



Paradise and Politics in the Music of Blind Willie Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the various political, social and religious paradises introduced in the many voices of Blind Willie Johnson's recorded songs. I investigate the critical response to Johnson's recordings, suggesting that many of these treatments reduce Johnson to a single voice, in doing so silencing other voices present in the songs. In response, I call for a listening that is open to plural interpretation, allowing for multiple voices in a productive and radical indeterminacy.

BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON'S AFRICAN AMERICAN GOSPEL BLUES

Willie Johnson (1897-c1945) was a blind African American musician from Texas, who supported himself singing on streets and outside churches. In 1927 Columbia Records recorded Johnson and Willie B. Harris singing six songs, which were released on Columbia's 'Race' catalogue (Oliver 1985:24). Strong sales spurred further sessions, and in total thirty songs from four sessions were released. Johnson's records were extremely successful and he was one of Columbia's three top-selling artists, alongside Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters (Charters 1975: 151). Sales were hit in the early 1930s by the new affordability of radio sets, when music was made available in homes for free, though radio would not have affected sales of black as much as white musicians, as black music was not often heard on radio (Wald 2010:39). As for the Depression which hit in September 1929, Johnson's continuing sales (dropping sharply, but not as sharply as those of other stars) were likely sustained by religious revivalists who



considered Johnson's harsh warnings to be relevant enough to purchase in those apocalyptic times. In the 1950s, Samuel Charters sought to investigate the musicians who had been most successful and most widely listened to by black Americans, basing his search on sales figures for pre-war record companies (Hamilton 2007:181). Charters contacted Angeline Johnson, Willie's second wife, though Willie by then had died. He oversaw the first reissue of Johnson's music in 1957 and included a chapter on Johnson in his 1959 book *The Country Blues*. Later treatments of Johnson's recordings include D.N. Blakey's transcription of lyrics in his 2007 book *Revelation*, and Max Haymes' (2004, 2011) listing of antecedent recordings of similar songs. A dramatised Johnson narrates Wim Wenders' 2003 film *The Soul of a Man*, and Terry Rowden's *The Songs of Blind Folk* (2009) mentions Johnson in calling for consideration of blindness and disability as well as race in studying identity and experience in music.

Johnson's contemporaries Son House, Mississippi Fred McDowell and Gary Davis (also blind, also a largely religious singer) played songs that Johnson recorded, in arrangements which indicate direct influence. In addition, the list of artists who have subsequently recorded Blind Willie Johnson songs is lengthy, featuring many interested in the roots of American folk music such as Nick Cave, Lou Reed, Bonnie Raitt and the White Stripes. Since the first reissues in 1957, Johnson's recordings have often been repackaged, in 1958, 1965, 1977, 1982, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2010, and 2011 (Discogs 2012). Johnson's *Dark Was the Night, Cold was the Ground* was included on the Voyager record as representative of the best of American and world culture (Blakey 2007: 2).

OLD TESTAMENT PARADISES

The Old Testament paradise of Canaan is featured as culmination of an arduous journey by a chosen people, crossing the river Jordan to earthly paradise. Several songs directly or indirectly refer to Moses (Johnson 1993: 12, 29, 26; Blakey 2007: 184). Johnson sings of "Crossing the river Jordan" and "meeting on Canaan's shore" (1993: 2,19). Blakey (2007: 154) transcribes "Kingdom" rather than "Canaan," though both can be heard simultaneously. Mentions of earthly paradise complement a focus on Moses and David (1993: 25), frequent inspirations in African American music for their emphasis on this-worldly salvation (Levine 2006:590).

Black musicians have long linked Canaan with social justice (Roach 1985: 28, Cone 1972: 88, Baraka 1983: 183, Sullivan, P. 2009: 61), as have civil rights activists (e.g. DuBois 1994, King Jr. 1968), the sanctioned discourse of Christianity offering comparative shelter to an emancipatory myth. Rather than explicit protest emerging from nowhere, such as when music is described as having been important to African American struggles "ever since 1961" (Sullivan, D. 2011: 5), it is useful to consider the early stages of a gradual unveiling, since "every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism" (Gramsci 1977:75).



For Johnson, justice is inextricable from paradise, present-day hardships tinged with Old Testament vengeance. This is threatened and enacted in the sinking of the Titanic and an influenza epidemic (Johnson 1993: 8,20), but reasons for retribution are left implicit. Blakey suggests that *I'm Gonna Run to the City of Refuge* refers to salvation sought in the Church (2007: 74), but in the Old Testament, cities of refuge offer sanctuary to accidental murderers (Numbers 35, Joshua 21, KJV). This connection was made by Rudolph Fisher in 1925 in his story *City of Refuge* (2007 [1925]), in which Harlem is sanctuary to a southern black labourer who murders a white man.

NEW TESTAMENT PARADISES

Paradise in the New Testament is a post-mortal Heaven. In Johnson's songs, death is an imminent possibility, related to salvation: "In the midnight hour, when death comes creeping in your room, you're gonna need somebody on your bond" (1993: 30); heaven is open to those who "would only come in" (1993: 7). This is no apology for acquiescence, nor a deferral to compensation after death. The immediacy of death strengthens the apocalyptic message, while a real world focus gives political potential.

Heaven is related to salvation through the theme of burdens, as in "Christ is my burden-bearer" (1993: 25), the "heavy load He bore for thee" (1993: 5, Blakey 2007: 51), and

Jesus knows the pains you feel,
He can save and he can heal,
Take your burden to the lord and leave it there. (Johnson 1993: 18)

Metonyms like sin as burden do not produce meaning through simple substitution, but in relations between levels of significance. In the Old Testament, "burden" often refers to servitude, even slavery, with clear resonance for African Americans for whom even "death was sometimes interpreted as a welcome release from the burdens of this world" (Cone 1972: 77). Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson (1966: 46) links burden to freedom: an economic migrant arriving in a northern city "could lay down his burden of being a colored person in the white man's world."

Old Testament prophets Zechariah (whom Johnson cites (1993: 20)) and Malachi speak of "the burden of the word" (Zechariah 9:1, 12:1, Malachi 1:1, KJV), and Moses of "the burden of the people" (Numbers 11:17, KJV), signifying the responsibilities of following God's word. In contrast to hoping for death, laying down this burden is to have achieved in this world the paradise of God's kingdom and political justice.

Johnson also invokes the paradise described in the book of Revelation, Christ's kingdom manifested on earth. This apocalypse is imbued with political potential in warnings of retribution and calls for faithful preparation: "We done told you, God done warned you, Jesus coming soon;" "keep your lamp trimmed and burning, for the



work/world is 'most done'" (1993: 8; 10); encouragement which found expression in later socially-conscious African American gospel music such as Curtis Mayfield's *People Get Ready* (1995).

VOCAL STYLES

"Blues texts speak with many voices" (Pratt 1990: 83), and Johnson's recordings contain numerous vocal styles, different accompanying singers, guitar voices, grammatical and subjective shifts, changing line patterns, and the absent presence of several silent voices: these voices bind together multivalent references and derail unifying interpretations.

Johnson uses many vocal styles: a gruff baritone in *Soul of a Man*, a smoother style in *The Rain Don't Fall On Me*, and several styles in *Let Your Light Shine On Me*, the voice gradually becoming harsher while a strident rhythm is introduced. Different female voices feature. Willie B. Harris sang at two sessions, and an unidentified woman at one. Another voice is that of Angeline Johnson, recorded singing several songs that Johnson also recorded (Johnson 1975), and for a time thought to be the voice on the 1928 recordings (Corcoran). In some songs, lines are split between male and female voices (1993: 10,21); in others, voices interact in a doubling move where Johnson sings the whole line each time Harris sings half:

I am walk (walking in the light)
in the light (walking in the light) (1993: 28)

These variations, and simultaneous lyrical differences ("Kingdom's shore" sung at the same time as "Canaan's shore"; "He's a wonder in my soul" and "he has won me in my soul," 1993: 19,28) showcase differing voices and words, but also draw attention to difference itself in a close harmony of meaning.

Antiphonal structures are common in African American music, a source of strength as well as means of conveying hidden messages (Levine 2006: 589, DeSalvo 2006: 19, Gates 1988: 67, Gussow 2002: 4). Johnson employs this call-and-response structure with another vocalist and between voice and guitar. In *The Soul of a Man*, Johnson (1993: 26) sings complete lines but uses the structure to pose a deliberately unanswerable question ("Want somebody to tell me, answer if you can/ want somebody to tell me, what is the soul of a man?"). Expectations are manipulated to add rhetorical force to Jesus "teaching the lawyers and doctors" (Johnson 1993: 26). Doctors are similarly ridiculed in *Jesus Coming Soon*, the consistent position on doctors presenting the contemporary world in biblical terms, and dismissing experts' claims to final knowledge.

GUITAR VOICES



Black music expresses meanings “in the sound if not the word” (Gates 1987: 96-97, see also McKune cited in Hamilton 2007:185), from bebop to hiphop (Rose 1994: 6) and spirituals to gospel (Jackson 1966: 181). Johnson’s guitar produces and hides meaning, implying and effacing words. The title lyric of *I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole*, for example, is never completely voiced. Johnson sings “I know his blood can...” and follows with three guitar notes that match the expected “make me whole.” In *When the War Was On*, a whole line in an otherwise sung but difficult-to-decipher verse is replaced with guitar picking:

President Wilson, sitting on his throne,
Making laws for everyone,
Call up the black man, leave out the white,
(guitar line) (1993: 16)

World War One had a mobilising effect in racial struggles, as African American soldiers returned from Europe refusing to accept discrimination (Gussow 2002: 179), and wartime provided employment opportunities otherwise unavailable to black people (Sullivan, P. 2009: 61). Given this, the “missing” words could well have been incendiary content sung in other contexts. This is plausible, but not necessary, evidence for political awareness: even highlighting the taboo by removing words is a radical act.

GRAMMATICAL VOICES

Grammatical voices also shift. *If I Had My Way* features several voices: a narrator; Samson to his father; Samson’s mother to Samson; Samson to Delilah; Delilah to Sampson. Devices of reported speech are left to later interpreters:

Well here’s a riddle “Please tell it to me”
How out the eater there came forth meat?
Well here’s a riddle “Please tell it to me”
How out the strong Oh there came forth sweet? (Blakey 2007: 60),

Or

“Well, your riddle please, a-tell it to me”
A-how an eater became forth meat?
“Well, your riddle please, a-tell it to me”
A-how strong of it came forth sweet? (Metrolyrics 2011).

This indeterminacy echoes Old Testament prophetic texts, which can be unclear as to whether God or the prophet, or God through the prophet, is speaking (see for example Isaiah 63, KJV).



Subject positions change. In *Motherless Children*, Johnson sings in the third person, though he too was motherless. Contrastingly, in *Nobody's Fault But Mine*, recorded at the same session, he sings in the first person about reading the bible, despite blindness affecting his experience of reading. Colloquial and formal King James Bible language is mixed, sometimes even in the same line: "Ain't no evil can betide" (1993: 28). Irony is suggested when Johnson (1993: 20) sings of the designer/captain of the Titanic as a "mighty man" in describing pride punished by God. This distances Johnson from these and potentially other words that appear straightforwardly literal. These and other devices resist any project of reducing Johnson to monovocality.

SILENT VOICES

Other voices speak, in their silence, of the arbitrary and contingent nature of the documents with which we contend. Most songs were recorded twice, one take selected by a Columbia representative. Since such detailed extrapolations emerge from tiny details of the released recordings-

[sounds like] DJYUM [I think this line refers to when Jesus was carrying his cross to where he was to be crucified. A crowd were lamenting him and he said 'Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.' So, I think the DJYUM would be something like 'Jesus heard women'] WEEPING (Blakey 2007: 29, ellipses, brackets and capitals in original)

-it is easy to imagine different interpretations, had other takes been selected for release. The surviving recordings document just 66 minutes of Johnson's life's music. Considering his numerous vocal and guitar styles, and facility in switching between them, we can assume that these songs and many others were rearranged, developed and altered depending on context.

Another intriguing voice is that of Blind Texas Marlin, recorded immediately after Johnson's second session, and considered the same singer (Blakey 2007: 120). Recording under pseudonyms was common for musicians, either to retain multiple contracts (Charters 1975: 93), or when recording on the other side of the sacred/secular divide without alienating possible fans (Smith 2004: 33). The two Blind Texas Marlin songs were not released, kept or even titled, but Johnson as secular blues singer is a powerfully ambiguous, if silent, voice. Angeline also recorded songs with Johnson (Obrecht 2011), but these recordings did not survive.

Johnson's rereleased recordings are compiled not from original masters, long since carelessly erased or lost, but copied from poor quality circulation copies. The surface noise of accumulated history is transferred to CD, despite efforts to "preserve the integrity" of the imaginary pure recording (Producer's note, Johnson 1993: 26). This ever-present whisper testifies to the precondition of technological mediation,



often elided by enthusiasts or fetishised as marking an obscure authenticity (Hamilton 2007: 9,128), subtly reminding listeners of the silent voices and alternative possibilities implicit in every ostensibly final recorded event.

POSITIONAL VOICES

Recording companies, representatives of the dominant and oppressive culture, controlled recording and distribution. Their decisions significantly mediate the traces of voices to which we now have access, as do the limitations and possibilities of the contemporary technology and the subsequent passage of time. "Blind" may have been added to singers' names by executives as a perceived marketing point, despite blindness in the rural South being unremarkable for African Americans (Rowden 2009: 35-6). Some recordings were reissued under the name "The Blind Pilgrim," further contributing to the proliferating ambivalence.

Songs were carelessly labelled. A song about motherless children is titled *Mother's Children Have a Hard Time*, a song with the chorus "Go with me to that land" becomes *Go To Me With That Land*, and, most tellingly, a song entitled *The Rain Don't Fall On Me* includes the line "Latter rain done fall on me," the title in literal opposition to the lyrics. Printed labels would contribute to a listener's interpretation of a song, while listeners familiar with Pentecostalism, or the prophet Joel, might infer more apocalyptic significance.

TEXTUAL VOICES

Many songs refer to multiple texts, producing meaning in relations between references. *Bye and Bye I'm Going to See the King*, alludes to biblical verses as well as to earlier recordings (Dranes 1976, Various Artists 1997), containing the line "Isaiah saw him coming with his dying garments on." Blakey (2007: 150) takes this as mistaking dying with dyeing, though in the scriptural reference, garments bloodstained from God's trampling wrath are linked with "garments like him that treadeth in the winefat" (Isaiah 63:2, KJV), and Isaiah's prophecy of the coming of Jesus (in Isaiah 7:14, KJV), also evokes dying garments. While in Arizona Dranes' version, the "Isaiah" is clear, in Johnson's it is muffled and seems to contain consonant sounds D or T. Perhaps Johnson was more familiar with the songs than with the biblical reference, but the only certainty is indeterminacy.

Christ's garments are also mentioned in *I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole*, a song drawing lyrically from two 19th century hymns (Blakey 2007: 17-23). One hymn relates a story from Matthew 9 about a bleeding woman healed by Jesus' garment, while the second speaks of Jesus' blood washing clean and making whole. The two themes of a garment healing bleeding, and blood healing, are incorporated. The tune is not that of either hymn, so traces of multiple earlier songs are present, and the



titular line also appears in *Church I'm Fully Saved Today*, linking songs and further complicating allusions.

A moment occurs in *Jesus Coming Soon* which hints at the multiplicity of voices and intentions: a line runs "Read the book of Zechariah, Bible plainly says," but where the lyric suggests transparent interpretation, Johnson veers away from the word "say," destabilising the meaning of "plainly says" by not saying plainly. Charters (1993: 16) adds to the irony, quoting the lyric as "Read the book of Zacharias, Bible plainly says," despite the absence of any such book in the Bible.

TRANSITIONS

These multiple voices are effective not just in their plurality, but in their foregrounding of transitions between and within voices, between paradises, binding together multilevelled meanings both lyrically and sonically. Journeys highlight transition, with songs featuring a journey "to that land where I'm bound" which is "almost over" (1993: 23); a protagonist running toward justice (1993: 7); crossing of the Atlantic (1993: 20); crossing of rivers (1993: 19); walking by the saviour's side (1993: 28); and being "on the King's Highway...travelling every day" (1993: 9). Crossing water may connote reaching a physical holy land, crossing over to death, transcending sin in baptism, escaping north guided by directions hidden in spirituals, the middle passage tribulation expressed in the "racial memory" (Baraka 1963: 183) of music, and/or a return home to the paradise of Africa (Dubois 1994: 161). Seas and oceans, and the presence of God in them, are mentioned in songs which have no other clear connection to water (1993: 8,12,14), and this network of connotations can clearly account for God's wrath in sinking the Titanic as it crossed the Atlantic.

Another transition is a play on words in *Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed*, where the cross of Jesus is linked to the crossing of the Jordan. This makes scriptural sense, in that crucifixion was a crossing of the boundary of death to heaven, bringing about the kingdom of God through resurrection. "Crossing," then, deploys two meanings and reflexively implies a third, commenting on a crossing between meanings.

The characteristic melisma of African American music (DeSalvo 2006: 26) are present in Johnson's recordings, structurally indexing transitions, between fixed notes and harmonies, wordless syllables and guitar notes, defying reduction to textual or notated renderings. Musical transitions can be heard in many songs, where heavy offbeats are marked with dampened chords, while delicate picked slide notes join strophes in melodic arcs and bridges.

Transitions pointedly highlight not only particular paradises, apocalyptic events and tribulations, but also their interchangeability. The effect is destabilising, since connotations are so often and so variously juxtaposed and conflated that final interpretation is no longer tenable, while the force of signification is multiplied.



FINALISING MEANING

Some interpretations of Johnson's recordings seek to extract and inscribe a single "correct" meaning of Johnson's recordings and by extension, black music and religion. In doing so they miss or actively silence the multivalent paradises, voices and transitions I have suggested. Michel de Certeau describes this kind of movement to categorisation, in a study on glossolalia:

Political, scholarly, and religious discourses, for example, all progressively close themselves off to that which emerges where voice ruptures or interrupts a series of propositions, to that which is born where the other is present. A fragility disappears from discourse. With the erasure of occasional stammers, hesitations, and vocal tics, or lapses and drifting sounds, the interlocutor is removed to a distance, transformed into audience. (1996: 30).

This fragility, recorded in sound, cannot be erased and so interpretation is forcibly inserted into transcriptions of noises, obsessive because futile. Writers transcribe lyrics as exclusive determinants of meaning in a descriptive project that offers a textual map in place of a sonic territory, a particularly quixotic project considering Johnson's (perhaps deliberately) unclear pronunciation and the multitude of voices employed. Like the glossolalia described by Certeau, each polyvocal recording "sets a trap for interpretation and drives it to delirium" (Certeau 1996: 36). Blakey (2007: 35) for example, founders in attempting an impossible fidelity to a sound recording and explicable English: "I have a mble? [sic] of my own."

Blakey (2007: iv) is "confident of accuracy in over 95% of cases": but where finality is claimed, interpretations do not always agree. And if description is the ostensible goal, few can resist adding parentheses, betraying the anxieties of determination, writers stepping in to explain what the singer really meant:

"Great Titanic still not berthed
People (had to) run and pray" (Charters 1993: 23);

"Samson wasn't (sounds like "was" but "wasn't" makes more sense) the first man
the lion attached (meaning attacked)" (Blakey 2007: 63).

Any intertextual references (beyond glib assumptions of an uncomplicated evangelism) are made only in attempts to determine exact lyrical transcription, rather than in exploration of social context. Haymes (2004) details each previous "source (on record at least)," hinting at recognition of the limitations of relying solely upon catalogued recorded objects for even a genealogy of song influences, let alone an understanding of social meaning or use. While recordings are fascinating and valuable sources, the tendency to ignore other possibilities (even if unknowable) limits the scope of interpretation. For instance, despite the subject of *If I Had My Way* being a tortured and blinded man who wreaks vengeance against his abusers by destroying



their temple, despite Johnson narrowly avoiding arrest for singing the song outside the New Orleans custom house (a temple of slavery economics?) (Charters 1993: 13-14), and despite the oft-sung spiritual “plac[ing] the singer and audience in Sampson’s first-person subject position, making his threatened vengeance theirs” (Gussow 2002: 189), no writing on Johnson suggests any motivation beyond straightforward biblical narration. Johnson deserves at least to be afforded the possibility of political awareness and agency.

Blakey (2007: 300) insists that Johnson “stuck to his arrangements quite rigidly” though the two versions of *You’re Gonna Need Somebody On Your Bond* are quite different (Johnson 1993: 15,30). African-derived music often values versions or treatments of familiar material (Gates 1988: xxii, Rose 1994: 66), making Blakey’s claim appear more ideological than historical. The length of Johnson’s recordings, all between three and three and a half minutes, are determined by the capacity of a ten-inch 78rpm record, the convention of the three-minute song arising from this technological limitation rather than being some universally appropriate duration: Johnson certainly adapts well to these constraints, but there is no reason to suggest that he would have adopted those limits while singing in the street. Blakey, though, posits fixed versions in order to assert the primacy of the ultimately fixed version, the recording, and by extension his own project of transcribing those versions as final ones.

Descriptions of songs are often accompanied by dramatisations of the recording sessions, understandable given the surfeit of data on Johnson’s life. Sarah Thornton (1996: 4), amongst others, notes a shift in values from the primacy of live performance to the primacy of the recording, after which performances are judged by their fidelity as reproductions of the recorded version. Wim Wenders illustrates the ideological implications of exactly this movement in presenting an actor miming to Johnson’s songs, complete with effects added to falsely age the monochrome footage (Wenders 2003). These scenes show the effect of the reversal of values, where an image of an artist-individual is reconstructed from a recording, rather than an attempt made to situate the recordings in historical and social context. Speculation in these reconstructions may deny social awareness or political agency, as Gussow (2002: 161) notes in suggesting an “insurrectionary” hearing of Mamie Smith’s *Crazy Blues*, the first widely distributed recording of an African American. Recordings afforded a space where vocalization itself could be more important than content, akin to a “space where the possibility of speaking is deployed for itself” (Certeau 1996: 30), a possibility of repeatedly and loudly singing, warning, comforting and prophesying, deployed for itself and for anyone within earshot of a phonograph.

Exclusive focus on recordings mutes any political agency and reduces a person to shellac objects. Laurence Fishburne in Wenders’ film introduces himself “I’m Blind Willie Johnson,” an avatar derived from recordings rather than a representation of a person unlikely to have referred to himself as “Blind Willie” (Rowden 2009: 39). Haymes too (2004, 2011), searches for meaning exclusively in recordings- few textual references are elucidated, vocal styles are considered as if one record influenced



another, rather than styles passing between singers. Denying alternative possibilities attempts to rescue these projects from the futility of locating final meaning in one contingent recorded version of a song, in which any political statement would have been carefully disguised: “[B]lues men and women would have to be very naïve to couch the blues in white categories of protest. Moreover, if they did, they would not likely sing them in recording studios!” (Cone 1972: 133). Of course, anyone must approach these and other recordings as texts from which other versions are extrapolated, but the uncertainties of the past must be acknowledged to avoid silencing voices of dissent or protest. Any dissatisfaction is also removed from biographical speculation. Blakey (2007: 4) “feel[s] certain that, with parents who loved him, young Willie, who had his full sight then, would have enjoyed some happy times,” combining fantasies of simple happiness with an implicit assumption that sight alone offers access to happiness. Wenders (2003) has his narrator claim that Johnson “didn’t care none about [his] career” nor the small sum of money he was paid by Columbia for recording some of their best-selling releases.

Portraying Johnson as strictly religious also advances an ideology of final determination while supporting an author’s claim to have achieved that goal. Johnson is described as playing “only Christian religious music” (Wald 2010: 32), recording “exclusively religious” songs (Rowden 2009: 75), and it is claimed that he “only cared about God, and spiritual matters” (Wenders 2003). This despite the “Blind Texas Marlin” takes suggesting a secular side, and despite two songs (*When the War Was On* and *Motherless Children*) containing no discernable religious content (besides lines ending in “Lord,” commonplace for secular contemporaries (see for example Jefferson 1967)). But Blakey (2007: 45) claims that *Motherless Children* contains “a definite religious line” in “Nobody on earth treat you like mother will,” anxious to show religiosity in Johnson’s song, work and life, and thus prove the univocality of Johnson’s motivations and the accuracy of his own descriptions.

Dark Was the Night, Cold was the Ground often draws out contradictions in interpretations. As Charters (1975: 165) notes, wordless chants were hardly uncommon, but in describing the song as “otherworldly” (Bush, Gordon) or saying that Johnson’s voice came from “a place unknown” (Ford and Obek 2011: 157), the song is removed from context by its supposed uniqueness. These sounds did not come from nowhere, and to suggest that they do silences a political voice. While such descriptions might appear to restore indeterminacy and difference, in fact the recording becomes a fenced-off area in which difference is contained. This quarantine extends to the recording being physically expelled from the solar system, on the Voyager spacecraft (Gordon).

Johnson’s economic motivations are ignored. Singing was his only means of income, and so songs referring to being away from home, to motherlessness, to blindness or sight, to charity and judgement, could all have been designed to elicit donations from strangers and church-goers through pity and guilt. If songs about seeing Jesus, sung by a blind singer “took on an even more heightened sense of eschatology and transcendence than when it was sung by the sighted” (Rowden 2009:



74), they could be combined with a cultivated sense of identification (regular mentions of race, family, congregations and common trials and difficulties), integrating earning potential with a subtle activism. Confining Johnson to a strict religiosity limits him to merely calling for a post-death heaven, rather than for multivalent social, political and religious paradises, ignoring the political, social and economic contexts from which Johnson spoke.

In addition to the specifically African American practices of signifying as identified by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Johnson's multiple voices are reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about heteroglossia in the novels of Dostoevsky, where many voices express differing worldviews and, crucially, are "combined [...] into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness" (1973:4). Bakhtin contrasts this irreducibility with monovocality, in which "only a pedagogical dialog is possible" and each apparently separate voice only speaks in supporting an already finalised meaning dictated by the author (1973:66, 75). While Bakhtin does not elaborate extensively on the political implications of this distinction, it is clear that a deliberate use of many voices simultaneously, might undermine "the ultimate semantic authority, and consequently the ultimate stylistic authority as well [which] is contained in the direct speech of the author" (1973:155). Johnson's records then, in their polyvocality, challenge the authority of univocality itself, while challenging the particular authoritative voice of white culture, even while the messages are mediated and distributed using white-owned and managed methods of technological inscription.

CONCLUSION

In suggesting alternative interpretations, I do not aim to wrest the laurels of true meaning from other writers, but rather to undermine attempts at final determination and restore a plurality to listening. This hopefully reintroduces whispers of political protest, not reducible to nor dependent upon any particular hidden meanings or fragile ciphers, instead resonating in transitions between texts and sounds, in slides between notes, between Bible verses and contemporary recordings, between news stories and Old Testament prophets, between salvation, death, the Promised Land and political justice, demanding space for elusive and shifting differences, moving from suffering to salvation, oppression to freedom, from scriptural to personal to political paradise in a radical utopian indeterminacy. James Cone (1972: 95) writes that "the image of heaven served functionally to liberate the black mind from the existing values of white society, enabling black slaves to think their own thoughts and do their own things." Music, and Blind Willie Johnson's recordings, even for three minutes, offer a utopian space not in regressive escapism or complacent submission, but in an apocalyptic heteroglossia, a paradise of simultaneously resounding and irreducible truths.



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