of cultural analytics I call data signification, my research team used digital tools to decode the scriptural technology that is Rogers’s serial *Facts*.⁴² It enables us to fathom how persons like my grandmother and Rogers come to discursively make the world more of their own.

The primary conceit of data signification is a refutation of our contemporary obsession with “big data.” Data signification

41. Vincent L. Wimbush, *Scripturalectics: The Management of Meaning* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

42. For more specific discussion of cultural analytics, see Lev Manovich, *Cultural Analytics* (MIT Press, 2020).

recognizes that computers can help us appreciate that a single datum is infinitely complex. I think this important because if we fetishize the tools—digital or otherwise—we will miss the work humans do to ourselves and others: the references, the equations, the deletions.⁴³ In her installation “The Library of Missing Datasets,” artist Mini Onuoha provokes us to consider the stories and persons missing from the computational record of our bureaucracies. Onuoha writes, “When you look into them, you start to realize that they almost universally intersect with the interests of the most vulnerable.”⁴⁴

What myths does the dark past teach us? What do we make of Rogers’s *Facts*? For me, data signification brings four uses of scriptural technology or scripturalectics into view. The first is what I would call a *disruptive cartography*.⁴⁵ This is the notion that maps, as spaces of world conception, are sites of discourse rather than records of reality. Whatever their overlap with empirical territory, map are first and foremost tools of orienting people to make-believe. My first research inquiry into Rogers’s *Facts* was to ask: where, precisely, is his mythic Africa? I use the term mythic here not as fact-checking, but as reference to Bruce Lincoln’s point about myth as narrative in ideological form.⁴⁶ Myth is not just story. It is the discursive packaging through which humans enforce social orders on themselves and others. Rogers’s geography reflects a creative understanding of diaspora as a diverse ever-presence, more than it does a people forged in the crucible of dispersion. My team demonstrated this by geo-tagging all of the locations mentioned in the scrapbook clippings. When we mapped these locations using the geographic information system software ArcGIS, what became clear is that Rogers’s Africa is not the continental territory, but an

43. Mimi Onuoha, “The Library of Missing Datasets,” in *Black Futures*, edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham (One World Productions, 2020 [2016]), 136–139.

44. Onuoha, “The Library of Missing Datasets,” 139.

45. While the phrase “discursive cartography” finds purchase in various intellectual exchanges, I am specifically informed by Michelle Gonzales, “Latino/a Theology: Doing Theology Latinamente,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 41, no. 1 (2002): 64; and Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Revelation in the Vernacular* (Fordham University Press, 2021).

46. Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147.

intercontinental psycho-social expanse.

The second use is something my team has come to call *strategic anachronism*.⁴⁷ the creative manipulation of our temporal predilections. For instance, if we recognize that history is not what happened in the past but the contingent, useful ways in which we fashion the past, then we should study the deployment of synchronic, diachronic, and always imaginative uses of memory. Rogers does this deftly. Each serial page usually contains three vignettes from seemingly random moments in diaspora history. These dizzying chronologies are an affective tactic. For those outside the community, Rogers's historical attention appears scattershot and overwhelming. There are too many moments to engage or critique. For those who identify with his Negro, Rogers's historical imagination is a constellation reflective of diasporic possibilities. My research team was able to amplify these affects using sonic archiving, creating micro-podcasts of the 100 newspaper pages clipped in the scrapbook. Each page became an episode of performative readings of Rogers's texts. To aurally simulate Milai's illustrations, the production team inserted Foley sounds and impressionistic music evocative of the images. Listeners hear what they might read and see where they are looking. As each page and episode make clear, Rogers juxtaposes disparate moments. He is not moored to a linear view of time. He renders Africana history synchronistically. Each of Rogers's selected moments is an opportunity to ponder his Negro as the quintessential human.

However, Rogers does not dismiss the utility of a linear approach to time. On the contrary, we found that Rogers locates crucial moments from prehistoric times through the 1960s, when he literally highlights events and figures in news periodicals. As well, Rogers forecasts how he thinks Africana history will precede, later—making predictions about future sociological trends and

47. Since working on *Decoding Diaspora*, I have learned that the classicist Sarah E. Bond has also used the phrase "strategic anachronism" in her theorizing of socio-economic labor collectives in Western antiquity in relation to modern union towns. See *Strike: Labor, Unions, and Resistance in the Roman Empire* (Yale University Press, 2025).

gesturing toward notable Black figures which he suspects will break segregationist barriers.

Third is his *rhetorical editorialism*. As much as Rogers wanted to be a visual artist, he was a wordsmith. Rogers not only has much to say about race. He has many ways of talking about race. In experimenting with computational distant reading techniques, my students came to appreciate the mathematics of Rogers's plotting of the color-line. When they segmented Rogers' text into units for analysis, they found consistent inversion in his racial diction. The more that words with the morpheme "Negro" appear in a segment, the less words containing the morpheme "white" appear in the same area. We have come to call this a statistical disempowering of superman to man. Rogers's logic (cf. Gk. *logos*, word) pulls political levers in readers' conception of the racialized human.

Finally, we should give renewed attention to the *masquerade* underway.⁴⁸ Rogers presents the diasporic situation as far more manageable when understanding that the performance of power is scripted in many fonts. When we printed 3D replicas of artifacts and portraits that reflected Rogers's view of the world, we grew more attentive to his read of human constitution. He talks of color and hue, but he also speaks of racial strain, hair texture, erotic desire, and feats of strength. Rogers has us watch the drama unfold in the theater of military campaigns, the art scene, the annals of kingdoms, tribal rituals, the university, and the marketplace. Our team became more sensitive to this after we began using computer-aided design to produce tactile representations of Milai's images, helping us pay better attention to Rogers's agenda.

Concluding Invitation

Decoding Diaspora provides a case study with which ISS conversation partners may think. On decodingdiaspora.org, one may explore Rogers's *Facts*, extending the study of how they have

48. Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Masquerade: Scripturalizing Modernities Through Black Flesh* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

been read, preserved, chronicled, mapped, recorded, and curated. To be clear, this order of cultural analytics—the melding of social theory and computational methods—is neither an effort to scour nor renovate the archive. That would be to fall prey to the delusions of archive fever. In the testimonies of figures like J. A. Rogers, Oluale Kossola, and Lucille Rice, we find evidence of complicated persons resiliently living with the dangerous preexisting condition we have come to abbreviate as diaspora. Tempted as we may be, we should neither demonize or glorify them. Again, the ecstasy that would result is a symptom of the fever.

What *Decoding Diaspora* calls for instead is reflexive examination of our own encoding into scriptural matrices. The data significations invite us to decode ourselves: in order to make sense of diasporic formations, what causes them, what makes them appealing, what makes them threatening, and what makes them all too strange and yet so familiar. It is to read Rogers's *Facts* darkly, reacquainting ourselves with the principle that facts are the scriptural human's discursive constructions (cf. Latin *facere*, to make) deployed to orient themselves and others. What we see in Rogers's *Facts* is what we should likely notice all around us, were we to pay attention.

Decoding Diaspora offers a chance to rethink who are our kin and who are our people. But if we are honest, diaspora also asks us to acknowledge what we will remember and what we will forget on the way to making our worlds. The real story of diaspora is precisely that—being in a situation where you cannot prevent breakage, but can sift through the pieces you find: things, words, people, places, and memories to hold and that hold you.

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