

James Weldon Johnson and the *Speech Lab Recordings*

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Projects of historical reconstruction are common to all contemporary oppositional intellectuals in America. This follows from the erasure of ‘other’ from dominant historical accounts; if it is said by those who deny us now that we have no past, then we have to insist that we have a past as deeply as we have a present.

(Hunt 1990:201)

Introduction

On Christmas Eve in 1935, James Weldon Johnson met with Columbia Speech Professor George W. Hibbitt (1895-1965), a lexicologist and scholar of American dialects, and read thirteen of his poems. Johnson, a polymath who distinguished himself as a poet, a lawyer, a professor, a lyricist for Tin Pan Alley musicals, the American Consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua, and a leader of the NAACP, had returned to his alma mater to capture his poetry in—or perhaps reconvert it to—sound.¹ Together, Johnson and Hibbitt created four aluminum records of Johnson reading his poetry, with selections from Johnson’s 1917 *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (his first collection of poems), the much-praised 1927 *God’s Trombones*, and his 1935 *St. Peter Relates an Incident*. While bits of these recordings, most frequently the recording of “The Creation,” have emerged in poetry audio anthologies,² the majority have lain dormant in the archive. It is odd that these recordings were never published in light of their quality. Many poetry recordings made in Hibbitt’s speech lab were released in a series of records produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and sold to schools on a subscription basis (more on this later). Johnson may have opted to record only for Columbia’s on-site record archive, and as a result, these recordings were never distributed, save for the fragments that made it out of the archive—until now. For the first time, these recordings are available for public download, historically contextualized, [as part of the PennSound archive](#) (Johnson 1935).

¹This essay is dedicated to Professors Herman Beavers and Charles Bernstein, friends and mentors both. Much of the thinking in the piece was developed in a seminar I took with Professor Beavers at the University of Pennsylvania in 2014. I would also like to thank the Penn Digital Humanities Forum for the support necessary to digitize these recordings, and I thank the staff of the Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library for their assistance with the digitization process.

²Including *Poetry on Record: 98 Poets Read Their Work, 1888-2006* (Mosby 2006).

The context for the creation of these recordings begins in 1931, when the poet Vachel Lindsay approached Barnard Professor of Speech W. Cabell Greet (1901-1972) and implored him to record Lindsay reading his poetry. Lindsay had recently been rebuffed by the commercial record companies he had approached since their executives had believed that poetry was not sufficiently commercial to warrant the production. Greet, who possessed a Speak-o-Phone recording device that he used to record samples of American dialects for his research, agreed to use it to record Lindsay. In January of 1931, Greet and Lindsay recorded nearly five hours' worth of Lindsay's poetry (Mustazza 2014).³ Lindsay died nine months later.

Galvanized by what he saw as the recording industry's disrespect for poetry in favor of more profitable content, Greet partnered with Hibbitt to create a series of recordings of American poets, all made in Greet's speech lab, with some being distributed in a series that would come to be known as *The Contemporary Poets Series*. Greet and Hibbitt worked with Walter C. Garwick, an audio engineer and the inventor of the portable field-recording device he later sold to John A. Lomax for use in recording African American spirituals, cowboy songs, and other ethnographic repertoires (Mustazza 2014). The series, which grew to include poets such as T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Harriet Monroe, and Robert Frost, was distributed by the NCTE on 78rpm records to schools and to the public on a subscription basis, intended for "teachers, students, and other lovers of literature" (Greet 1934:312).

Greet and Hibbitt actively sought out poets whose work was better heard than read, those that foregrounded the sonic facets of their poetry. In a call for suggestions for poets to be recorded in the series, published in *American Speech*, Greet prompted (1934:312):

"You are asked to give some thought to the use of records in studying and teaching literature, to ask yourselves the following questions:

What poems of present-day authors *lose most when transferred to the printed page*, and should, therefore, be preserved as the poet reads them?

What poets and what poems would I and my friends like most to hear?

What poems would be most useful in emphasizing for students that *all poetry*, not only the so-called lyric, *exists first as song*, in aural terms, before it is *reduced to print*?" (emphasis added).

Greet's take on the textual preservation of poetry as intrinsically privative is fascinating, to be sure. Regardless of whether we agree that in *all* poetry auralness has primacy over textuality, Greet's comments help to frame the editors' criteria for selecting poets to be included in the series. According to these criteria, which are constructed around pedagogy and scholarship, it is no wonder that the editors included James Weldon Johnson in this eminent cadre of poets—Johnson's work, as we will see, challenges and complicates any attempt at opposing text and speech. But, unfortunately, most of the recordings were never included in a distribution release.

³I also edited the Lindsay collection, which is available here in PennSound: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Lindsay.php> (Lindsay 1931).

Through my work editing the collection, I seek to bring these recordings to public attention and also to situate them in their context among the rest of the recordings in the *Speech Lab Recordings*,⁴ taking note too of the material conditions of their production.

It should not be viewed as happenstance that the editors of the *Contemporary Poets Series* were scholars of American dialects, specifically ethnographers. Greet and Hibbitt were interested in capturing for posterity the disparate and unique sounds of locality that serve as variations (musical connotation intended) on our primary sign base, the American idiom. James Weldon Johnson's poetry functions in the same manner as the recordings themselves: it works to preserve the sounds of African American cultures. As such, we might think of these sound files as meta-recordings: recordings of recordings. In my forthcoming essay on the Vachel Lindsay collection (Mustazza 2016), I make this point vis-à-vis Lindsay's poetics and propose that the recordings function as a sonic ekphrasis of the sounds of Lindsay's America. So too do these recordings of James Weldon Johnson operate as a sounded chronicle of African American life, and in an even more specific manner. Johnson's poetic preservations of the sounds of African American folk sermons of the early twentieth century, alongside a set of dialect poems that evoke vernacular speech sounds, perhaps of Johnson's origins in Jacksonville, Florida, function as sounded representations and poetic preservations of the kindred, though heterogeneous African American cultures of the time.⁵ And so Johnson is no less an ethnographer than Greet and Hibbitt, and the appearance of this collection in PennSound is both a fulfillment of Johnson's hope for the preservation of the sounds of his America, as well as a tribute to one of the founders of Afro-Modernism.⁶ This essay serves to introduce the collection and to historicize and elucidate the poems of which it is comprised; I will also speculate on why Johnson selects these particular poems from his oeuvre and what it must have meant for him to read them in 1935.⁷

God's Trombones as Sonic Ekphrasis

The first two poems in the collection, "The Creation" and "Go Down, Death," come from Johnson's famous 1927 collection of poems, *God's Trombones*, which seeks to preserve for posterity the sounds of African American folk sermons of the early twentieth century. From the

⁴See my in-progress edition (Mustazza 2015) of the *Speech Lab Recordings* here: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Speech-Lab-Recordings.php>.

⁵I will approach the question of the complicated relation of ekphrasis, preservation, and representation in the next section.

⁶For more on Afro-Modernism, see Kathy Lou Schultz's dissertation, "'In the Modern Vein': Afro-Modernist Poetry and Literary History," in the abstract of which she says of Afro-Modernism: "Afro-Modernists use modernist technique in conjunction with African American and African historical content. Afro-Modernism highlights uses of form along with issues of content, seeing form as a political issue. It confronts the singular, unified lyric 'I', re-seeing black identities" (Schultz 2006).

⁷This essay covers a number of the poems read in Johnson's reading at Columbia, but not all of them. The full list of poems read is as follows: "The Creation," "Go Down Death," two separate takes of "Ma Lady's Lips Am Like De Honey," "Answer to Prayer," "Los Cigarillos," "Teestay," "Sunset in the Tropics," "O Southland," "We to America," "Mother Night," "My City," "Brothers," and "Sence You Went Away."

title of the collection through the poetics Johnson enunciates in the preface of the work, these poems are born sonic and stand as a waypoint between the ephemerality and preservation of sound. To begin to approach the relation of the textual manifestation of the poems to Johnson's performance, where the medium is sound, we must explore the interplay between the dynamics of preservation and representation.

Johnson states clearly in the preface to *God's Trombones* that one of his primary aims in writing the text of the poems is preservation. He notes that "[t]he old-time Negro is rapidly passing" and that in the sermon-poems, Johnson has "tried sincerely to fix something of him" (1927:11). The facet of the preacher that Johnson seeks to preserve is his speech—in both content and form, the content being the topics of the sermons themselves (for example, the funereal sermon in "Go Down, Death") and the form being the delivery of the sermons. Facets of delivery include the dialect with which the preacher speaks (which is distinct from the congregation's dialect), as well as the sonic dynamics of the performance (pitch and loudness modulations, for example). In other words, the written poems are themselves sonic preservations, transductions: the scoring of sound to be preserved on the printed page. Johnson says on the mechanics of this preservation: "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 an audible expulsion of breath I have indicated by dashes" (10-11). One might conclude from this that Johnson saw the textual medium as privative, as incapable of capturing the robust and immersive phenomenon of the sermon—a position that would connect him with Greet's aforementioned stance of all poetry being born sonic. He speaks to this point in addressing a sort of reader-response necessary when reading the poems for the preacher's delivery: "There is a decided syncopation of speech . . . the sensing of which must be left to the reader's ear" (11). And it must be left to the reader's ear because the text cannot represent it, which brings us to the question of representation.

To say that these poems are preservations alone elides the mediation that occurs as Johnson refracts them through a poetic lens and re-encodes them to an alternate medium (sound to text). In this regard, what we are hearing when we listen to the poems and seeing when we read the poems is a kind of ekphrasis, a poetic description—or representation—of another art form. I don't think it is too dramatic to say that the conversion that occurs when Johnson scores the speech sounds to text is tantamount to other radical forms of ekphrastic medium conversion. Consider as parallels Gertrude Stein's cubist poetic portrait of Picasso, "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso," or William Carlos Williams' *Pictures from Brueghel*. Both of these works take as their source or compositional strategy a non-textual medium and convert it to poetry. Johnson takes speech sounds as his source and re-encodes them to text for the purposes of storage (preservation).⁸ In short, the poems that we see and hear are Johnson's interpretation and flattening of a multitude of different sermons, deliveries, preachers, and localities, condensed into a single representation of all of them. What is then preserved is this representation, which stands in as an abstraction for a variegated reality.

⁸All of the language that I use here to connote computational processes of encoding, inscription, and playback is very intentional, as I believe Johnson's poetics functions on similarly formalistic complexity.

All of this brings us back to the context of these recordings being made in a speech lab. What Johnson is doing in the recordings—what I called earlier the reconversion of the poems to sound—is capturing his representation of an abstracted model for speech sounds (in this case the dialect of the preachers) for purposes of preservation, which is very similar to the way Greet and Hibbitt used the lab for their research. One might be tempted to point out that the subjects who were recorded in the Speech Lab represent a particular—these were individuals speaking the way they spoke—versus Johnson’s mediated homogenization of the particular into the abstract. But this elides the fact that the goal of Greet and Hibbitt’s capturing these speech samples was to make generalized statements about the way people spoke and the migration or sources of dialects. Making linguistic claims about the way a group of people speaks is no less of a generalization than Johnson’s representation. We might just say that Greet and Hibbitt’s approach was inductive, while Johnson’s was more deductive.

But what is essential to take away here is that in both cases, a multitudinous reality is being flattened into a generalized representation. Johnson said of the variegated dialects that made up African American speech: “An ignorant Negro of the uplands of Georgia would have almost as much difficulty in understanding an ignorant sea island Negro as an Englishman would have. Not even in the dialect of any particular section is a given word always pronounced in precisely the same way” (Johnson 1922). Interestingly, this statement aligns directly with the pragmatic dialect work that Hibbitt did while working for the U.S. Navy. A bulletin from Columbia to celebrate Hibbitt’s career upon his transition to professor emeritus describes his employment when “the U.S. Navy borrowed him from the Columbia faculty to work with submarine crews” during World War II (Columbia 1963). His duties included “recasting the intelligibility of orders given in emergency situations ‘so that Maine would not misunderstand Texas because of regional variation in pronunciation. Faulty communications had caused too many losses’” (*ibid.* 2). Hibbitt’s work is an applied example of Johnson’s point that it is problematic to make generalized statements about the way people speak. That said, given that Johnson’s work is a single-author literary representation of a heterogeneous reality, a generalization is necessary. We just need to bear in mind that it is as such, and while Johnson does “fix something” of preachers of the early twentieth century, he does mediate, center, and abstract our view into what and who is being preserved. While much more could be said on this topic, suffice it to say for now that bearing in mind the vectors of preservation and ekphrastic representation are crucial when listening to these recordings.

In addition to the relationship between preservation and representation vis-à-vis the context of the recordings’ production in the Speech Lab, the poetic relationship between orality and textuality in *God’s Trombones* is also worth attention. I saw Johnson’s use of lineation and punctuation as a sort of musical notation for language, a way to mark the timing of delivery, as a proto-Projective Verse. Decades after Johnson published *God’s Trombones*, Charles Olson wrote that poetry moves from “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE,” and praised the advent of the typewriter because “[f]or the first time the poet ha[d] the stave and the bar a musician has had” (Olson 1950). Johnson’s poetics prefigures Olson’s theories on the musicality of language and the use of the so-called *vers libre* in transducing these sounds to page. The creation of these recordings, then, raises a fascinating question: if the text is a transduction of sound to the page, and the recordings are the

conversion of sound (the preacher) to sound (the recordings) as mediated by Johnson (and the text?), which is a truer representation of the culture they seek to preserve? In other words, is the text a libretto for the sound, only necessary in the absence of sound (a position Greet might take), or does the text function as something more than a scoring?

My instinct would have been to argue that these recordings provide a truer view into Johnson's aesthetics than does the text, but I have come to reconsider this dichotomization after reading Brent Hayes Edwards' caution to resist "relegating the text to the status of a [musical] score" (1998:585). He quotes Aldon Nielsen's point in *Black Chant* that "African American traditions of orality and textuality were not opposed to one another and did not exist in any sort of simple opposition" (quoted 581).⁹ Edwards' Derridean deconstruction of the primacy of speech over text leads him to suggest a theory of a "black poetics of transcription that would link such elusive uses of music to the more conventional or *ethnographic* 'recordings' or referencings of music, and oral expression in general" (emphasis added, 581). I agree with Edwards' point that the best way to approach these recordings from *God's Trombones* is phonotextually: reading the text of the poems while listening to Johnson perform them.¹⁰ And it will be in this free play of differences (to carry forward Edwards' Derridean line of argument) that we can best access the cultural preservation through sonic representation, the sonic ekphrasis Johnson accomplishes.

Resisting a strict dichotomization of textuality and orality, as Edwards and Nielsen suggest, does not negate the poems' place as a sort of offset forebear for Projective Verse poetics. A close examination of Johnson's performance of the poems from *God's Trombones* as compared to the text reveals that he is very faithful to his poetics of textually scored sound, and thus is in a kind of alignment with what would come to be Projective Verse: he pauses at the end of each line, and to some degree for the em-dashes. But a crucial facet of the composition of the text is that most lines break in natural places, with each line containing a complete dependent or independent clause and ending with a comma or period. These poems do not look like, say, a poem by William Carlos Williams, employing a radical visual syntactical fracture. In the lines' shaping around complete clauses, one might note that the grammatical line breaks mirror the sonic facets endemic to everyday speech and reading. In other words, generally speaking, one interjects a pause in speech or reading aloud when a comma or period is encountered. And so the question is raised of whether the composition of the poems on paper influenced their sound as much as the sounds of speech influenced the textual presentation, returning us to inextricable and dialectical bond Edwards and Nielsen suggest between text and performance.

But these recordings of Johnson's sermonic performances from *God's Trombones* go beyond demonstrating the inception of the formalistic elements of African American modernism; the content of the recordings is worth more attention than it has generally been given. Take, for example, Johnson's performance of "Go Down, Death." The funeral sermon takes its title from the African American spiritual "Go Down, Moses," which relates the biblical story of God telling Moses to command the Pharaoh, "Let my people go." Johnson was interested in this spiritual, as

⁹See Nielsen (1997).

¹⁰ It is my intention to eventually create a text-audio alignment of these poems from *God's Trombones*. Here is an example of what this would look like: http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Creeley/i_know_a_man.php (Creeley n.d.).

evidenced by his reference to it in his poem “O Black and Unknown Bards” and in the preface to his anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, where he emphasizes the role of the spiritual: “I doubt that there is a stronger theme in the whole musical literature of the world.” Johnson goes on to note, “It is evident that the opening lines of ‘Go Down, Moses’ . . . have a significance beyond the bondage of Israel in Egypt” (1922). It seems clear to me that Johnson here references the application of “Let my people go” to the institution of slavery. But how do we get from here to “Go Down, Death”? What is the commonality between the spiritual framed within the context of slavery, as applied to the funeral sermon? The overtones of the poem are certainly conciliatory: “Weep not, weep not, / She is not dead; / She’s resting in the bosom of Jesus.” Perhaps Johnson is creating a parallel between the emancipation of Sister Caroline from her illness and the abolition of slavery. In other words, maybe the poem suggests that a long period of suffering has ended and that the path forward, while not easy, will lead to the same liberation that Moses commanded of the Pharaoh for God’s people. One of Johnson’s reasons for writing *God’s Trombones* was to honor African American preachers as community leaders, possessing the trust of their congregations and thus the great power that comes with such trust. In these performances, we can hear Johnson enacting the cadences of the preachers who seek to lead their people onward in the wake of the recent cessation of the institution of slavery.

Dialect(ic) Encounter

None of the poems in *God’s Trombones* are written in conversational dialects. Johnson gives two reasons for this, one pragmatic (the sermons were not delivered in dialect and so he does not portray them as such), and the other ideological: “[dialect] is an instrument with two complete stops, pathos and humor” (1927:7). He goes on to explain that the reason for this is not a “defect” of the dialect itself, but rather contemporaneous, binary stereotypes of African Americans as “happy-go-lucky or . . . forlorn figure[s]” (7). In other words, Johnson renounces the use of dialect poetry—for this collection and in general—because primarily white audiences did not perceive that poetry written in dialect does not reduce to the binary opposition of pathos or humor. Thus, it is significant that here, in 1935, Johnson reads three dialect poems: “Ma Lady’s Lips Am Like De Honey,” “Answer to Prayer,” and “Sence You Went Away.”

“Sence You Went Away” is a demonstration of Johnson’s ability to craft a complex aesthetic from an ostensibly simple poem written in dialect. Johnson describes the poem, originally set to music with his brother J. Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole (Morrissette 2013:37) as “a little Negro dialect poem” in his comments prepended to the recording. But his use of the diminutive “little,” along with the poem’s *prima facie* appearance as a song about unfulfilled desire for the presence of another, belie its complexity. The poem pivots on a Derridean slippage that Johnson creates between “sence,” a dialect form of “since,” and its homophone “sense.” In the latter case, the poem asks to be read/heard as a direct address to the speaker’s senses, in the figurative sense of the word (“I’ve lost my senses”): Sense, you went away. Thus, the poem can and should be read two ways at the same time, with the polysemous “sence” as the pivot point between them. For example, consider the following, from Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (Johnson 1922:75):

Seems lak to me de stars don't shine so bright,
 Seems lak to me de sun done loss his light,
 Seems lak to me der's nothin' goin' right,
 Sence you went away.

This excerpt could be read/heard with two simultaneous interpretations: 1) the aforesaid surface case about desire for presence, and 2) a commentary on the attenuation of the speaker's senses due to the lack. In the literal interpretation of the latter, his sense of sight attenuates, along with his ability to perceive the positive facets of life. He responds through the direct address to these senses, suggesting that the lack of his desired companion parallels the departure of his senses: "Sense, you went away." As such, well beyond being limited to binary constructions of humor and pathos, Johnson's use of dialect poetry is complex and prefigures the poetics of writers of the late twentieth century who focus on the slipperiness of language, poets like Nathaniel Mackey and Harryette Mullen.

Johnson's renunciation of dialect poetry likely ended around 1932, when he wrote the introduction for Sterling A. Brown's collection of poems *Southern Road* (1932). As Johnson wrote there, "Mr. Brown's work is not only fine, it is also unique. He began writing just after the Negro poets had generally discarded conventionalized dialect, with its minstrel traditions of Negro life. . . . He infused poetry with genuine characteristic flavor by adopting as his medium the common, racy, living speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life" (Brown 1932:xxxvi). Just as poetry written in dialect is complex, capable of conveying more than "two complete stops," so too is Johnson's view of the poetics of dialect poetry.

Here, again, we can return to the context of the recordings' production in a speech lab, made by professors who studied American dialects and sought to record them for posterity. But what is most interesting to note is the particular brand of prescriptivist linguistics that W. Cabell Greet, the founder of the *Speech Lab Recordings*, worked within. An obituary for Greet, under the subheading "True U.S. Tongue Sought," says of the many dialect recordings he made of students in his speech lab, "The idea was to make the students 'speech conscious' and to uncover the *true unadulterated tongue of the United States* from all of the twangs, drawls, nasalities, lilt and burrs of the several regional dialects that Greet studied" (emphasis added, Hanley 1972:38). The positivist idea of a single, "true" U.S. dialect runs counter to Johnson's work to explore, preserve, and celebrate the regional tongues that, as he alludes in his comments on African American dialects' reception as representations of only pathos or humor, were often constructed as symbolic of the Other. Also consider Johnson's dialect poetry within the context of Hibbitt's aforementioned work on the pragmatic homogenization of dialect for communications purposes. Shifting speech sounds away from the particular localities that birthed them toward a centered ideal (even if for pragmatic ends, like Hibbitt's), runs counter to the poetics that drove Johnson to preserve speech sounds as literary representations. And so this complication of the notion of recording dialect poems in a lab meant for the study of dialects is crucial: these poems are not just framed by the fact that they were recorded within the context of such conditions of production, but also by the particular linguistic research conducted in the lab.

Toward a “Self-Determining Haiti” Through Poetic Reframing

It is noteworthy, I would argue, that among the thirteen poems that Johnson reads, three are subsections of the longer poem “Down by the Carib Sea”: “Los Cigarillos,” “Teestay,” and “Sunset in the Tropics.” “Down By the Carib Sea” was originally published in the 1917 *Fifty Years and Other Poems* and reprinted, as Johnson notes in the comments for these poems, in his 1935 *St. Peter Relates an Incident*. While the overall set of poems Johnson chooses to read for the Speech Lab Recordings definitely skews toward *St. Peter Relates An Incident*, no doubt because the book had just come out, there is still the question of why he chooses these particular sections of “Down By the Carib Sea” to read. In Sondra Kathryn Wilson’s presentation of *St. Peter Relates An Incident* in her edition of James Weldon Johnson’s *Complete Poems*, she suggests that the poems in *St. Peter* fall into two groups: “The poetry of the first type manifests protest, challenge, and hope. The poems of the second type . . . are not imbued with the polemical aspects of the race problem. The sentiments expressed in these poems are common to all humankind” (quoted in Johnson 2000:47). I would argue that the text of “Down By the Carib Sea” constitutes a dialectical encounter between the two types of poems Wilson identifies: it is both oppositional and objectivist (the latter connoting a detached observation of a scene).¹¹ In other words, the poem serves as both an immersive observational chronicle and an impassioned polemic. Through his reading of these particular selections of the poem in the recordings, Johnson shifts the dialectical balance toward the pole of oppositional poetics (to borrow from Erica Hunt) and reframes the poems’ target to be his experiences in Haiti exploring crimes against race on behalf of the NAACP.

The text of “Down By the Carib Sea” (Johnson 2000:75) comprises six sections that portray a day of life in the tropics, presented in accordance with an Aristotelian dramatic poetics: unity of place (albeit an amalgam of tropical locales), unity of time (one particular day), and unity of plot (the poem’s speaker seems to reflect a unified subjectivity). The poem charts a Caribbean day from sunrise through the day’s events (smoking, imbibing a local drink, admiring a woman, and dancing) through sunset. While the poem, taken as a whole, presents a complex mixture of bitter, oppositional irony (“Los Cigarillos”) through earnest expressions of romantic musings (“The Lottery Girl,” “The Dancing Girl”), it is via Johnson’s omission of the later category that the poem as presented in the *Speech Lab Recordings* becomes oppositional.¹² By omitting “Sunrise in the Tropics,” Johnson takes us into the poem *in medias res* (cf. aforesaid dramatic poetics), and by foregrounding “Los Cigarillos,” he sets the poem’s atmospherics in the realm of political commentary.

¹¹ I highly recommend Charles Bernstein’s essay “Objectivist Blues” for more information on scoring speech for sound, dialect poetry, and objectivism (Bernstein 2008). Also see Dennis Tedlock’s *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Tedlock 1983).

¹² Poets who agreed to record for the series were permitted to choose which poems they would read. One constraint may have been that the aluminum records could only hold about 6 minutes’ worth of material. Thus, longer poems would have to be segmented. As such, I argue that there is some authorial intent in the selection and sequencing of the content. Aside from any intentionality, I claim the listener can and should find meaning in the selection of poems read, just as with any musical or poetic collection.

By beginning his reading of “Down by the Carib Sea” with “Los Cigarillos” (“The cigarette smokers,” as Johnson translates the title in his prefatory comments), Johnson takes as a point of departure a satire of reductive, Ameri-centric views of life in the Caribbean. The poem turns on a conceit presented in its refrain: “For life in the tropics is only a joke, / So we pass it in dreams, and we pass it in smoke, / Smoke—smoke—smoke” (76). The first line here suggests an interplay with Johnson’s view of dialect: that a primarily white audience seeks to reduce a black Other to a false binary of “happy-go-lucky” or “forlorn.” The Ameri-centric view of the Caribbean presented here enacts this dichotomization by presenting the Caribbean residents as “happy-go-lucky”: seeing life as “only a joke.” While “smoke,” at this point in the poem references the smoke emanating from the smokers’ cigarettes, it takes on a polysemy as the poem progresses: “Tropical constitutions call for occasional revolutions / But after that’s through, / Why there’s nothing to do / But smoke—smoke.” The smoke now also comes to reference a city burning as a result of revolutions, here highlighted by the pun on “constitutions.” Johnson’s satiric use of the playful and reductive “occasional revolutions” serves to highlight this Ameri-centric dichotomization by rendering it absurd. Hearing Johnson read “Los Cigarillos” is crucial, as the vacillation of the quality of voice between playful (“occasional revolutions”) and grave (“Smoke—smoke—smoke”) enact the dialectic at the heart of the poem: the former quality of voice suggesting Ameri-centric views of the Other, particularly the black body, and the latter suggesting the direness that such a view creates.

Johnson was immersed in various locales of the Caribbean throughout his career. Given that “Down By the Carib Sea” was published in 1917, we can reasonably deduce that it references Johnson’s history as U.S. Consul to Venezuela (1908-1910) and U.S. Consul to Nicaragua (1910-1913). Indeed, Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, where Johnson was stationed, is located right on the Caribbean Sea. While Johnson’s assignment in Nicaragua put him in Corinto (Morrissette 2013:101), located on the Pacific side of Nicaragua, the poem also references this period, as is evidenced by the section titled “Teestay,” a phoneticization of “tiste” (Johnson 2000:76), a nonalcoholic Nicaraguan drink made with cocoa beans and corn (“F&D” n.d.). Johnson’s reading of “Teestay” carries on the repetition set forth in “Los Cigarillos”: “Teestay, teestay / The national drink on a feast day;” (Johnson 2000:76). While the poem itself does not read as overtly political, two factors should be appreciated: 1) to phoneticize a simple word like “tiste” implies an American audience who would otherwise have limited knowledge of cultures and languages outside their own, and 2) Johnson was Consul to Nicaragua during the American occupation (Logan 1971:398) that sought to prevent the building of a Nicaraguan canal by any power but the United States government (Solaún 2005:24).¹³ To the former point, Johnson’s poetics involving the blending of languages within a poem (“dolce far niente,” “sin duda,” and so on) render “tiste” as one of the simpler pronunciations. To spell it phonetically, I would contend, denotes an opposition to the assumed audience of the poem. As for the second point, the Nicaraguan “rebels” who sought to resist the U.S. Occupation, with troops departing from Johnson’s town of Corinto (NYT 1912), are perhaps those who engage in “occasional revolutions.” Johnson’s dramatic and sonorous conclusion to the constellation (pun intended) of

¹³ In fact, Corinto, where Johnson was stationed, was the “western terminus of the proposed canal” (Keasbey 1896:25).

poems he reads is “Sunset In the Tropics,” a female gendering of “Queen Night” that snuffs out the day’s activities by enveloping the rays of colored light in darkness. In other words, there is no sunrise: only sunset. Thus, Johnson’s selections from “Down By the Carib Sea” move this poem into the realm of the political and oppositional.

But even though “Down By The Carib Sea” was influenced by Johnson’s time in Venezuela and Nicaragua, I believe that Johnson’s inclusion of the poem in his 1935 selected poems and reading of it at Columbia in the same year reframe the poem to focus on his experiences in Haiti and reaffirm its oppositional stance. In 1920, Johnson traveled to Haiti, on behalf of the NAACP, to investigate reports of crimes along racial lines by occupying U.S. forces, thus immersing Johnson in the midst of a second American occupation of a Caribbean nation in less than a decade (Morrissette 2013:80). Johnson’s investigative journalism turned up numerous abuses, such as the rape of Haitian women by U.S. soldiers (Johnson 1920), and chronicled his findings in four essays written for *The Nation*, later compiled into the book *Self-Determining Haiti*. Johnson’s research, which questioned the purpose for America’s presence in Haiti to begin with, suggests a link between a New York banker with ties to the State Department and financial interests in Haiti (Logan 1971:398-99). In other words, Johnson locates capitalistic and imperialistic reasons for the U.S. presence in Haiti and reports them to break the silence of what he felt was media censorship of the country’s actions: “There is the strictest censorship of the press. No Haitian newspaper is allowed to publish anything in criticism of the Occupation or the Haitian government. . . . Nothing that might reflect upon the Occupation administration in Haiti is allowed to reach the newspapers of the United States” (Johnson 1920:9). Johnson’s work would lay the groundwork for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Haiti, but it would take a decade before the Haitians were permitted to elect their own government (Logan 1971:402). As a result, Johnson’s reading of these selections in 1935 takes on a new meaning with the reframing (in the Goffmanian sense of the word) of Johnson’s experiences in Haiti. In other words, these readings serve as an ethnographic chronicle of imperialistic pursuits throughout the Caribbean and serve as both a link in the chain of witness and as a bulwark of opposition against future recurrences.

The Oppositional Poetics of Sound

Drawing from the same collision of Classical dramatic elements and modern poetic practice that drives “Down By the Carib Sea,” Johnson chooses to read “Brothers—American Drama,” a harrowing poem about a lynching. The poem takes the form of a Shakespearean tragedy, written in blank verse, but Johnson alters the form by blending in elements of classical Greek drama, specifically the use of the “Mob” as a morbid stand-in for a dramatic chorus. The function of the chorus in Classical Greek drama was often to give voice to the collective morality of a particular town or community, and Johnson’s mob functions to negate the classical chorus, serving as the voice of a collective immorality in America. The Shakespearean aspects of the poem, especially the violence that takes place “on stage” (compare to Greek drama like *Oedipus Rex*, where violence like Oedipus’s putting his own eyes out takes place off stage) function as an embedded modernism: Shakespearean poetics reject tenets of Greek drama. And it is through the

modifier “American” in the poem’s title that a second rejection, and thus modernism, occurs: the appropriation and redeployment of European forms, used to elucidate the violence committed along racial lines in Johnson’s America.¹⁴ Departing from this point of progressive modernisms summing to Afro-Modernism, I would make the argument that the power of this reading of the poem derives from the sonic facets of Johnson’s performance.

Johnson’s reading of “Brothers—American Drama” enacts the aesthetic set forth in the text. One of the jarring elements of the poem is the clinical precision with which the Mob describes the lynching occurring, the cold detachment that creates a tension with the concept of an angry mob: “Fetch water! Water! Pour a little on / The fire, lest it should burn too fast. Hold so!” We are immediately struck by the archaic diction used, one that is often associated with high society, here applied to a mob. Johnson’s reading of the poem enacts this through a performative and patrician enunciation of the poem. The exceptional aesthetic tension that derives from this disjuncture between calculating and frenzied, so-called refined language and base actions is what powers the poem and situates it as an oppositional poetics and a key work of Afro-Modernity.

I would include in this constellation of oppositional poems “We To America,” a poem that makes its oppositional function clear in its title: by creating a disjunction between African Americans (“We”) and “America” as a metonymy for whiteness, Johnson presents his topic. The poem proceeds to create a set of binary oppositions that crescendo into the threat of revolution (Johnson 2000:61):

How would you have us, as we are?
Or sinking ‘neath the load we bear?
Our eyes fixed forward on a star?
Or gazing empty at despair?

Rising or falling? Men or things?
With dragging pace or footsteps fleet?
Strong, willing sinews in your wings?
Or tightening chains about your feet?

Johnson’s voice enacts the gradient from rhetorical exchange to threat, in the lowering pitch and severity with which he delivers the final lines of the poem. Unlike his reading of “Brothers—American Drama,” where his reading derives its power from a disjuncture between sonic form and content, here Johnson’s reading serves as illustrative of the poem’s content.

Finally, I would also add Johnson’s reading of “O Southland” in this constellation of poems of resistance. The title of the poem interacts with the title of the collection within which it was originally published: *Fifty Years and Other Poems*. The title poem of this collection, completed in 1913, designates the amount of time that had passed since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. “O Southland” takes the form of a lyric ode, spoken to Johnson’s native South. The poem calls for progress toward equality for African Americans in the South:

¹⁴ Consider as a parallel Claude McKay’s use/redeployment of the sonnet form in “If We Must Die,” as discussed in PoemTalk #71 (PoemTalk 2013).

“O Southland! O Southland! / Do you not hear to-day / The mighty beat of onward feet, / And know you not their way?” Interestingly, Johnson chooses to end his reading of the poem before he reaches the end of the text, stopping with: “And God’s above, and God is love, / And men are only men.” The binarization of divinity and humanity in this poem is a theme in Johnson’s work, and here functions to implore the South to consider all men equal, that anyone who is not divine (that is, everyone) is human and the same. The tone of “O Southland” is quite different than that of “Brothers—American Drama” and “We To America,” in that it takes a less direct form of opposition. Rather than being a biting, Juvenalian satire or a poem of defiant opposition, it engages with reason, suggesting that time brings change and conservatism is bound for failure. In other words, it is modern: it seeks the iterative path toward a better future.

These poems of opposition were written and performed at a time when lynchings were still occurring, and this is the frame within which these poems should be understood. Indeed, one of the formative events of Johnson’s life was his own near lynching at the hands of a mob in his own Jacksonville, FL (Morrissette 2013:36). Johnson went on to work on the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1921, “a bill that would have made lynching a national crime, but it failed to become law because of insufficient votes in the Senate” (JWJI n.d.). As such, these poems resist by serving as acts of remembrance: ethnographic chronicles that (re)light the past so as to protect the future. These poems, which focus on African American life, taken together with the selections read from “Down By The Carib Sea,” focusing on those of African descent in the Caribbean, display Johnson’s concern for all peoples of the African diaspora.

Conclusion

It is unclear how James Weldon Johnson came to meet W. Cabell Greet and George Hibbitt and to be recorded in this session, but there are many possible avenues. For example, Johnson was an alumnus of Columbia University, and his teacher was Brander Matthews, a colleague of Greet and Hibbitt’s.¹⁵ Indeed, Matthews wrote the introduction to Johnson’s first collection of poetry, *Fifty Years and Other Poems*. One of Johnson’s “literary mentors” was H. L. Mencken (Morrissette 2013:104). Mencken was close with W. Cabell Greet, and their correspondence is housed at Columbia, as part of the *W. Cabell Greet Papers*. It is possible that Mencken was the connection, given his interest in poetry and his relationships with Greet and Johnson.¹⁶ Other possible connections include Carl Van Vechten, who mediated Hibbitt’s recording of Gertrude Stein the previous year, or perhaps Stein herself, as Johnson had given her a copy of *God’s Trombones* when she visited New York in 1934 (Morrissette 2013:116) (the same trip when she came to be recorded by Greet and Hibbitt¹⁷). Regardless of whether any of

¹⁵ Matthews did die, however, six years before these recordings were made, so he would have had to introduce Greet to Johnson before the Lindsay recordings were even made.

¹⁶ Mencken was also an admirer of Vachel Lindsay. See his remembrance of Lindsay (Mencken 1947).

¹⁷ See my edition of Gertrude Stein’s recording in the Speech Lab here: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Stein.html> (Stein 1935).

these were the connections that led to Johnson's recording session, we are fortunate that his poetry was recorded and survived to be digitized and presented to the public.

One of Johnson's most famous dicta is his claim that "The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior" (Johnson 1922:vii). It is essential to listen to these recordings with this quotation in mind, as well as to hear them as part of his work to "extol black literature as an integral part of American literature" (quoted in Johnson 2000:xviii). Just as in the poem "O Black and Unknown Bards," where Johnson speaks for the unattributed authors of the spirituals, who represent a collective voice, these poems stand as both an act of remembrance and tribute and a gesture toward the future. Johnson's portrayal of the voices of preachers as community leaders interacts with his work in these recordings: to light the way toward a new Afro-Modernism. And the recordings provide the final, heretofore missing component to the crucial dialectical dynamic of orality and textuality in Johnson's work. In other words, rather than providing a more authentic form of Johnson's poetry (cf. Greet's comments on the privative nature of text), the release of these recordings through PennSound marks an essential component to developing a rich phonotextual understanding of a body of work crucial to American Literature.

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