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Better Intoned Than Read: Sound and Matter in God's Trombones

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This paper offers close textual readings of poems from James Weldon Johnson's 1927 collection, *God's Trombones*, uncovering in Johnson's language resonant clues to his thought. In contrast to his disaffected novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (1912), Johnson's sermon–poems, through reengagement with the folkways of traditional African American worship, forge out a more potent creative space. As hybrid works, they diminish the gap between text and speech, and demand careful and lively ways of reading. My argument situates Johnson's practice in the contexts of sound recording, ragtime, and programmes for African American uplift at the turn of the century.

In his introduction to *Blues People* (1963), Amiri Baraka recounts,

> As I began to get into the history of the music, I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people … That the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life, our words, the libretto, to those actual, lived lives.[1]

This is a bold invocation of art as mimesis, with music playing an impossible two-handed part of figure and figured. In Baraka's metaphor, music and lyrics are the written transcriptions of lived history, which is itself the live performance. The playful circularity here negates the possibility of closed-off, one-way relations between cultural identity and cultural production. The inclusive plural of "our words" opens up a continuum enveloping both blues lyrics and Baraka's present volume. African American music and musicology become familial gestures, two ways of approaching the same thing. There is an implicit refusal here to reify art into artefact, or to overlook its social manifestation.

One effect of slavery was the dispossession, if not total obliteration, of the enslaved individuals' material culture. As Baraka observes, only "music, dance,

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[1] Amiri Baraka (as Leroi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), ix.

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religion," things which did "not have *artifacts* as their end products," could be "saved": "These nonmaterial aspects of the African's culture were almost impossible to eradicate."[2] Baraka implies that African American expression is, by nature, equipped to survive genocidal uprootings, and of a different origin to the Western fixation with the material *objet d'art*. This is an important distinction. But for the literary critic, it can pose a temptation to treat African American literary texts as unstable entities, propped on a perilous fault line between the binaries of oral and written traditions. More dangerously, they can be portrayed as in some way bereft: as documents lacking the vitality of speech or song. In Brent Hayes Edwards's important essay on James Weldon Johnson, he notes the insufficiency of "expecting the literary to capture the oral on the page" and suggests a different way forward: "black poetics might instead cohere around the vicissitudes of that interface, around the fascination with edges, openness, fracture, ventilation that we encounter so often."[3] As this essay provides close readings of poems from James Weldon Johnson's 1927 collection *God's Trombones*, a collection which explicitly undertakes to "capture the oral on the page," Edwards's prompt will prove useful for considering the nature and shape of that contact.

The sonic turn in modernist studies, with works by scholars such as Emily Thompson and Sam Halliday "restoring the aural dimension of modernity to our understanding of it," has created the perfect climate for a substantive reengagement with Johnson's writing.[4] His lifetime, 1871 to 1938, saw an unprecedented reshaping of auditory experience by new sound technologies, and the formation of popular musical modes which this technology would help promulgate. Johnson thought and wrote about music throughout his life, and as a lyricist and librettist he brought a practitioner's experience as well as a sharp critical ear. Questions of sound are posed again and again in his poetry, fiction and critical writings. In the introduction to *Sonic Modernity*, Halliday provides this deft explanation of what precisely literature has to offer studies of sound:

> literature is especially well suited for revealing such para-sonic factors as sound's social connotations, its relationships with other senses, and – perhaps most importantly of all – the qualitative dimension that means certain sounds are actually of interest to people, things they actively seek out or shun.[5]

[2] Ibid., 16. The italics are Baraka's.

[3] Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form: James Weldon Johnson's Prefaces," in Robert G. O'Meally, ed., *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 580–601, 580.

[4] Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 11.

[5] Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 12.

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This mandate is highly instructive, but it also reflects the parameters within which many current discussions of Johnson's work play out. In Halliday's configuration, "literature," we have reason to suspect, primarily invokes prose fiction. He asks, "what has literature got to do with sound itself, given that in most contexts, at least in western culture … it is generally read in silence, on the page?"[6] The slight room for manoeuvre which the qualifiers "most" and "generally" create is still too narrow for what is a large exception. Poetry is and has historically been written to be read aloud. In Johnson's preface to *God's Trombones*, he takes no chances, instructing us that "these poems would better be intoned than read."[7] While we are free to ignore this note and read the poems silently as we would a novel, I would argue that Johnson's purpose has already inflected their construction so that however we choose to approach them, their acoustic reverberations cannot be avoided. We are reading things built *to be intoned*.

Such objects are particularly pertinent to literary investigations of sonic culture, in that as well as being able to portray and comment on sound, they also seek to deploy it. They are a species of aural culture in and of themselves. Nonetheless, *God's Trombones* remains understudied and Johnson is typically treated as a novelist and critic whose prose forms a commentary on cultures of sound at the turn of the century, dealing in the kind of "parasonic factors" that Halliday describes, but not intervening in the acoustic realm per se. If it is fair to describe a critical reticence around *God's Trombones*, it is one apparently caused by, rather than despite, the poems' acoustic nature. Miriam Thaggert's reservations, that "like the spirituals collected in anthologies" Johnson's sermons "leave much to be desired as mere text," locate them squarely on that perilous fault line: not *text* enough for literature and not *sound* enough for performance.[8] Even Edwards tacitly relegates them in his essay, reserving forensic attention for Johnson's critical prose. This troubledness, or perceived inadequacy, in a volume of poems that, as Thaggert tells us, Johnson chose to be buried with when he died, I take as the jumping-off point for this article.[9]

Much of the essential critical writing on Johnson has focussed on his 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, and essays by Cristina L. Ruotolo and Katherine Biers in particular will direct some of the discussion

[6] Ibid., 10.

[7] James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 1–8, 7. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

[8] Miriam Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 61.

[9] Ibid., 61.

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here. In the first book-length study on the subject, *James Weldon Johnson's Modern Soundscapes* (2013), Noelle Morrissette has made an important case for sonic experience as a main artery running through Johnson's entire *oeuvre*, and my account of *God's Trombones* will follow in her wake, while making my own contention that the poems reveal a marked shift in Johnson's thinking and approach.

Rather than a record or transcription of past voices, this essay will read *God's Trombones* as a future projection of voices arriving: an invitation to speak, directed at us, the transhistorical reader, as well as at the American and African American subject locked in their particular cell of twentieth-century history. I will pay close attention to that neglected element of *God's Trombones*, its text, and consider how Johnson's language and productive methods disrupt, as Edwards calls it, "the seemingly clear divide between orature and scripture," and by doing so create the photonegative for what a modern African American expressive mode might look like.[10] We will see that Johnson's sermon–poems are lively documents which register his own aesthetic concerns and reflect the urgencies and opportunities facing African American artists who had to navigate racism and its unfolding imbrication with new recording technologies and popular cultural modes at the turn of the century. Contemporaneous debates around African American social contribution, the development and dissemination of ragtime music as a popular commodity, and African American folk production are not merely a contextual backdrop to these poems, but directly inform Johnson's compositional practice, and they will steer the main three sections of this article. The poems, in turn, reflect Johnson's changing attitude to questions which he grappled with throughout his life. *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* has been read as Johnson's chronicle of artistic and political disillusionment with the era, and my readings of *God's Trombones* will look back to this earlier work, with the proposition that the two texts pose helpful ways of reading each other, and that the poems reformulate and reanimate certain possibilities that are discarded by Johnson in his novel as unworkable. That Johnson's composition of *God's Trombones* was at the very least synchronous with a shift in relationship to this earlier work is borne out by the fact that the anonymously published *Autobiography* was reprinted in 1927 – the same year as *God's Trombones* – with the author's name attached to it at last.

As a printed volume, with its illustrious titlepages and lettering designed by C. B. Falls, and accompanying illustrations by Aaron Douglas, *God's Trombones* is no less an artefact than the bourgeois novel. But the project

[10] Edwards, 581.

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which emerges from Johnson's sermons is one of a social art, privileging process over product and prefiguring the mandate laid out by Baraka and the Black Arts Movement. Baraka's metaphor of words as "the libretto, to those actual, lived lives," is precisely pertinent as we approach these poems, which are secretly and ceaselessly agitating for their own sonic expansion.

James Weldon Johnson was a conscientious and tireless chronicler of his life and times. His talent for elucidation and framing has in large part shaped his legacy and the impact of his lengthy prefaces has sometimes swelled beyond that of the work being introduced. His prefaces to *The Book of Negro Poetry* (1922) and *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) have become landmark texts of the Harlem Renaissance. Deft and wide-ranging in their engagements, Johnson's critical writings are no less enlightening when they shine their torch onto his own working methods. In his preface to *God's Trombones*, for example, he offers us this glimpse inside the poet's workshop:

> The tempos of the preacher I have endeavored to indicate by the line arrangement of the poems, and a certain sort of pause that is marked by a quick intaking and audible expulsion of the breath I have indicated by dashes. (8)

With these procedural insights, Johnson willingly demystifies the poetic process. Verbs like "endeavoured," "marked" and "indicated" evoke the provisional lines of the draughtsman's pencil. There is something rough and ready which deflates the rarefied aura around poetic creation. Even the idea of "line arrangement," with its suggestion of freely mobile components, belies the myth of the poem as somehow organically perfect, with every stress, word and line in its essential, preordained place. The prompt reads like an advisory note on musical performance, turning the reader into a vocalist who must do their best to bring the song lyrics to life.

Lyric writing was a familiar process for Johnson, who between 1902 and 1910 was part of the vaudeville song-writing trio, Cole and Johnson Brothers, founded in New York City by Johnson, his brother J. Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole. Johnson wrote the lyrics while Rosamond and Cole performed their songs, as Lori Brooks tells us, in "full evening dress with a grand piano, both rarities in vaudeville" – injecting a note of class and respectability as a counteractive agent to the common stereotypes of the minstrel show.[11] As a successful outfit, the three men toured the United States and Europe. Decades later, their best-selling song "Under the Bamboo Tree" was still relevant enough to be sung by Judy Garland and the young

[11] Lori Brooks, "The Composer versus the 'Perfessor'," in Noelle Morrissette, ed., *New Perspectives on James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 169–188, 171.

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Margaret O'Brien in MGM's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). Another, earlier composition of Johnson and Rosamond's, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" – written to commemorate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln – is still sung today and known unofficially as the Black National Anthem, with recent performances by Beyoncé at Coachella in 2018 and Alicia Keys in a video for the 2020 National Football League kickoff game.

Johnson's work as a lyricist is only a minor entry in his portfolio. As well as being a successful novelist, poet and editor, he was the first African American to pass the Florida state bar. He acted as US state consul to Venezuela and then Nicaragua, and from 1920 until 1930 he was executive director of the NAACP. In the variousness and scope of Johnson's professional achievements, we see the restless mind of a polymath. But we might also detect the lurking persistence of racial barriers that one by one made certain models of working untenable, unsatisfying or dangerous for an African American. Johnson's early career as headmaster of Stanton High School, the school he had attended as a student in his hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, was cut short after a traumatic episode in which he was detained by a group of National Guard soldiers for being seen speaking with someone they took to be a white woman. The potential culmination of such an encounter was all too clear, and it was in the wake of this event that Johnson left Jacksonville for New York.

Lynching and the ever-present threat of extreme violence produced the state of emergency in which Johnson and other black American modernists worked. Through them, art and cultural production became fronts in the struggle to justify black humanity to white America: simultaneously projecting a shared national future and underlining a legible black American past that could not be overwritten. Like W. E. B. Du Bois, Johnson believed that it fell to the black bourgeois intellectual – what Du Bois called the talented tenth – to curate and frame black expressive culture, and in turn to produce work which showcased black genius. In Johnson's preface to *The Book of Negro Poetry*, he wrote that "nothing will do more to … raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art."[12] Johnson often cast America's race problem as its failure to properly perceive the potential for black cultural contribution: "The common idea has been that the Negro, intellectually and morally empty, is here to be filled, filled with education, filled with religion, filled with morality."[13] The passive

[12] James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1922), 1–42, 1.

[13] James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in Johnson, ed., *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 2 vols. in 1, Volume II: *The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 11–24, 18.

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construction of "to be filled," by which African Americans are rendered objects rather than active subjects, is so objectionable that Johnson can't help but linger over it, repeating the insult as the worthy nouns pile up like unwanted gifts. This formulation, given in Johnson's preface to *The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1926), is taken up again in a paper he delivered to the intercollegiate Socialist Society conference "on the contribution of the Negro to American culture":

> The common-denominator opinion in the United States about American Negroes is, I think, something like this: These people are here to be shaped and molded and made into something different and, of course, better; they are here to be helped; here to be given something; in a word, they are beggars under the nation's table waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization. However true this may be, it is also true that the Negro has helped to shape and mold and make America; that he has been a creator as well as a creature; that he has been a giver as well as a receiver.[14]

Here we find the same passive construction, but now the verbs "shaped and molded" seem to locate the political struggle directly in the realm of cultural production, with the African American resembling a lump of unformed clay, while the mechanics of white paternalistic control become the determinative caresses of an artisan in a ceramic studio. The tools for escaping this prescriptive and damaging perception are for Johnson those same productive processes, of shaping and molding, but in which African Americans must engage actively as creators, forging their own destiny through culture.

The conflicting perceptions of black America as "creator" or "creature," shaped or shaping, and Johnson's own emphasis on the importance of black creation, are formative strands in the opening two poems of *God's Trombones*. It is typical that Johnson, so concerned with framing and prefacing, should not neglect to include his own version of the preparatory prayer that would traditionally be given by the prayer-leader, who "was sometimes a woman" (8), he tells us. In "Listen Lord – A Prayer," Johnson's prayer-leader includes the whole congregation in a broad encompassing "we":

> We come this morning –
> Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,
> With no merits of our own. (ll. 7–9)

By invoking "empty pitchers," Johnson allows the residue of his previous figuration to briefly settle here: that common perception of African Americans as "empty" and "here to be filled" coheres around the otherwise innocuous devotion of congregants coming to church. And yet the passive

[14] James Weldon Johnson, quoting himself in his autobiography, *Along This Way* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 326.

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construction that Johnson elsewhere associates with the devaluation of black culture is nowhere to be found. The majority of verbs in the poem, in keeping with its title, are imperatives launched boldly at God, who is being invoked like a muse to ignite the expressive faculties of the preacher, and for which purpose even nouns are pressed into service: "Lord, turpentine his imagination" (12). This congregation are an audience who apprehend and feel keenly the absolute urgency of black creative intervention.

In close proximity to that threatening figure of the "empty pitchers," we also find the same dash that cuts the poem's title in half. Johnson tells us in his preface that these dashes are meant to convey "a quick intaking and an audible expulsion of the breath" (8), and we find them working hardest in this first poem, where "this morning" becomes a breath-stopped refrain:

> O Lord – this morning –
> …
> Lord – ride by this morning –
> …
> Take him, Lord – this morning – (ll. 4, 16 and 26)

Unlike the sermons, which address the congregation and take on an easy, conversational canter, "Listen Lord – A Prayer" is appealing directly to God, and so it is fitting that the delivery becomes more fitful by increased proximity to the source of power – that the spirit is summoned with the breath, as if by sympathetic magic. As we read the poem aloud, the dashes direct a new attentiveness to our instrument of speech, which, as Johnson's preacher points out in "The Creation," is also the source of life itself:

> Then into it he blew the breath of life,
> And man became a living soul. (ll. 89–90)

The breath is not only a regulator of speech, but the deep physiological metronome of human life. To be made suddenly conscious of the unheard background mechanisms in our every vocalization gathers the force of an insight into divine creation. But more than this, the self-sustaining circuit of respiratory inhalation and exhalation, the "quick intaking" and "audible expulsion" of the breath that the dashes demand, chaffs against the hollow passivity of those "empty pitchers." Their emptiness as objects *to be filled* from an external source is overwhelmed by the adjacent reality of lungs actively filling and emptying themselves. The breathing, speaking black body, with its power to self-sustain, to convert oxygen and to power speech, becomes a site of resistance in the poem, and is the precise location where resistance to white cultural domination will be enacted. In "Listen Lord – A Prayer," then, we see Johnson going back over and rehabilitating his previous language, using the sonic opportunities of the poem to reformulate and reframe these problems to himself, and letting its tense coils of meaning share some of the burden with him.

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Edwards's suggestion was that black poetics might cohere around a "fascination with edges, openness, fracture" and "ventilation." Johnson's dashes surely function as apertures of literal "ventilation," directing through-flows of air across the poems. While Edwards doesn't turn his focus to specific poems, he describes "the revolutionary possibility that opens up" in *God's Trombones*: "in the manipulation of line, measure, and punctuation, the poem itself begins to be sketched out as a 'breathing,' 'syncopating' body."[15] What Edwards sees as a movement emanating from the black body and arriving in the formal body of the poem might also be imagined in reverse: moving from the text into the body of the reader who speaks the poems aloud. Morrissette suggests that Johnson's works are not "discrete entities but are continually transformed and modified by those who enact/perform them," and that "this participation occurs through the incorporation of sound, which enables his writing to be voiced through the bodies of others."[16] I would argue that this applies especially to *God's Trombones*, which invites and indeed demands performance. But ultimately, the physical embodiment of sound which Johnson underscores in his instructions to the reader brings home to us that all reading and writing are physical enterprises, originating and culminating in the body. From this vantage, the conceit of the poem or literary text as an inert and extraneous artefact begins to appear untenable, and throughout the collection Johnson continues to bear down on this pressure point.

Johnson's iconoclastic urge to demystify and to uncover the physiological and social acts which make up art objects might lead us for a moment back to Baraka, who contrasts the alto saxophone playing style of Paul Desmond with Charlie Parker's. While Desmond "always insists he is playing an instrument, that it is an artifact separate from himself," Parker "did not admit that there was any separation between himself and the agent he had chosen as his means of self-expression."[17] In other words, Parker was not afraid to lose, or rather fuse, himself, twinning the strains of his voice with the limits of his instrument, while for Desmond the saxophone becomes a separable and extraneous organ whose growls are isolatable and entirely detachable from his body. For the one, the instrument is simply an extension of the physical act; for the other, it is a repository – a fetish object granted nonexistent qualities of agency. Whether or not we agree with Baraka's verdict as a jazz critic, the permeable membrane which he believes musical performance should open up speaks to Johnson's wish to induct his readers into the embodied performance of his

[15] Edwards, 595.
[16] Noelle Morrissette, *James Weldon Johnson's Modern Soundscapes* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 2.
[17] Baraka, *Blues People*, 30–31.

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poems. When searching for the right metaphor to describe the vocal reach of the folk preacher, Johnson lighted on the trombone, not as a hyperbole or exaggeration of the human voice, but rather because of its similarity. In his preface, he calls it "the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice" (5). For Johnson, as for Baraka, the instrument seems to have no existence, figurative or otherwise, beyond the realm of the human mouth. It is only a prosthetic extension of the lips which know how to blow, with its bell and pipework even resembling a polished brass reflection of the oesophagus and lungs that power it.

In "The Creation," Johnson launches into a vivid celebration of art as process, with God's act of world-building reimagined as a cosmic performance. Originally published in Max Eastman's *Freeman* magazine in 1920, "The Creation" was the first sermon–poem Johnson composed, and comes as the first sermon in the collection. The shadowy art of biblical genesis, in Johnson's retelling, becomes a deeply material exercise, with God engaged in a kind of full-body improvisation:

> So God stepped over to the edge of the world
> And he spat out the seven seas –
> He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed –
> He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled – (ll. 36–39)

Johnson's God is a showman, with no shame for the materiality of his conceptive logic as he "spits out the seven seas," turning even the liquid product of the mouth into matter. Heaven is no longer the preserve of the immaterial and ethereal, but a cacophonous workshop filled with liquid, fire and smoke. In Johnson's preface, he makes provision for a "marked silent fraction of a beat" to be "filled in by a hand clap" (8). So as God "clapped his hands," with this caesura, it is fair to imagine that the preacher claps as well, thus bringing his own productive methods into close alignment with God's. Johnson's poem does nothing less than imagine the black artist *as* God. If Johnson had previously criticized white America's view of African Americans as unformed clay, "here to be shaped and molded," here we find the African American artisan crafting themselves:

> The Great God,
> Like a mammy bending over her baby,
> Kneeled down in the dust
> Toiling over a lump of clay
> Till he shaped it in his own image … (ll. 84–88)

God's construction of humanity becomes an act of conscious, cultural self-inception. Closeness to "the dust," to the material nature and extremities of existence, is here imagined as the most advantageous posture for the creator,

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who must work with what materials are available underfoot, while the emotional realization of such a work can only be expressed by Johnson's strident minister through the feminization of God, who kneels down over her creation like "a mammy bending over her baby." "Mammy" alerts us that Johnson's God is specifically a black mother. As a racist trope, the Mammy figure was portrayed caring for white children, a comforting domestic figure whose presence shored up the racial economic divide. Thus Johnson's image, of God the black mother "bending over *her* baby," is infused with the dignity of a final restitution.

By directing attention to our own powers of vocal production, and disclosing the material roots of speech, "Listen Lord – A Prayer" and "The Creation" suggest ways of reading which disrupt discrete divisions between orature and scripture, or between composition and performance. The act of intoning and the act of poetic composition are companion manoeuvres, gesturing towards each other without any hierarchical or originary relation. The potential of embodied, transmissible sound as a mode for black creation, which Johnson identifies and explores in *God's Trombones*, became a matter of moral panic in turn-of-the-century America, as white commentators imagined black music – and its technological means of propagation – as a dangerous force invading and mechanizing their bodies. The landscape and fallout of this clash will be given some excavation below.

In the drive for black cultural excellence and acceptance, and what in 1920s New York would become the Harlem Renaissance, music played a vital part. Critics have described how, for the African American culture framers, the sonic realm seemed to represent a promising arena for racial resolution, insofar as it was free from the visual demarcations of racial difference. Morrissette describes how sonic experience can "draw attention to the mutual contingencies and interdependence of American and African American culture."[18] Michael North points out that, for Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "all the positive indices of the race are aural."[19] Du Bois's main evidence of African American cultural contribution was the spirituals: "And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas."[20] At the same time as Du Bois makes this assertion about black American music

[18] Morrissette, 25.
[19] Michael North, "Du Bois, Johnson, and the Recordings of Race," in North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 164–85, 166.
[20] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 168.

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history, black American musicians were pioneering the ragtime style that would come to shape America's contemporary popular music. The commodification of these sounds via notated sheet music, radio and phonograph, presented its own opportunities for ragtime players, who, as Ruotolo describes, were suddenly "in a position, whether dark- or light-skinned, to pass as white, since their music was now detachable from their bodies."[21] But as Ruotolo, North and others have pointed out, the potential for popular commercial music to have any transformative impact on American race relations was ultimately not realized, with the aural becoming just another domain in which for racial exploitation to manifest, and it fell to novels like Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* to register the disillusionment of a once hopeful generation.

The metropolitan world of marketized musical performance into which Johnson was plunged on his entry into New York's vaudeville circuit in 1902 finds its fictionalized mirror image in *The Autobiography*, where the Ex-colored Man also arrives in Manhattan and begins work as a ragtime pianist. In "The Prodigal Son," the second sermon of *God's Trombones*, Johnson's preacher warns against just such an urban transfer, retelling the classic New Testament fable of riotous living, ruination and homecoming. With a notable presentism, the preacher's voice merges the biblical and modern, giving Babylon the feel of a swinging rag-era New York:

> And the city was bright in the night-time like day,
> The streets all crowded with people,
> Brass bands and string bands a-playing,
> And ev'rywhere the young man turned
> There was singing and laughing and dancing … (ll. 40–44)

Here, the electrification of the city street becomes an invitation for eschewing sleep and exposing oneself to the after-hour vices of drinking and gambling. But the first of the temptations, the gateway drug, as it were, is secular music. With polysyndeton, Johnson's preacher re-creates in his syntax the "smooth and easy … road" "to hell and destruction" (22), where each sin leads logically and fluidly to the next, while his repeated, breath-stopped exhortation, "Young man – / Young man – ", stages its aural and moral intervention (21–22).

The interpolated vowel in "a-playing" and the elided vowel in "ev'rywhere" seem to reassert this lingual figuration of sin, in which worldly mistakes coincide with slips in pronunciation. In his study *Tin Pan Alley* (1930), Isaac Goldberg describes how interpolated vowels developed "in the singing of

[21] Cristina L. Ruotolo, *Sounding Real: Musicality and American Fiction at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), 100.

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ragtime," and takes his "classical example" from the Cole and Johnson Brothers song "Under the Bamboo Tree":

> If you lak-a me, lak I lak-a you
> And we lak-a both the same …[22]

Sung by Marie Cahill in 1920, "Under the Bamboo Tree" was the trio's runaway hit, selling around 400,000 copies of sheet music in six months.[23] With the interpolation of vowels in song lyrics like these, we see rhythm trumping sense, as language bends to the syncopated swing of the music. In her essay "Syncope Fever," Biers quotes a 1914 article by Leo Oehmler called "Ragtime: A Pernicious Evil and an Enemy of True Art," which traced musical syncopation back to the medical term "syncope," meaning "a heart beating unevenly through excessive agitation" (although Biers clarifies that "it is more frequently used to designate the loss of consciousness that results").[24] Critics like Oehmler believed that ragtime music had a very real, physiological impact on the listener, straining the nerves, hazing the faculties and transforming the dancer into something akin to a music machine. Biers links this ragtime "syncope" to the elision of vowels in poetry and song, to which we might add the interpolated vowel, insofar as it marks an audible skip in spoken meaning.

As the title of Oehmler's article suggests, ragtime's entry onto the American musical scene did not go uncontested. In the Ex-colored Man's description of the new musical trend, we can already detect the qualities that would be seized upon by its critics:

> It was music that demanded physical responses, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat. The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places …[25]

Here we have the irresistible beat which, like a drug or other coercive substance, demands "physical responses." Its description here is typical of the way in which, as Ruotolo tells us, ragtime's "celebrants and critics" both emphasized "the *embodied* experience of its listeners, who found themselves spontaneously and even involuntarily 'jerking' along with its

[22] Isaac Goldberg, *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of American Popular Music* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. Inc., 1961), 162.
[23] David E. Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 115.
[24] Katherine Biers, "Syncope Fever: James Weldon Johnson and the Black Phonographic Voice," *Representations*, 96 (Autumn 2006), 99–125, 105.
[25] James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (New York: Norton & Company, 2015), 53. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically in the text.

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rhythms."[26] Then there is the "barbaric" element: the association of this new American sound with the projection of a far-off and exotic locale, in the fire-smoke of which the Western cosmopolitan subject finds something both repulsive and alluring. And of course there is the "abrupt jump" which for Oehmler seems to threaten the healthy functioning of the heart.

If white cultural gatekeepers viewed ragtime as a dangerously disruptive force in American music and society, so did Johnson, who dared to hope that it would become just such a catalyst for radical change. In his memoir, *Along This Way* (1938), he recalls with savour the power that ragtime seemed able to exert over white audiences, as, for once, "the Negro drags his captors captive":

> I have been amazed and amused watching white people dancing to a Negro band in a Harlem cabaret … seeking to recapture a taste of primitive joy in life and living; trying to work their way back into that jungle which was the original Garden of Eden; in a word, doing their best to pass for colored.[27]

The apparent reversal in power relations that this music initiates, exhilarating for Johnson here, was deeply alarming to those who, as Ruotolo writes, saw American music as "a space of moral and … racial purity."[28] Brooks, in her thorough discussion of the ragtime debates, describes how "ragtime was made to signify a crisis in taste, education and skill among the American musical public," with music organizations like the American Federation of Musicians declaring a "state of emergency" in 1901, and banning "the public playing of ragtime by its members."[29]

The fact that such efforts were ultimately in vain, and that ragtime became an unstoppable force in popular music throughout the United States and Europe, does not mean that these anxieties disappeared. Biers describes how ragtime became a repository for fears of disintegration and vocal decay associated with the new music technologies. The automatism of the phonograph's spinning disc seemed to mirror the automatism that ragtime inspired in its listeners who found themselves moving along involuntarily to its rhythms. Even ragtime's sounds and structures seemed to reflect some obscurely mechanical nonhuman principle, as though its melodies "were produced rather than simply sustained by its own technique."[30] But significantly for white commentators, if anxieties about the new materiality of sound could be imaginatively displaced and quarantined to black musical modes, the white voice might escape unscathed, and could in fact fortify its purity through juxtaposition.

[26] Ruotolo, 93. The italics are Ruotolo's. [27] Johnson, *Along This Way*, 328.
[28] Ruotolo, 93. [29] Brooks, "The Composer versus the 'Perfessor'," 174. [30] Biers, 105.

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Morrissette, discussing the high modernist register of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, describes how "racial 'others' could direct the white self to a place of regeneration while affirming cultural purity and distance between blacks and whites."[31] We find Eliot employing these tactics in his verse play fragment "Fragment of an Agon," published in the same year as *God's Trombones*, and where that same Cole and Johnson Brothers tune, "Under the Bamboo Tree," becomes a site associating linguistic and cultural decay with black sound. In a London walk-up, Doris and Dusty listen as Wauchope and Horsfall sing the pastiche musical number, while Snow and Swarts mime along as typical blackface minstrel characters, Tambo and Bones:

> Under the bamboo
> Bamboo bamboo
> Under the bamboo tree … (ll. 46-48)[32]

These aren't the correct lyrics, but then nothing is quite as it should be in Eliot's unsettling vaudeville fragment. Johnson's island idyll is transfigured into a "cannibal isle" (120), and the negative stereotypes that his lyrics were attempting to disperse are pulled back into focus. Ragged syncopation in the characters' speech becomes a symptom of spiritual malaise, and we might think of the typist in *The Waste Land*, whose action of putting "a record on the gramophone" becomes one of posttraumatic automation (62). According to Sweeney, life on the island would afford only three things:

SWEENEY: Birth, and copulation and death.
That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all,
Birth, and copulation, and death.
DORIS: I'd be bored.
SWEENEY: You'd be bored.
Birth, and copulation, and death.
DORIS: I'd be bored.
SWEENEY: You'd be bored. (ll. 32–39)

Repetition and call and response here associate the "primitive" and the mechanical. The bare functions of "Birth, and copulation, and death" overlay with the characteristic functions of sound technologies which can capture the human voice and deploy it at random. As Halliday writes,

> the phonograph treats all sounds equally, irrespective of aesthetic or affective "rank". Accidental or intrusive sounds are thus raised to a position of fundamental parity with the intended and sought out, resulting in a sonorous democracy where musical and

[31] Morrissette, *James Weldon Johnson's Modern Soundscapes*, 141.
[32] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 121. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

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"noisy", natural and man-made, significant and senseless, and all other kinds of sounds have equal claims upon the listener.[33]

For Eliot, this "noisy," "sonorous democracy" appears to have had a corrosive effect on language. Although Sweeney warns Doris – with the incorrect verb form – that on the isle "There's no telephones, / There's no gramophones" (120), we are made to feel that such machines have already infiltrated nature, and that their parroting mechanisms are in fact well suited to the aural dimensions of the "cannibal isle" – a place where humanity, but perhaps also language, is self-consuming. The mimicry of "I'd be bored," "You'd be bored," becomes a rhythmic assertion of alienation, bouncing across space with no exchange of meaning. Tambo and Bones, silent through their song, become the visual, racial markers for this barren to-and-fro, and in this way Eliot's racial economy of sound is firmly replanted in the visual realm where racial difference is at its least erasable.

In *The Autobiography*, Johnson provides a very different account of the relation between black sound and white market. The mechanical and alienating nature of the exchange does not emanate from the black musician, as Eliot suggests, but from the white listener, whose surplus of socioeconomic power opens up a gulf between the two. Johnson's Ex-colored Man is so skilled on the keys that he becomes the paid live-in pianist for a rich white patron, effectively becoming his personal stereo system:

> The man's powers of endurance in listening often exceeded mine in performing – yet I am not sure that he was always listening. At times I became so oppressed with fatigue and sleepiness that it took almost superhuman effort to keep my fingers going; in fact, I believe I sometimes did so while dozing … He seemed to be some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant, possessing over me a supernatural power which he used to drive me on mercilessly to exhaustion. (64)

The phrasal verb "drive … on" locates the automotive character of the relation not in the music or the musician, but in the musical consumer, who also resembles a slave-driver. Baraka, describing the essential "nonhumanity" which characterizes the relation between "master and slave," resorts to a metaphor of music technology: "if you twist the knob on your radio you expect it to play."[34] Such is the relation we find here. There is nothing intrinsically machinelike in the Ex-colored Man; rather the machinic is an imposition of the music consumer whose hunger for amusement makes them senseless to the musician's humanity. The Ex-colored Man's nonconsensual performance at the keys even comes to resemble a rape, as the patron continues to exact his art from him as the Man drifts in and out of consciousness. The patron's

[33] Halliday, *Sonic Modernity*, 15.

[34] Baraka, *Blues People*, 3.

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bottomless appetite is like the sexual desire of a man who means to have his satisfaction at all costs, and it is this insatiable hunger, together with regenerative stores of spending power, which initiates the transformation from human into machine. As Ruotolo writes in her essential examination of the novel, the Ex-colored Man's audience "ultimately fixes both performer and music as projections of their seemingly unquenchable desire."[35] And so, if the white listener experiences a nagging alienation as they listen to ragtime, they are merely sensing the blowback of a cruel power disparity which leaves the performer entirely beholden to their habits of consumption.

The disillusionment that *The Autobiography* ultimately expresses about ragtime, or any commercial music, becoming an effective engine of racial enfranchisement has been given compelling illumination by Ruotolo and North. Ruotolo believes that the American culture industry ultimately "reifies racial difference, as it depends on the repeatability, marketability, and novelty of its products" and "separates performer and audience into commodity and consumer."[36] As we turn again to the preacher of "The Prodigal Son," we might consider that, by 1927, the commodification of ragtime was itself already historical, and that *God's Trombones* was part of a new movement which, as Morrissette describes, emerged in the 1920s "from this earlier decade of modern black life and black popular culture and from the fascination, fear, and violence in American reception of this culture."[37] The fascination and fear with which ragtime was received and the unheeding brutality with which it was extracted from its black pioneers – many of whom were left penniless for their efforts – is perhaps grimly apprehended by Johnson's conservative-minded folk preacher, who in his distrustful view of the distant metropolis, becomes briefly indistinguishable from a sceptical contemporary observer with all the powers of hindsight:

> And they stripped him of his money,
> And they stripped him of his clothes,
> And they left him broke and ragged
> In the streets of Babylon. (ll. 81–84)

The repetition and rhythmic emphasis on "stripped" remaps the coordinates of the black musician's place in the popular-music economy as presented in *The Autobiography*. The physical, forcible seizure of assets mirrors that enforced extraction of the musical commodity, and the parallel sexual economy of such abuse is present in the Prodigal Son's newly stripped and exposed body. Nakedness also reverts the black body to its most vulnerable and visible state of racial difference, and so, as we witness in Eliot's

[35] Ruotolo, 106. [36] Ibid., 111. [37] Morrissette, 13.

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"Fragment of an Agon," the integrative potential of a popular, transmissible black sound is scuppered, and the aural becomes just another theatre in which to restage existing racial divisions.

The black musician, "broke and ragged," is a victim of *rag*time and perhaps by extension of the "syncope" that we can hear in "broke," the past participle having been stripped of its final *n*. Of course, "broke" is that common idiomatic evocation of pennilessness, and of its truism that to be without money in this world is to be socially, physically and mentally broken. Yet to read these verbal ticks and tricks of the preacher as purely cautionary – as gestures of over-righteous disapproval – is to ignore the flair and ease with which he deploys them. The variously attributed Methodist saying, that *the Devil has all the best tunes*, finds its counterpart in the preacher who condemns the swing of modern rag music even as he claps his hands along to it. The irresistible quality of ragtime, whose audiences have no choice but to move along, could – so Johnson believed – be approximated and cultivated by the orator's voice, whose "chief virtue lies in 'timing'": "The ability of the speaker to set up a series of rhythmic and emotional vibrations between himself and his hearers. I have witnessed the accomplishment of this feat by oldtime Negro preachers using pure incoherencies."[38] This willing and open privileging of sound over sense shares its outlook with the song lyricist's, who adds vowels and rescinds them according to the dictates of the music's rhythm. What we find in the preacher of "The Prodigal Son," who relishes the lingual and musical flourishes of the Prodigal Son's road to ruin, is a lyrical taste for tragedy. In his sensibility we might recognize that urge by which Ralph Ellison famously defined the blues:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.[39]

With the climactic portrait of the Prodigal Son's ruin, as the young man lies "broke and ragged" in the streets of Babylon, we can feel the preacher's fascination burning through in his language. The tough plosives of the *k* and *gg* almost seem to squeeze their vowels, as though that *a* and *o* were berries being bitten into with the back teeth. This exertion of pressure in the mouth is only a physical manifestation of that mental pressure, that "aching consciousness" and the desire to "finger its jagged grain" – the quality of suffering only one letter away from *ragged*.

[38] Johnson, *Along This Way*, 338.
[39] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 128–44, 129.

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If "broke" is a partially broken word, its tooth ever so slightly chipped, it is this very quality, its material responsiveness to its meaning, that the preacher appears to savour. The "syncope" that Oehmler dreads, and which seems in ragtime music to initiate a loss of consciousness, is for Johnson's preacher a moment of heightened consciousness. It signals not linguistic decay but linguistic sensitivity, as vowels make room for emotions which are usually expressed and stirred up by music. The interpolated vowel in "a-playing" (22) is a simple but inextinguishable reflection of the joy at work in the secular performance and in the ears of its listeners, which Johnson's preacher cannot help but tap his foot along to, even as he supposedly condemns it. It falls to this religious orator to covertly assimilate the language that has been demonized and racialized as a symptom and source of cultural decay, revealing its expressive purpose and its tricks of use. This supposedly damaged language, with its aural excisions and growths, is really just showing us its own matter: the interpolated vowel in "a-playing" that gives us its syllable, but not its meaning as indefinite article. Language that registers the swing of music and the swing of the body ultimately guides the body of the intoning reader back towards movement. The intoning mouth cannot avoid being embroiled in the swing of "a-playing," and so the word itself seems to sit astride the page and the music that the reader must summon in speaking it. Johnson's sermon–poems are poised in just such a nimble position, between text and the embodied vocalizations of its readers.

If *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* culminates in disillusionment, with the Ex-colored Man entering a life of limbo passing as a white man in the North, we might reflect not only on the failures of the Man's musical projects, but also on the narrative limitations of the bourgeois novel, which must necessarily end in disappointment and assimilation, or outright destruction for the individual, and which – like sheet music or ragtime performance – is a commodity to be bought and sold at the whim of the market. As to where alternative cultural forms and models might be found, Ruotolo offers her suggestion:

> Johnson's novel finally gestures to the idea of an authentic black music as existing essentially outside the domain of the American culture industry, defined not by the distinct sounds, rhythms, and melodies so much as the distinct social rituals and relations that produce it.[40]

Ruotolo goes on that black music then "becomes inaccessible to anyone outside its social economy and thus loses its power to transform the 'required

[40] Ruotolo, 111.

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sounds' of mainstream white America."[41] Meanwhile, the question of what exactly constitutes "an authentic black music" becomes a difficult one to answer, when authenticity can only be vouchsafed from within that music's own set of "social rituals and relations." Construing Johnson's shift in understanding as a tactical retreat from mainstream intervention, whether justified or not, should not overshadow the precise nature of this lens adjustment. The idea of an "authentic" African American folk culture as a rare and precious mineral with its original and entirely unreproducible molecular arrangement, always lying in the next valley over, is itself the half-conscious projection of the consumer society that Ruotolo describes, with its hunger for novelty and imaginative safe passage into the interior. Johnson willingly catered to these touristic appetites in his novel, with the additionally tantalizing prospect that the anonymous *Autobiography* was a true account. But with *God's Trombones* we have a more nuanced project – one that complicates the relation between folk practitioner and collector, artist and audience. The "authentic," uncapturable quality of black folk production, which Johnson gestures to again and again in his critical commentary, is dispersed in practice. Rather than leading us on towards the unkeepable promise of an essence, Johnson's sermon–poems propose a range of procedures which are grounded in but not sequestered to African American folk culture, nor to music, poetry or any one particular medium.

One of Johnson's most ambitious and expansive projects of the 1920s – and Edwards reminds us that it was an "ambitious *literary* project" – was the transcribing of 120 African American spirituals, with arrangements for piano and voice by J. Rosamond Johnson, and published as two volumes in 1925 and 1926.[42] Since 1871, with the first national tour of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the spirituals – those religious folk songs composed by unknown writers under slavery and disseminated by word of mouth – had garnered praise and attention from composers like Antonín Dvořák, who believed they could form the basis of a new classical American music. J. Rosamond Johnson wrote of the spirituals, "If composers want themes for American symphony, or American grand opera, let them study the sad strains of the Negro plantation songs and they will find food and inspiration for great works."[43] For Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the spirituals, or Sorrow Songs as he calls them, are his main evidence of African American cultural contribution, and notated snippets of their music preface each chapter. Not only were the spirituals of

[41] Ibid., 111.
[42] Edwards, "The Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form," 587. The italics are Edwards's.
[43] J. Rosamond Johnson, "Why They Call American Music Ragtime," *Black Perspective in Music*, 4, 2, bicentennial number (July 1976), 260–64, 264.

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high artistic quality, but their nature as historical folk products testified to an indelible African American story and cultural imprint within the territories of the United States, establishing a heritage which might justify a shared political inheritance.

Rosamond Johnson's backhanded praise of the spirituals, in which he carefully preserves the hierarchy of high and low art, and in which "great works" feel implicitly classical and European-facing, is typical of the ambivalence which has been often been discerned in the relation of the Harlem Renaissance cognoscenti to the rural folk they championed. The possibility of a fair negotiation existing between folk practitioners and cosmopolitan artists who are necessarily outside the social rituals and relations of the former has been a subject of doubt, not least for Johnson himself. Commodification, and the American hunger for "authentic" black forms, come to implicate the black musician and poet alike, who may begin to view their own heritage with a proprietary eye, wondering what might next whet the public's appetite. In his essay "The Blues as Folk Poetry," Sterling A. Brown summarized the crisis of authenticity facing African American folk culture: the blues

> are sung on Broadway in nearly unrecognisable disguises, are produced on phonograph records by the thousands, are transmitted by radio, the T.O.B.A. circuit, carnival minstrel troupes, and the returned prodigal with his songbag full. It is becoming more and more difficult to tell which songs are truly folk and which are clever approximations.[44]

Here, the figure of the Prodigal Son returns, but not as the southern young man going North to the city – rather as the northern man going South to the countryside in search of saleable folk material. This is the last attempt at creative engagement by Johnson's Ex-colored Man, who goes South to rural Georgia with the intention of using the spirituals as inspiration for a new classical music, searching for what he imagines as virgin soil, "material which no one had yet touched" (74). But while on his field trip, the Ex-colored Man witnesses a lynching and, faced with the brutal realities of southern black life, he returns empty-handed and traumatized to New York to live out the rest of his life passing as a white man. In Daphne Lamothe's reading, Johnson's "amateur folklorist" is engaged in "an exercise in upward class mobility through art."[45] His great work is not designed to be heard by the people who have inspired it, but is for an art market organized by the very people who oppress them. Lamothe goes on, "the novel suggests that while cultural recovery is a necessary

[44] Sterling A. Brown, "The Blues as Folk Poetry," in O'Meally, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 540–51, 540.

[45] Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 83–84.

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and important goal, the agenda and methods of those engaged in this project could be suspect and even sinister."[46]

Before we attribute similarly questionable motives to Johnson himself, and take his poetic project in *God's Trombones* as a realization of the exploitative musical enterprise envisioned by his Ex-colored Man, a more fruitful way to read might be to investigate how well the poems bear the weight of such complex encounters, and what avenues they offer for thinking them through. In "Go Down Death – A Funeral Sermon," Johnson provides a plaintive and potent model for reflecting on the nature of that rural–urban interface. We are in "Savannah, Georgia, / Down in Yamacraw," and the sermon is for "Sister Caroline" (28). Johnson's elegy is a beautifully tender exhortation against grief: a recognition of the heavy load of living and the necessity of final rest. Hope is found in spite of a folkloric "Old Death" (28) who seems at times to resemble a particular manifestation of white worldly evil:

> And Death heard the summons,
> And he leaped on his fastest horse,
> Pale as a sheet in the moonlight. (ll. 24–26)

The "pale … sheet in the moonlight" evokes the typical garb of Ku Klux Klan riders. Not only is Death's semblance white, but he stands awaiting God's command beside "the Great White Throne" (28). Here an indefatigable God merges with the faceless powers of white oppression. Death's journey "down" – down from the firmament of Heaven to Earth – similarly blends with the poet's geographical descent from the North to the southern United States. Johnson's preface to *God's Trombones* is signed off simply, "*New York City, 1927*" (8). As a black bourgeois intellectual equipped with the resources of money and mobility, his power relation to his ethnographic subject suddenly begins to resemble that of oppressor to oppressed, with his temporal expedition down to Georgia being layered against the spectres of white temporal and spiritual control.

As a command, "Go Down" may well remind us of the title of the famous spiritual "Go Down, Moses." Johnson tells the story himself in "Let My People Go":

> Therefore, Moses, go down,
> Go down into Egypt,
> And tell Old Pharaoh
> To let my people go. (ll. 33–36)

[46] Ibid., 84.

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Here, the command to Moses to "Go Down" invokes an urgent mission of liberation and redemption: the freeing of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. In God's instruction to Old Death in the funeral sermon, we cannot but hear the echo of this earlier directive, that seems like its mirror opposite – the envoy of freedom and the envoy of destruction riding under the same banner. Going down, the ethnographic poet's imaginative and spatial North–South trajectory, is given all the ambivalence of a fierce paradox, justifying equally hope and terror on the part of the folk who glimpse their visitor's approaching figure: is it a race leader, ready to free them from penury, or just another officer of white domination?

The space in which Johnson's poems allow these thoughts to move, and by which his folk subjects are able to squint back at him in simultaneous interrogation of his own procedures and motives, belies the idea that African American folk culture is a static resource to be plundered. To commodify it, to attempt to capture or replicate it in a saleable form as a product, would be to omit and dissolve its most significant qualities. Again and again, Johnson teases us with the idea that the essential characteristic of the spirituals is uncapturable: "I doubt that it is possible with our present system of notation to make a fixed transcription of these peculiarities that would be absolutely true; for in their very nature they are not susceptible to fixation."[47] For Johnson, the spirituals' main significance lies in the wider fabric of folk production, performance and transmission which sustained them, and which he, as a transcriber and poet, wishes to enter and extend through his own practice. As he describes in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, sermons and spirituals were closely intertwined as part of worship. During services, the preacher and the song leader cooperated closely: the latter needed to have "a delicate sense of when to come to the preacher's support after a climax in the sermon had been reached by breaking in with a line or two of a song that expressed a certain sentiment."[48] Not only that, "One of her duties was to 'sing-down' a long-winded or uninteresting speaker at love feasts or experience meetings, and even to cut short a prayer of undue length by raising a song."[49] In this lively and antiphonal mode of worship and community expression, collaboration, rejoinder and even corrective interruption have their proper place in the proceedings. Identifying a locus of originality or authenticity is almost impossible in music, which, as Johnson points out, is already a hybrid of cultural and formal synthesis. Throughout his preface, he configures the development and performance of spirituals via a

[47] James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 2 vols. in 1, Volume I: *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 11–50, 30. [48] Ibid., 23 [49] Ibid., 22.

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series of synthesizing dyads: African religion and Christianity; African rhythm and European melody; sermon and song; call and response; the deep, swaying rhythm of the body and the percussive rhythm of hands and feet.

Synthesis, borrowing and revision were all habits Johnson wished to instil in his own creative practice. The dialogic character of the spirituals is foregrounded in "The Judgment Day" sermon, the opening of which is closely adapted from his own transcription of the spiritual "In Dat Great Gittin' Up Mornin'," in which God and the Archangel Gabriel are overheard in cosmic duologue as they gleefully bring on the end of the world. Compare these transcriptions from the spiritual with their adapted lines in "The Judgment Day":

Take down de silvah trumpet, fare you well, fare you well
Blow yo' trumpet Gabriel; fare you well, fare you well
Lord how loud shall I blow it, fare you well, fare you well
Blow it right calm an' easy, fare you well, fare you well
…
Gabriel blow yo' trumpet, fare you well, fare you well
Lord, how loud shall I blow it, fare you well, fare you well
Loud as seven peals of thunder, fare you well, fare you well
Wake de livin' nations, fare you well, fare you well …[50]
("In Dat Great Gittin' Up Mornin'")

Blow your silver trumpet,
And wake the living nations.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord,
How loud must I blow it?
And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
Blow it calm and easy.

…
Then God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,
Once more blow your silver trumpet,
And wake the nations underground.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord
How loud must I blow it?
And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,
Like seven peals of thunder. ("The Judgment Day", ll. 11–29)

Thaggert's criticisms of *God's Trombones* could be read in confluence with this passage. She finds that "the printed and fixed collection of poems diminishes the sense of improvisation and experimentation Johnson was trying to create; there is no sensation of a dynamic call and response in *God's Trombones*."[51]

[50] Johnson, *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, 41.
[51] Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism*, 61.

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Sure enough, the vocal textures of call and response – the refrain of "fare you well, fare you well" answering every line in the spiritual – have here been removed for Johnson's single-throated preacher. Gone too are the written renderings of southern black dialect, which Johnson believed had outlived its poetic usefulness: "Indeed, it is an instrument with but two complete stops, pathos and humour" (5). Edwards's thorough discussion of the blues poem, a mode which both calls out "to an 'absent lover' *and* calls out to an absent music, its missing chord changes," might help to describe a poem like "The Judgment Day," from which Johnson has indeed stripped away the music as well as any extraneous lyrics.[52] Even on the page, Johnson's version appears whittled down by contrast, with half of its lumber removed; the lone preacher facing his absent congregation.

And yet the "mood of distance" that Edwards identifies in the blues poem does not hold sway in Johnson's.[53] To overstrain our ears to its supposed absences, the lack of dynamism that Thaggert discerns, is to ignore the vivid exchange taking place before us: the vocal interplay between God and Gabriel which becomes the focus of Johnson's adaptation. Their calls to each other, left balancing by Johnson on the tips of the line endings, teeter on their colons, almost as if the two conversers were leaning out of windows to be heard by one another. This is a galactic conversation brought down to street level. The amity of their exchange is a far cry from the fire-and-brimstone thundering we might expect to hear on the eve of the apocalypse. In their easy to-and-fro of repeated question and answer, we find Lord and servant engaged in the collaborative close working relationship of fellow musicians, and the stage of earthly judgment starts to resemble the dance pit of a nightclub, as revellers await the epic trumpet solo that will rock the foundations of hell. A careful meting out of labour is suggested by lines which counterpose the two actors' names at beginning and end – a procedure which also reflects the elastic register of the preacher, who is determined to fast-switch between narration and speech within the body of the line.

The preacher's negotiation between heavenly voices is only one small dimension of the larger formal negotiation taking place here, between text and song, transcription and composition, and between Johnson's own poetic practice and all the various and shape-shifting historical forces that characterize folk production. Johnson's adaptation, newly intoned by the reader, extends these processes outwards. Their commitment on the page and their imaginative potential in the voice of the reader are held in a perpetual state of flux. That mutual back-and-forth between Gabriel and God, whose

[52] Edwards, "The Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form," 596. The italics are Edwards's.
[53] Ibid., 595.

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names appear so cumbersome and lonely on the page, clinging precariously onto their line endings, is an attitude understood and shared by the poems themselves, which although they appear singly and discrete on the printed page, are actually broad and arching objects, straddling numerous voices and modes. Their exposed posture, "hovering," as Edwards describes the blues poem, "on both sides of the inaccessible present of performance," occupies a delicate and valuable position in the consideration of what demands a black poetics might fulfil.[54]

The troubled water in which *God's Trombones* moves, and in which it has remained partly submerged, even in critical reappraisals of the Harlem Renaissance, has been given some exposition in this article. The dynamic and nuanced ways Johnson proposes of reading offer a rich vein of inquiry for researchers in sound studies and cultural studies. *God's Trombones* involves itself in the mechanics of breath and the transmission of sound between bodies, it reorients the linguistic ticks of ragtime music, and it engages in the productive and dialogic modes of African American folk expression and performance. As textual objects, its poems convey the brilliance and range of Johnson's craft, and present the reader with distinctive avenues for navigating the particular hopes and horrors that mobilized American culture in the first decades of the twentieth century. "The Creation," Johnson's rousing call for an African American Genesis, sparkles and blazes with industrious fervour; while his preacher in "The Prodigal Son" seems to watch in rapt anguish as this effort temporarily stalls. The collaborative modes and manners of folk producers envisioned in "The Judgment Day" see God and His archangel taking their apocalyptic inspiration from poor southern folk musicians. These are the working methods, Johnson suggests, that will one day bring down empires.

The powers of complication and the restlessly hybrid form that *God's Trombones* reveals require a hybrid approach which treats performance and text, sound and page, in conjunction; to close our ears or eyes to one or the other is to appreciate only half of Johnson's creation. To imagine *God's Trombones* as a libretto, as a form thrumming with contained anticipation, awaiting its full orchestra, is in the end only a provisional tactic. What lies on the far side of that metaphor is a firmer and finer understanding of black poetics.

[54] Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 80. His second chapter, "Towards a Poetics of Transcription: James Weldon Johnson's Prefaces," is a close reworking of his previous essay.

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