"Accordin' to the Gospel of Etymology": Burlesque Sermons on Early Commercial Sound Recordings

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ABSTRACT

Among the most highly esteemed verbal artists in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American society were preachers, some of whom attained a remarkable degree of celebrity. As Bakhtin has reminded us, however, ritual forms like the sermon are prime targets for carnivalesque rekeying. Sermon parodies were abundant in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American popular culture from the Jacksonian period onward. As the producers of early commercial sound recordings in the United States (ca. mid-1890s–1920) sought to build their market with expressive forms that would be attractive to consumers, they included sermon parodies in their catalogs. The most common sermon parodies in the early commercial record catalogs had a special edge. They were burlesque performances, drawn from the minstrel-show tradition, in which performers in blackface animated popular stereotypes of the traditional African-American preacher. In this essay, I examine a sampling of these parodies of the African-American oral sermon to suggest what we can learn from them about the popular entertainments of the day, the emergent culture of commercial sound recording, and the racial politics of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

Michael Silverstein and I took the pragmatic-poetic turn together many years ago, both guided in our approach to language by the signs posted by Roman Jakobson, and we have been fellow travelers along that wind-

ing path ever since. Whatever I may be working on at any given moment, I can be confident that it will resonate with Michael's own concerns in some way that will help me carry my thoughts further down the road in a productive direction. I am pleased, then, to have this opportunity to continue our dialogue with this exploration into poetics, intertextuality, language ideology, mediatization—and puns. I know that Michael shares his mentor's delight in speech play, so I have every reason to hope that he will enjoy the paronomastic performances that follow.

I begin with a gesture to Michael's growing body of "winolinguistic" work on *oinoglossia*, wine talk (Silverstein 2003, 2004, 2006, 2013, 2016). One of Michael's concerns in this corpus of essays is to trace the emanation outward of wine talk from wine into other discursive domains, including the tracing of playfully reflexive interdiscursive references to the oinoglossic register. An early and interesting case in point that bears on the subject of this essay occurs in an 1877 article from the *New York Times* titled "The Phonograph." This article was part of the wave of journalistic speculation that followed on the heels of Edison's public announcement of his new technological marvel that could capture and fix the ephemerality of the human voice. What might be the affordances of this talking machine? How might it affect social life? What would be worthy of recording?

The author begins by comparing the more familiar technology of the telephone to the newly invented phonograph: "The former transmitted sound. The latter bottles it up for future use." And the first acoustic form he suggests as worth bottling up is the sermon. "With the aid of the phonograph . . . sermons can be stored away in the cellar, to be brought out years hence with their tones unimpaired by age." The sermon was an elevated speech form, a vehicle for the display of virtuosity as well as virtue and thus clearly worthy of storing up for future consumption. Borrowing the cultural capital that accrues to fine wine, the author suggests further that "whether a man has or has not a wine cellar, he will certainly, if he wishes to be regarded as a man of taste, have a well-stocked oratorical cellar," the contents of which may be classified in oinological terms: "dry," "sparkling," "effervescing," "sweet," and branded according to its sermonological terroir, such as "'Dr. Tyng,' 'Dr. Crosby,' or some other popular ministerial brand." Ultimately, "the connoisseur of orators will become in time as great a bore as the connoisseur of wines."[1]

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1. "The Phonograph," *New York Times*, November 4, 1877.

The playful prophecy of the newspaperman regarding the commoditization of bottled sermon performances proved to be remarkably prescient. Two decades after he published his speculations, as the commercial record companies vied with each other in building their catalogs, their aim was indeed to establish their brands as the frame of reference for the consumer market they were struggling to create. When it came to the place of sermons within those developing catalogs, however, celebrity preachers occupied a limited place. Here too, though, the early commentator proved prescient. The playful and irreverent tone of his speculations about the declining need for living preachers in organized religion anticipated the conspicuous irreverence of the recorded sermons offered to consumers in which parody was far more prevalent than piety.

The most common sermon parodies in the early commercial record catalogs had a special edge. They were burlesque performances, drawn from the minstrel-show tradition, in which performers in blackface animated popular stereotypes of the traditional African-American preacher. In this essay, I examine a sampling of these parodies of the African-American oral sermon to suggest what we can learn from them about the popular entertainments of the day, the emergent culture of commercial sound recording, and the racial politics of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

The African-American sermon and the preaching that gave it expression were manifestly complex ideological signs in the politics of race in early twentieth-century American culture. These expressive forms and practices were bound up in the construction of and contestation over the place of black people in American life, past, present, and future. For African Americans, what was at issue were the debilitating and degrading stereotypes that encoded purported traits that marked them as inferior, ignorant, incapable of cultural, or economic, or intellectual achievement. The stereotypes were largely white constructions, but they exerted enormous hegemonic force over whites and blacks alike.

Early Twentieth-Century Representations of African-American Sermons
One of the most resonant and provocative contributions to the effort on the part of the African-American intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s to grapple with the place of vernacular preaching in the history of their people and to imagine where it might fit within their emergent visions and programs for the future is is a slim volume of poetry called *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, published in 1927 by James Weldon Johnson ([1927] 1976). "God's trombone" was Johnson's evocative term for the voice of the African American preacher, "the instrument," he wrote," possessing

above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice" (5). Johnson's motivation for writing *God's Trombones* was rooted in the Romantic ideology of many intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance that the literary and artistic creations of a people represented a powerful—for Johnson, the most powerful—basis for establishing the greatness of their culture and sustaining a claim to respect from others. Johnson argued, for example, that "No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior" (1931, 9).

For African Americans, as we know all too well, the burden of being looked down upon was especially severe, so a claim to being the creators of great literature and art required a strenuous effort to overcome prejudice and negative stereotypes. In the trenchant words of Alain Locke, one of the leading intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, it was incumbent upon participants in the movement to "discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid" ([1925] 1992, 264).

Johnson was clearly committed to that task of discovery and revelation. In his view, "The old-time Negro preacher has not yet been given the niche in which he properly belongs," as a powerful contributor to the verbal arts of African American people. "He has been portrayed only as a semi-comic figure." ([1927] 1976, 2). Johnson recognized in the "old-time Negro preacher" an orator who understood that oratory "is a progression of rhythmic words more than it is anything else. . . . He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was often swept away. At such times his language was not prose but poetry. It was from memories of such preachers there grew the idea of this book of poems" (3–4). It is worth noting that Johnson consistently refers to the preachers who inspired *God's Trombones* as "old-time." At the end of his preface, he observes explicitly that "the old-time Negro preacher is rapidly passing" (8). That is to say, in Johnson's view, the kind of preaching he finds so rich in poetry was, by the late '20s, something of an anachronism but a useful resource for modern artistic adaptation.

In writing his poems, Johnson had to struggle not only with the stereotype of the preacher as a comic figure, but with issues of dialect, because of "the fixing effects of its long association with the Negro only as a happy-go-lucky or a forlorn figure" (Johnson [1927] 1976, 5). Dialect, that is to say, was a vehicle of trivialization or tragedy. In other words, Johnson was deeply concerned, in writing *God's Trombones*, to provide a critical corrective for strongly established negative stereotypes of the black preacher and caricatures of his language. In the long run, Johnson was successful: his book has been a precious and vital re-

source for subsequent writers and scholars who have come to recognize the poetic power of black preaching, from Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) on down.

Much less clearly known, however, with regard to the language of black preaching, is the base of stereotype and caricature against which Johnson addressed his book. There is some interesting work on burlesque sermons in antebellum minstrelsy (e.g., Holmberg and Schneider 1986; Mahar 1999, 59–86), but none on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century published texts—from the period more immediately antecedent to Johnson's work—which are found mostly in resource books for white amateurs who wished to put on a minstrel show (e.g., Marble 1893; Dumont 1899; Simond 1974). Those texts are indeed replete with crude and stereotypical representations of dialect, but they are of next to no use as sources of insight into how African American performance style was actualized on the minstrel stage. Given Johnson's insistence on the figure he persistently called the "old-time Negro preacher" as an oral poet, whose great artistic achievement was realized in the living context of the religious service, it would be useful to have a corpus of materials that sheds light on how the black preacher was caricatured in performance. Unfortunately, we don't have recordings of full-blown minstrel shows. What gets us closest to enacted representations of the comic preacher is a body of commercial sound recordings from the first two decades of the twentieth century featuring parodic sermons drawn from the blackface tradition. The recordings, of course, rely only on sound, without the visual component of actual blackface; they are a sort of "aural blackface" (Strausbaugh 2006, 225). I will suggest in the body of this article how blackness is conveyed in these recorded performances. There are some interesting and surprising things to be learned from those recordings, and in the remainder of my essay, I propose to offer a preliminary exploration of what they reveal about stereotypes of black preaching.

Before taking up the mock African-American sermons that are my main subject, though, let me establish two points of background. First, the burlesque sermon as a genre has a very long history in Euro-American tradition. The *sermon joyeux*, in which a lay performer delivered a mock sermon in full homiletic style on a decidedly earthy topic, was a well-established genre of the medieval carnivalesque (Gilman 1974; Jones 1997). A 1712 statute of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, outlawing the "composing, writing, printing or publishing of any filthy, obscene, or profane song, pamphlet, libel or mock sermon, in imitation or in mimicking of preaching, or any other part of divine worship," testifies to the continuation of the tradition on this side of the Atlantic and points up the gen-

erally anti-authoritative power of parody and burlesque irrespective of race (*Charters and General Laws* 1814, 399).

Moreover, the figure of the preacher, the embodiment and agent of religious authority, has always been an apt target for deflation when he slips from his pedestal. From the vantage point of verbal performance, the preacher is expected to be fluent in delivery and coherent in message, so any frame-breaking display of verbal incompetence is a ready resource for humor. There is an early recording by Cal Stewart, reporting on a revival meeting in Pumpkin Center, the fictional, rural New England town that served as the setting for an extensive series of widely popular recordings that Stewart, one of the classic avatars of American "rube" humor, made in his performance persona of Uncle Josh Weathersby.[2] One episode of Stewart's account recounts the effort of the Reverend Obadiah White to preach a sermon, taking as his text the well-known opening line from a poem by the great Irish poet Thomas Moore, "This World Is All a Fleeting Show" ([1816] 1869, 147–48):[3]

> Well, the Reverend Obadiah White was a'preachin' to us,
> and he went to say,
> "This world is but a fleeting show."
> And he said, "'This world is but a flowing sheet.'
> I should've said, 'This world is but a shoating flea.'
> I mean, dear brothers and sisters,
> 'This world is but a fleeing shoat.'"
> [Laughs]
> Well, the choir had to sing four times
> before they could get order,
> an' I just had to snicker right out.
> [Laughs]

What happens, however, is that the hapless preacher commits a series of enunciative misfires that subvert the moral import of his text. Attempting to

2. Cal Stewart, "A Revival Meeting in Pumpkin Center," audio cylinder recording, U. S. Everlasting Indestructible Cylinder 1349, released 1909–13.

3. In the transcriptions that follow, I have had two principal concerns in mind: (1) I intend the transcripts to convey that they are representations of spoken language. The chief means I have employed to this end is nonstandard spelling to capture features of pronunciation. One of the recurrent problems in transcribing oral speech, especially oral speech in nonstandard, vernacular dialects, is the danger of making the speakers appear to be uneducated, unsophisticated, and of low status. I should make explicit, then, what will be even more obvious in the pages that follow, that those stereotypes are precisely what the *performers* are trying to convey, and if my transcriptions evoke them yet again, so much the better. (2) I have endeavored to represent by graphological means some of the significant formal patterning principles that organize the performances. Line breaks mark breath units, intonational units, and/or syntactic structures, which are usually—though not always—mutually aligned.

say "This world is but a fleeting show," he first produces "flowing sheet," then "shoating flea," and finally "fleeing shoat," with each subsequent metathesis representing a failed effort at repair (as in "I should have said," "I mean") of the preceding one. The result of this cumulative series of Spoonerisms is uncontrolled, carnivalesque laughter, a breakdown of the reverent tone of the sermon, and a state of general disorder. In Stewart's recorded performance, then, the reported sermon serves entirely as a vehicle for a bit of entertaining speech play, stemming from a momentary breakdown. The performance is not a sustained assault on sermons or preachers in general.

Also by way of background, I want to offer to the reader a baseline against which to hear the burlesque sermons. The first recordings we have of African American sermons date from the mid-1920s, as the commercial producers of so-called race records—recordings by black performers, oriented to the emerging market of African American consumers—realized that there would be a sizable audience for virtuoso religious performers. A sermon by the Reverend A. W. Nix, "Black Diamond Express to Hell," recorded in Chicago in 1927, provides a useful frame of reference. I select this example in part because James Weldon Johnson cites a version of this sermon that he heard in Harlem shortly before the publication of *God's Trombones* ([1927] 1976, 2).[4]

George Graham, "Colored Funeral"

The first example of a burlesque sermon I will consider is titled "Colored Funeral," recorded October 9, 1901 (Victor 1862)—pretty early in the development of commercial sound recording—by George Graham.[5] Graham himself is a fascinating character. Until very recently, the standard account of Graham's career consisted of a brief recollection by Fred Gaisberg, a pioneer of the recording industry, that he had discovered Graham on a Washington, DC, street corner, working as a pitchman for a liver cure, accompanied by a singer and banjo player to draw the crowds—essentially a small-scale medicine show (Moore 1999, 17–18). Graham was certainly adept at the pitchman's art, as attested by his recordings of spiels for baking powder, liniment, a corn cure, and a carnival side show—all displays of verbal virtuosity—but he apparently commanded a much broader range of performance skills. He was known around the capital as a blackface comedian, and his recordings also included various

4. The recording may be accessed online at https://youtu.be/FW2RB82L23k.
5. The recording may be accessed online. See *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, s.v. "Victor matrix [Pre-matrix B-]1862. The colored funeral / George Graham," accessed December 4, 2017, http://victor .library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/2000001318/Pre-matrix_B-1862-The_colored_funeral.

forms of oratory (both serious and parodic), comic narrative, Irish and German dialect humor, humorous sketches of various kinds, and other forms drawn from the contemporary repertoire of popular entertainments (Feaster 2007, 493–501). Here is a transcript of the recording:

Announcement
Imitation of an old time colored preacher down South,
buryin' one of de brothers,
by George Graham.

Sermon
Now, my dear beloved brothers and sisters,
I want to say one thing dis mawnin',   5
dat in de midst of life,
we are in death.
Yes, and dat fact is forcibly brought to our minds
every day.
Every day you can see it on every hand.   10
You can see it in de mountains
and in de valleys.
A:::h, my dear beloved brothers and sisters,
prepare for dat mighty time t'come.
I want you a:::ll to prepare   15
for dat mighty time t'come.
Now, I am gathered here dis mawnin'
to perform a sad and painful duty.
One of our dear beloved brothers,
by de name of Flatback Jackson,   20
am no mo'.
He am done passed over dat dark river
from which no traveler ever is known to return.
And if dey did return,
dey ain't said nuttin' about it.   25
He was a man dat stood well in society.
He was a member of several lodges.
He was a member in good standing
of Obadiah Lodge number 16-QIXP of XW.
He was also a member of the Chal-deans,   30
de Mis-Carriers Half-Moon Pilgrims,

and de Independent Order of Hen-Roost Disturbers.
De body will be brou:ght here dis mawnin',
an' placed on de left side de church.
Den de congregation, ah,   35
will gadder on de right side de church.
Den de congregation, ah,
will move around from de right side de church
to de left side de church,
and take one last lingering look at de remains   40
while Sister Penny will play dat beautiful hymn,
"All Coons Look Alike t' Me."
Now, a great many people might inquire
what did 'e die of?
Dere's been a great deal o' discussion in dis community   45
about how did 'e die.
I am pleased to state, my brothers an' sisters,
dat 'e died in a glorious manner.
He was shot in de back last Thursday mawnin'
at fo' 'clock g.m.,   50
as 'e was gwine over Miz Grady's back yard fence
wit' six chickens and one duck.

The title "Colored Funeral," together with the spoken announcement at the beginning of the recording, orients us to the performance we are about to hear. The announcement "Imitation of an old time colored preacher down South buryin' one of de brothers, by George Graham" offers interesting contextualizing information. "Old time" suggests that the preaching style will be anchored in the past, old-fashioned, somewhat anachronistic. Recall that James Weldon Johnson consistently used the same adjective to describe the preachers that inspired *God's Trombones*. "Colored" identifies the style as African American; taken together with "imitation," it evokes blackface minstrel, vaudeville, and medicine show performances. "Imitation" as a frame suggests iconicity but without the felicity conditions that would confer upon Graham's representation the full performative efficacy of a real sermon. And, finally, "down South" gives the performance a regional grounding: the South as primarily rural, largely backward, the symbolic heartland of traditionalized black culture. So, with this richness of contextualization cues, how does the recorded performance actually sound?

The sermon starts off in a notably conventional key, building upon recognizable components of the sermon genre. It opens with a formulaic salutation to the congregation, "my dear beloved brothers and sisters," echoing scriptural models (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:58; James 1:19; Phil. 4:1; etc.) and characteristic of American Baptist and Methodist sermons of the period. The parson then proceeds with a metadiscursive introduction to his spiritual "text," declaring his intention to broach the authoritative framing text of the service to come, and then goes on to cite the text itself: "I want to say one thing dis mawnin', dat in de midst of life, we are in death." Reflexive phrases like "I want to say" are among the most common formulaic elements in African American preaching (Rosenberg 1988, 79). This "text," thematically appropriate to a funeral sermon, is drawn from the Burial of the Dead section of the Book of Common Prayer, used not only by Episcopalians but also by Methodists.

Having set out his text, the preacher goes on to apply it to the life circumstances of his congregation, again a conventional step in the development of a homiletic sermon. He couches his delivery in an appropriately churchly register, including a nicely parallel construction with scriptural resonances: "You can see it in de mountains and in de valleys" (cf. Josh. 12:8). Then another formulaic salutation, followed by an exhortation to the congregation to "prepare for dat mighty time t'come," perhaps the life crisis point of their own deaths, perhaps Judgment Day. Either way, the preacher is pretty much on track, and it sounds right—couched in the scriptural register of the prophets, who are always going on about some day or other to come (e.g., Isa. 42:23; Ezek. 7:7, 12; etc.). The appropriate thematic focus for the sermon established, the preacher arrives, beginning in line 18, at the specific business at hand: memorializing one of their members, newly deceased.

At this point, I'd like to pause and take stock. What I have identified thus far is a series of functional and thematic aspects of the recorded performance that are conventions of the funeral sermon as a genre. It is all conspicuously condensed, subject to the time constraints of the phonograph recording, but the proper slots are appropriately filled. We might ask, then, what it is about the text that marks it as African American? What about dialect? In point of fact, there's less there than one might expect. In terms of phonology, there's some /d/ for /ð/ substitution, as in "dis" and 'dat" for "this" and "that," and deletion of postvocalic /r/ and dropped /g/ in /[mɔnɪn]/. That's about it. These are features of African American nonstandard but far from distinctive of that dialect alone (Green 2002, 117–19). As for grammar, it is entirely standard, at least up to line 21, where "am" for the third-person singular form of "be" kicks in. Note that

in line 8, Graham uses the standard "is." What seems to be happening, then, is that the use of "am" in lines 21–22, coupled with the broad "no mo'" and with the aspectual marker "done," in "am done," is meant to signal a code shift, a kind of downward breakthrough of the "old time," "down South," African American dialect. "Am" for the third-person singular was perhaps the most conspicuous grammatical marker of minstrel dialect, though there appear to be questions about how current it was in actual speech (Green 2002, 177, 203). "Am done," for its part, does not occur in Black English Vernacular. These forms are conspicuous enough, I would suggest, to change the key of the sermon. The rekeying effect of the dialect downshift is redoubled by the comic name of the deceased, Flatback Jackson, heard for the first time at this point. Flatback, of course, is a ridiculous name, suggesting laziness, out-of-it prostration, and mirroring the supine state of the deceased. The vowel harmony and rhyming of /flætbæk/ and /dʒæk/ adds a further flavor of speech play to the name of the deceased. The low, comical name works in tandem with the dialect shift in effecting the rekeying. This is the point at which the performance turns into burlesque.

Nevertheless, what makes this most strongly an imitation of an African American sermon lies elsewhere. Anyone who listens to the recording will be struck most strongly by the poetic organization and style of delivery of the text, the most conspicuous features of the performance and its most distinctively African American elements. Inspection of that portion of the performance we have examined reveals it to be segmented into four verses, defined by the initial particles "Now," "Yes," "Ah," and "Now" again. Each of the verses is further defined by falling intonation at the end, sentence completion, topical completion, and—for the third verse—finalization of a parallel construction. The space between verses is further marked by relatively longer breath pauses than those found elsewhere in the text. The individual verses are made up of four or five lines, defined by breath pauses and syntactic structures (phrases or clauses). The cadenced intonational structure of the sermon is especially foregrounded. In general, the tonal range of each line and the text as a whole is very narrow, making for a largely monotonic chant, but with occasional accentuated line-internal jumps of a major third and a falling tone in sentence- and verse-final position. The raised tones give the impression of moving from the prevailing chant toward song. A clear example occurs in lines 13–16:

> A:::h, my dear beloved brothers and sisters,
> prepare for dat mighty time

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        \_ t'come.
     _/ a:::ll
I want you        to prepare        15
for dat mighty time
         \_ t'come.
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The poetic and prosodic features I have just identified—all consistent, I might say, with Johnson's own—are core elements of what has been identified by practitioners and scholars as the "heightened" or "elevated" style in African American ritual discourse.[6] The measured, cadenced phrasing, with frequent use of grammatical parallelism and grouping into verses, and the narrowed tonal range, tending toward monotonic chanting, are especially prominent. To look ahead a bit in the transcript, the line-final exhalation, "ah!" in lines 35–37 is also a characterizing feature of the elevated style. Taken together, these features are indices in ritual discourse of spiritual inspiration and divine empowerment (Hinson 2000, 70). As Glenn Hinson describes this indexical relationship, it "finds its most telling confirmation in sermons, where the . . . heightened style often emerges after the point of 'elevation,' when preachers are said to start receiving ideas and words from on high" (71). Some interpreters identify the elevated style as a form of spirit possession, in which the preacher simply animates a message authored by the Holy Spirit. Others, however, view the words delivered in the elevated style as originating with the preacher, but with their affecting power and heightened capacity to move the hearer supercharged by divine agency (281).

To be sure, there is no suggestion that George Graham is in a state of spiritual elevation in delivering his funeral sermon. The imitation frame requires only the replication of generic and stylistic patterns that, under the appropriate felicity conditions, would index spiritual elevation on the part of the speaker being imitated. The rekeying effects of the "am no mo'" dialect shift and the identification of the comically named Flatback Jackson, I would suggest, call strongly into question whether the old-time African American preacher Graham is animating is in a state of elevation himself. Graham intends them to be debasing, rather than elevating. Here, again, is the core of the burlesque effect.

From this point to the end of the recording, the frame oscillates between morally serious and debased. The elevated style, interestingly, continues throughout,

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6. There is an extensive literature on the African American oral sermon. I have used the following works: Johnson ([1927] 1976); Pipes ([1951] 1992); Mitchell (1970); Gumperz (1982, 187–96); Oliver (1984, 153–55); Davis (1985); Rosenberg (1988); Pitts (1989); Raboteau (1995); Hinson (2000); LaRue (2000); Wharry (2003).

sustained by the chanting intonation, grammatical parallelism, and the voiced exhalations at the end of lines 35 and 37. The verse immediately following the "am no mo" dialect shift maintains the nonstandard/standard grammatical contrast, but after that, the grammar is all standard. The burlesque effect in the remainder of the recording depends upon thematic contrasts: the eulogy of the deceased as standing well in society reveals him to be a member of four ridiculously named fraternal lodges, including one that exploits the racist minstrel trope of African American men as chicken thieves; the viewing of the deceased culminates in the playing of the popular "coon song," "All Coons Look Alike to Me"; the "glorious manner" of Mr. Jackson's death is shockingly revealed to have been a shot in the back in the act of stealing "six chickens and one duck," playing again on the poultry thief stereotype; and so on. The recording ends abruptly, without the closure appropriate to the sermon genre, either in its straightforward guise (perhaps a call upon the congregation to sing a hymn) or its burlesque minstrel guise (e.g., the taking of a collection). Graham reached the tight time limits of the recording before he reached the generic limits of the sermon. So, with the account of Flatback Jackson being killed by a shot in the back, "Colored Funeral" comes to a close.

What does this recorded performance convey to the listener? I want to defer drawing any significant conclusions until we have had a chance to hear additional examples, but I do want to mark a couple of points in a preliminary way. First, there can be no question that "Colored Funeral" is heavily racist. It promulgates the stereotype of African Americans as chicken thieves, and it seeks humor in the extreme violence of shooting a black person in the back. Moreover, it portrays the preacher as unable to sustain a high discursive tone in his sermon, breaking down at times into broad, nonstandard dialect. Nevertheless, I would suggest that Graham recognized, just as Johnson did, that the language of the "old-time" African American preacher "was not prose but poetry," a virtuosic achievement. I'll come back to these matters in the conclusion of the article.

Peerless Quartet, "New Parson at Darktown Church"

The representation that I want to consider next is titled "New Parson at Darktown Church," recorded February 14, 1908, by the Peerless Quartet (Victor 5402 Mx. B5081).[7] "Darktown," of course, was widespread in the popular cul-

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7. The recording may be accessed online at https://ia600402.us.archive.org/26/items/PeerlessQuartetwithFrank Stanley/PeerlessQuartetwithFrankStanley-TheNewParsonattheDarktownChurchMinstrelrecording.mp3.

ture of the day as a racist term for African American neighborhoods and as a context for racist depictions of African American community life. The Peerless Quartet, known primarily as a singing group, underwent many changes of personnel over its life course but enjoyed enormous popular success throughout the acoustic era, that is, through the late 1920s (Gracyk 2000, 267–72).

The Peerless Quartet had a broad repertoire of popular songs and employed a number of presentational formats in their recordings. One of the formats they used relatively often was the dramatic representation of African-American ceremonial events—weddings, church services, lodge meetings—as a frame for the performance of purportedly black songs, some genuinely so, others drawn from the minstrel stage. "New Parson at Darktown Church" employs this format, with the church service providing two slots for songs, one at the opening of the service, the other at the close. The sketch is in two principal parts. In the first, the departing parson opens the service, announces the first song for the congregation, and then introduces the new parson, Brother Luther Wilberforce. Brother Wilberforce then takes over, and the remainder of the service consists of his sermon and the closing hymn:

> *Departing Parson*
> While the collection am being took,
> the congregation will rise and sing "In the Sweet By and By."
> Now, as your parson has recovered from the affliction of
>   brown-chitis,
> it am not necessary to put any more cough drops in the contribu-
>   tion box.
>
> *Choir*
> [Sings "In the Sweet By and By"]   5
>
> *Parson*
> Brethren and Sistren,
> Dis am de last time I shall be with you as your parson.
> I am goin' to prepare a place for you
> dat where I am,
> dere may you be also.   10
> I have been appointed chaplain of the colored wing
> of the Tennessee State Prison.
> I now introduces your new parson,
> Brother Luther Wilberforce of Memphis.

Brother Luther Wilberforce
Brothers, sisters, congregation,   15
my text am am dere or am dere not a hell.

Congregation
Course dey's a hell! Course dey's a hell!]

Brother Luther Wilberforce
Ingersoll said that there was no hell.

Voice from congregation
Parson, who was Ingersoll?

Brother Luther Wilberforce
Why, Andy, I'm astonished at your ignorance.   20
Ingersoll was de man what invented de dollar watch.
Now if dere ain't a hell, dere am gwine to be.
De Lord made earth to turn round on its axle-tree once in twenty-
    four hours.

Congregation
Oh, yes! Amen!

Brother Luther Wilberforce
And then he filled earth with oil for to grease de axle-tree,   25

Congregation
Yes! Dat's right! Dat's what 'e did!

Brother Luther Wilberforce
and de Standard Oil Company bored de holes in earth to distract
    de oil,

Congregation
[Unintelligible]

Brother Luther Wilberforce
and den dey moved it to Ohio and dey found it dar.

Congregation
Oh, dey found it dar!   30

Brother Luther Wilberforce

and den he moved it to Virginia and dey found it dar,

Congregation
Yeah! Yeah!

Brother Luther Wilberforce
and den he moved it to Texas and now dey done found it dar.

Congregation
Amen! Dey did!

Brother Luther Wilberforce
And now, when it am all gone den what be dar?   35

Congregation
What, what, what, what, what?]

Brother Luther Wilberforce
Why, de axle run hot,
de world caught fire,
won't dat be hell?

Congregation
Course, dat'll be hell!   40

Brother Luther Wilberforce
And den will descend dat golden chariot,

Congregation
Amen! Amen!

Brother Luther Wilberforce
Swing low, sweet chariot.

Choir
[Sings "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"]
[Choir sings refrain]   45
[Solo] I looked over Jordan and what'd I see?

Voice from congregation
What you see, brother?

Choir
[Sings: . . . a band of angels . . . .]

Leading up to the sermon itself are three humorous bits that set the tone of the performance, two in the first section and one in the second. First, the departing parson cautions the congregation against putting cough drops in the collection box. Ministerial complaints and exhortations about the insufficiencies of the collection are a convention of the mock sermon as a genre, and the substitution of other objects for cold cash is also a stock motif (Gilman 1974, 67–68; Russell 1991, 242). This little routine, then, can be used to mock members of any denomination as tight-fisted and any minister as venal. Here, it is targeted against African-Americans. More powerful as an instrument of burlesque is the carnivalesque subversion of one of the most foundational passages in the New Testament (John 14:3), in which Jesus says, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, *there* ye may be also." Jesus's preparation of a place in his Father's house for all mankind, by his sacrifice, becomes the parson's preparation of a place for his parishioners in the state prison, by his acceptance of a new civil-service position. Interestingly, the passage from John might serve quite appropriately as the "text" for a sermon, but here it is gratuitous, inserted solely for the purpose of setting up the inversion that establishes the burlesque key of the performance.

The third ludic routine occurs in Brother Wilberforce's lead-in to his sermon. Having set the theme of the sermon by posing the question of whether there is a hell (not, note, a true scriptural "text" of the kind most suitable for a sermon), the parson cites some authority named Ingersoll as denying the existence of hell. When asked by a congregant "who was Ingersoll?" Brother Wilberforce very authoritatively misidentifies him as the inventor of the dollar watch (the Ingersoll Company was the manufacturer of cheap watches) rather than as the renowned political leader and orator Robert G. Ingersoll (1833–99), an outspoken religious agnostic. Why cite a watchmaker in a sermon? Again, there's no logic; it's simply an opportunity to show up the pastor as lacking the knowledge and authority he claims.

We arrive, then, at the body of Brother Wilberforce's sermon, expanding upon his "text" "am dere or am dere not a hell?" (here's our minstrel-dialect "am" again). The development revolves (excuse the pun) around the pastor's paronomastic confusion of the axis of the earth with the axletree of a wagon, motivated not only by the phonological correspondence between the two terms but also by their semantic affinity: both represent a point around which an object turns. By tropic extension, the axletree of the earth, like the axletree of a wagon, requires lubrication; deprived of lubrication it will ignite. At a time

when the oil industry was burgeoning and Standard Oil was at the height of its monopolistic dominance, Brother Wilberforce suggests—note the malapropism—that the "distraction" of oil, placed by God within the earth to lubricate its revolutions, will lead ultimately to the overheating and burning of earth's axletree, and that will bring about a hell on earth.

In formal terms, following the preacher's positing of an initial answer to his "text"—"Now if dere ain't a hell, dere am gwine to be" ("gwine" is another emblematic bit of minstrel dialect; see, e.g., Holmberg and Schneider 1986, 31)—the sermon unfolds in a series of parallel constructions of increasing presentational intensity, building toward a climax in which the earth catches fire and the hell on earth is realized. The lines making up the parallel constructions are defined by syntactic structures and breath pauses, and the parallel units are marked off by falling intonation and responses from the congregation, acted by other members of the quartet. The first parallel set establishes the axletree/lubricating oil/extraction frame of reference; the second charts the acceleration of the extraction process until the oil supply is exhausted.

> De Lord made earth to turn round on its axletree
> once in twenty-four hours.
> And he filled earth with oil to grease de axletree.
> And de Standard Oil Company bored de holes in earth to distract
> de oil.
>
> And den dey moved it to Ohio,
> and dey found it dar.
> And den he moved it to Virginia,
> and dey found it dar.
> And den he moved it to Texas,
> and now dey done found it dar.

The concluding section begins with the parson's question, "And now, when it am all gone, / den what be dar?," which is linked to the end of the preceding section by repetition of the line-final "dar." When the congregation asks him, "What?," Brother Wilberforce concludes with a final parallel set and an answer to the question posed by his "text":

> Why, de axle run hot,
> de world caught fire.
> Won't dat be hell?

And into that apocalyptic inferno of hell on earth descends the golden chariot
of the cherubims (1 Chron. 28:18)—to save the righteous, perhaps?—and the
service ends with the congregation, animated by the quartet, singing the classic
African American hymn "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

As in "Colored Funeral," Brother Wilberforce's sermon is rendered in a var-
iant of the elevated style. I should perhaps note here that there is considerable
latitude for stylistic variation on the part of individual preachers; what matters
is the contrast between ordinary talk and heightened preaching. Like our earlier
example, Brother Wilberforce's sermon is chanted, marked by a severe narrow-
ing of the tonal range and a falling intonation at the ends of lines. This sermon
is also marked by an incremental raising of the pitch of successive parallel lines
and a pronounced shortening of the lines as the sermon reaches a climax, two
further characteristics commonly found in elevated preaching. Perhaps most
importantly, the lines delivered by Brother Wilberforce are also defined as turn-
transition points, open to responses from the congregation that index their own
heightened spiritual state. George Graham, as an individual performer, did not
have others to enact the part of congregation members, whereas the Peerless
Quarter had the personnel to build in this important and strongly characteristic
feature of the African American sermon. "New Parson at Darktown Church"
thus expands our inventory of devices employed in the burlesque sermons to
represent the elevated style. Brother Wilberforce may have his authority com-
promised by mistaking the watchmaker Ingersoll for the agnostic orator Inger-
soll; he may wind himself up in a spurious metaphor revolving around the
earth's axletree; but he is nevertheless able to sustain the core metaphor with for-
mal rigor and affecting power toward a spiritually heightened finale. The new
parson's sermon is no mean poetic achievement.

Ralph Bingham, "Brother Jones' Sermon"

My third example, issued January 4, 1918 (Victor 18587-B, Mx. 21405), is
"Brother Jones' Sermon," by Ralph Bingham, a performance routine popular
enough to have become a household performance piece, according to a col-
league who recalled versions of it performed by family members in the late
1940s.[8] Bingham was the consummate, multitalented lyceum entertainer.[9] He
began his platform career in 1876, at the ripe age of six, as "The Boy Orator of

8. The recording may be accessed online at http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/6504/.
9. Information on Ralph Bingham is available online at the University of Iowa Digital Library Archives,
"Traveling Culture: Circuit Chautauqua in the Twentieth Century," http://128.255.22.135/cdm/landingpage
/collection/tc.

America," reciting poetry and speeches and playing the violin. As a mature entertainer, Bingham was billed as "personator, humorist, violinist, vocalist, raconteur," according to one of his publicity brochures, and that flier neglects to mention that he also played the piano. The core of his professional identity, though, was humor: monologues featuring rural life and sports, storytelling (including some traditional folktales), and—most especially—dialect, listed in the record catalogs as "colored" or "Negro" dialect.

> *Brother Jones*
> My brethren,
> I take my text this evenin'
> from the fo'teenth verse o' the fo'teenth chapter
> accordin' to the Gospel of Etymology.
> "And de Lord cured the multitude   5
> of divers diseases."
> My beloved brethren and sisters,
> does you all get dem words?
> Does you all corroborate dar dimension?
> Does you all qualify dar intrusion?   10
> Hmm?
> Does you all specify de impo'tance of 'em?
>
> *Voice from congregation*
> What'd he say?
>
> *Brother Jones*
> Let me 'lucidate de words again, my brethren.
> "And de Lord cured de multitudes   15
> of divers diseases."
> Does you all notice dat it don't say nothin' about the *plu*-ralisis,
> or de *phew*-monia?
> No, suh!
> It don't say nothin' 'bout yella ja'ndice or yella fever.   20
> No, suh!
> It don't say nothin' 'bout de *pen*-deceetis
> or de spiral mcginnis.
> No, suh!
> What do de good book say?   25
> Hmm?!

I askes you what do de words transmogrify?
Dey say:
"And de Lord cured de multitudes
of divers diseases."   30
Does you notice, my brethren,
dat dey ain't nothin' 'bout de Lord wastin' valuable time
curin' de multitudes of little ol' common miseries,
like *mule*-aria,
or *ty*-phoid,   35
or chills an' fever?
It sure don't.
What do de words of wisdom equivocate or expectorate?
Hmmm?
Hyar dem again brethren and sisters of de faith.   40
Hyar dem again.
"And de Lord cured de multitudes
of divers diseases."
Oh, my chilluns.
Oh, my lambs of Zion.   45
Oh my pillas and bolsters o' de church.
Brudder Erysipelas Brown,
will you tell dem white boys sittin' back by de stove
dat if dey don't stop laughin' and behavin' injurin' of de sermon,
dat we'll send for the town constibule and outen 'em.   50
Oh, my lambs o' love.
What do de text mean?
Oh, my brethren and sistren,
if dey gets the janders,
any little ol' two by four phizzican can cure ya.   55
If ya gets the *phew*-monia,
any little ol' pill box can cure ya.
If ya gets the *neu*-ralgy,
any little ol' sawbones can cure ya.
But oh, my brethren!   60
Oh, my brethren.
If ya once gets the divers,
Mm mm!
You're gone!

You're de game cock in de pit.   65
Nobody but de Lord hisself can cure da divers.
"And de Lord cured de multitudes
of divers diseases."
Nobody but de Lord, my lambs, can cure de divers diseases.
De worst disease is what . . .   70
Ah-choo!
Ah-choo!
Ah-choo!
We will now take up a collecti—
Ah-choo! choo!   75
And disband de meetin'.
For some o' dat low down, cheap, white trash
has done throwed red pepper on de flo'.
Aaaah-choo!

By now, we're familiar with the core characteristics of the elevated style. Bingham employs a veritable anthology of devices in his representation: chant, repetition, parallelism, formulaic salutations and other phatic gestures to the congregation, and so on. I won't analyze the formal organization of "Brother Jones' Sermon" in detail—it's too complex for the space I have available to me. Let's just have a quick look at one brief section (lines 38–64):

What do de words of wisdom equivocate or expectorate?
Hmmm?
Hyar dem again brethren and sisters of de faith.   40
Hyar dem again.
"And de Lord cured de multitudes
of divers diseases."
Oh, my chilluns.
Oh, my lambs of Zion.   45
Oh my pillas and bolsters o' de church.
Brudder Erysipelas Brown,
will you tell dem white boys sittin' back by de stove
dat if dey don't stop laughin' and behavin' injurin' of de sermon,
dat we'll send for the town constibule and outen 'em.   50
Oh, my lambs o' love.
What do de text mean?
Oh, my brethren and sistren,

if dey gets the ja'nders,
any little ol' two by four phizzican can cure ya.   55
If ya gets the *phew*-monia,
any little ol' pill box can cure ya.
If ya gets the *neu*-ralgy,
any little ol' sawbones can cure ya.
But oh, my brethren!   60
Oh, my brethren.
If ya once gets the divers,
Mm mm!
You're gone!

The passage displays the marked intonation patterns of heightened preaching, verging here on song, the measured cadences, the grammatical parallelism, the phatic formulas that we might expect. I choose it, though, because it also illustrates clearly the contrast between the elevated style and ordinary talk, when Brother Jones breaks frame at line 47 to direct a member of the congregation to quiet the white intruders to the service and then switches back into sermon style at line 51. The unmarked, conversational passage features longer, unmeasured utterances between breath pauses, a more raspy timbre, no parallelism or repetition.

This extract serves well as an example in one other respect: the speech play in line 46, "Oh, my pillas and bolsters o' de church." "Pillars of the church," of course is a cliché, a commonplace, and "bolster" may also mean "to shore up," "support." Dialect renders "pillars" and "pillows" homophonous; the latter term then turns away from "pillars" to pair with "bolsters" in the same, stuffed-cushion semantic field. That bit of speech play, of course, is but one of many instances in Bingham's performance. Indeed, one might argue that the entire routine turns on speech play and complementary forms of metalinguistic and metadiscursive reflexivity.

The central trope, clearly, consists in Brother Jones's misconstrual of his scriptural "text," taking the "divers diseases" of Matthew 4:24 and Mark 1:34 to be a single, specific, deadly malady, susceptible only to the Lord's miraculous curing power. As the trope unfolds, then, in a profusion of parallel constructions, the preacher adduces an entire inventory of diseases that are merely "little ol' common miseries" that can be cured by routine medical treatments: "any little ol' two by four phizzican," "pill box," or ordinary "sawbones." As Brother Jones reels off these "common miseries," he makes a paronomastic mess of most of

them, in portmanteau mergers like "pluralysis," "mule-aria," and "phewmonia," or in puns like "spiral mcginnis" (for "viral meningitis," I assume), not to mention simple but nonstandard vernacular pronunciations like "neuralgy" and "janders."

In ironic tension with all these paronomastic misfires is a steady counterpoint of metalinguistic and metadiscursive monitoring on Brother Jones's part to ensure that the members of his congregation comprehend the meaning and significance of his scriptural text. This reflexive strain in the sermon is adumbrated by the very attribution of the text itself to the Gospel of Etymology. Brother Jones is in love with fancy words; black and white observers alike identify this penchant as a common characteristic of African American preachers (Washington 1909, 2:284–85; Johnson [1927] 1976, 9; Mahar 1985, 263). For burlesque sermons, this predilection and the susceptibility of uneducated preachers (again, black or white; see McCurdy 1969, 165) to mispronounce, misuse, or otherwise distort words because of their morphological complexity or misleading spelling is a ready comic resource. Immediately after citing his text, the preacher makes his first comprehension check, in a burst of malapropisms:

> My beloved brethren and sisters,
> does you all get dem words?
> Does you all corroborate dar dimension?
> Does you all qualify dar intrusion?   10
> Hmm?
> Does you all specify de impo'tance of 'em?

And throughout the remainder of the sermon, Brother Jones keeps checking in the same vein (as in "what do de text mean?" in our earlier extract), asking rhetorical questions, pointing out key features of the text, and commenting on his own efforts to make things clear—though his malapropisms offer much more amusement than clarity.

Beyond the centrality of speech play and metadiscursive reflexivity in "Brother Jones' Sermon," what is especially interesting about this performance is the depiction of white disruption of a black church service and the preacher's resistance to the intruders. He may be a figure of ridicule, in his misconstrual of his biblical text and the mess he makes of medical terminology, but he has the moral strength to tell off a group of white rowdies. And, like Graham's "old-time colored preacher" and the Peerless Quartet's Brother Wilberforce, Brother Jones is clearly a verbal artist, an oral poet of virtuosic ability.

Bert Williams, Elder Eatmore's Sermons

My last two examples, which I'll consider together, represent something of a departure from the other texts we have examined. Both were recorded in 1919 by Bert Williams, one of the most celebrated vaudeville performers of the day and a highly popular recording star as well (Rowland 1923; Smith 1992; Reed 2001; Brooks 2004, 10–148; Forbes 2008). Significantly, Williams was black, one of the many African American performers who appeared in the burnt-cork makeup and stereotyped costume of the blackface minstrel tradition (figs. 1, 2). I won't go into this complex phenomenon—many others have done so—but Williams was unique even in that company. Born in Nassau, he came to the United States with his family at the age of ten and grew up in Riverside, California. He aspired to be a civil engineer but drifted into vaudeville in San Francisco and rose to stardom as a singer and comedian. He was the first black member of the Ziegfield Follies, attracted an enthusiastic following of fans, both white and black, and was the best-selling black recording artist of the day, by far. Significantly, he was lauded—both for his talent and his success—by African American cultural leaders ranging from Booker T. Washington to W. E. B. Du Bois (Smith 1992, 145; Brooks 2004, 123; Forbes 2008, 95–96, 321).

It is important to establish that for Williams, blacking up and taking on African American dialect were acts of Othering more akin to the transformations effected by white blackface performers than by black ones. Fair-skinned and relatively well educated, he identified himself as Bahamian; the African American dialect of the US mainland was not a part of his native repertoire. While he accepted—he certainly could not escape—his identification as a black man in the United States, he occupied a position at a greater remove from the African American types he enacted than his fellow black performers were able to achieve. More on this later, after we consider his burlesque sermons.

Let us first consider Bert Williams's "Elder Eatmore's Sermon on Throwing Stones" (Columbia A6141, Mx. 49644-3, recorded June 27, 1919)—in my view, the more interesting of the two 1919 recordings.[10] *Elder* is the term for preachers in the "holiness" or "sanctified" sects that emphasized adherence to strict moral standards and avoidance of carnal activities (Baer and Singer 1997, 267). The title of the recording aligns it to the burlesque sermons from the minstrel tradition and it bears certain features of the genre, but the actual performance is more a comic character sketch than a parody of the sermon itself.

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10. The recording may be accessed online at https://ia700402.us.archive.org/15/items/BertWilliams-01-10/BertWilliams-ElderEatmoresSermonOnThrowingStones.mp3.

Figure 1. Bert Williams publicity photo. Source: Wikipedia.

The Elder is in bad humor
dis mawnin'.
I take my text from de 'leventh of d'Ecclesiastides
"He dat is of mostly widout sin,
let 'im throw de fust rock."   5

Figure 2. Bert Williams in blackface. Source: Wikipedia.

What it says is,
"let him cast de fust stone."
But I ain't takin' no chances on you all misunderstandin' me.
For twenty years y'all be thowin' rocks at one another,
but you wasn't satisfied.   10
You had to commence thowin' 'em at me.

Voice: Uh uh!

Uh uh nothin'!
But I ain' gon' warn y'all no mo'.
But in de language of dat great prophet Henry Shakespeare,   15
"watch yo' step,
w:::atch yo' step."
What did Nicodemus say?
I says, what did Nicodemus say?
He said, "wash me an' I shall be whiter den snow."   20

Voice: A:::men!

Mhmm hmm.
Dat's all right too.
Dey's a lot o' y'all here dis mawnin'
think you been washed.   25
You ain't even been sponged.

Voice: Hunh!

Nh. T'ain't no use gruntin'.
On night befo' last Thanksgivin',
I think it was long about midnight,   30
certain brother—he's sittin'right here out there—
dis brother was comin' down de road,
totin' a bag,
an' he sees another brother,
totin' another bag,   35
an' gettin' ovuh a fence.
Bot' bags was occupied.
Now neither one of dese brothers spoke,
but a sound fum de bag
of de brother on de fence   40
indicated dat he had secured de main article fo' his Thanksgivin'
     dinner.

Voice: Oooh!

Uh huh!
Now,
on dat other certain brother had   45
in his sack
a member of de same family,
but it wasn't
'zackly de kind of a bird
gen'ly used fo' Thanksgivin' dinner.   50

Voice: Mmm hmm.

Mmm hmm.
An' dis filled dat certain brother's heart
so full of jealousy
an' malice   55

dat he goes straight home
an' tells 'is wife what 'e'd seen,
an' dat does settle it.

Voice: Ain't it de truth!

Unnh.   60
You know it's de truth!
You know it's de truth!
His wife tells
her sistuh,
her sistuh tells her friends,   65
an' de fust thing I knows
ever' membuh of dis congregation here
is whisperin' around
dat I,
me,   70
me,
hah!
had stole a turkey.

Voice [whistles]: Phew!

Now, dey ain' no use phewin'.   75
In de future,
any of you all dat thows rocks at me,
I'm gon' thow 'em back at you.
An' when I
start   80
to thowin',
friends, I shall miss nobody.
Dere is silence.
Now dat certain brother that I've been talkin' 'bout
will kindly lead us in prayer.   85

Voice: There now.
De scriptures say
dat who de gods would last destroy,
dey fust makes mad.

EE: Oh, no now!   90

Voice: An' Elder Eatmo' sho is actin' crazy!

EE: Now there, there, there, there! there!

Voice: On las' Thursday night,
who was it
dat I had to almost tote home?   95

EE: No, no,
wait a minute!
Voice: Dat I almost had to carry home bodily.   //*EE:* Wait a
minute!
        Don't answer now! [?]
        Now look here!   100
            [Unintelligible]
Voice: Yes,
he was so full of applejack.
Hnnn.
An' who was it,
            // *EE:* Now here!   105
who was it dat steady stole de lodge's money?   Dat's enough!
I said, who was it Lo:::rd   I say, dat's enough!
dat stole de lodge's money?
An' lost it playin' five up down at Sister Mamie Crawford's?
Who . . .   110

EE: Doxology,
doxology,
doxology.
[Organ music]
Use all de doors.
Use all de doors.   115
Use all de doors.
We are all leaving now.
All leaving.

  The Elder opens with a general expression of ill humor and then devotes his
entire disquisition to rebuking those who have put him in his bad mood and
threatening to respond in kind. His "text," misquoted and misattributed, as
we have come to expect in burlesque sermons (it's actually from John 8:7), makes

clear the source of his disgruntlement: he is the target of malicious accusations by members of his congregation. In response, he goes on a counteroffensive, warning his accusers to back off, with further spurious, misattributed "texts," from the "great prophet Henry Shakespeare" and Nicodemus, the sympathetic Pharisee mentioned in the Book of John. Notwithstanding its scriptural source (Ps. 51:7), "Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" is a stock bit from the minstrel tradition, a nasty reminder, packaged as a laugh line, that black people can never be white and thus, perhaps, can never be spiritually pure. Certainly, that's what he claims of his unsponged congregants.

Elder Eatmore goes on to single out the specific parishioner he holds responsible for spreading malicious rumors about him but winds up revealing in the process that he has indeed been out on a poultry-stealing expedition during which he encountered this "certain other brother" likewise engaged—the old racist minstrel trope of black men as chicken thieves. Figure 3 shows a Currier & Ives print from their "Darktown" series that portrays the whole package in graphic form: the preacher with a stolen turkey behind his back encountering other men from his congregation similarly engaged. In the Elder's mind, it was that "other brother's" jealousy, provoked by the preacher's having bagged a tur-

A SURPRISE PARTY.
Parson: Ah! habn't I done tole yer not to covert yer neighbor's fowl?

Figure 3. Currier & Ives, *A Surprise Party* (New York, ca. 1883), a print representing an African American preacher and parishioners as poultry thieves. Source: Library of Congress.

key while he had only a chicken, that led to the backbiting accusations against him. The other brother tells his wife what he has seen, his wife tells her sister, her sister tells her friends, and the gossip against Elder Eatmore spreads quickly through the congregation. The Elder is at pains not to name names, as if he were above the kind of malicious gossip that is directed against him, but he still threatens retaliation: those who malign him will be the target of his own barrage of counteraccusations.

Although the Elder's rant is framed by a biblical text, there is nothing spiritual about his message. The only hint of the heightened style is in a few parallel lines ("watch yo' step / wa:::tch yo' step"), inspired by a mean spirit, not the Holy Spirit. And the responses from the congregation are not the usual enthusiastic ratifications of the preacher's inspired words, but dismissive ("hunh!"), shocked ("Oooh!"), or incredulous ("Phew!") reactions to his peevish accusations and threats.

The tenor of the performance shifts, though, when Elder Eatmore, perhaps thinking that he has cowed the nameless parishioner who has accused him, calls on him to lead the congregation in prayer. The "other brother" leaps immediately into the heightened style, but not in prayer. Rather, in a vehement counterattack on Elder Eatmore, he accuses the preacher of further moral lapses—drunkenness, embezzlement, gambling, frequenting low places—painting him as the antithesis of what a holiness preacher should be. The Elder tries to interrupt him, but is powerless to stop the harangue—the "other brother" is too forceful and caught up in his tirade. The Elder's only recourse is to bring the service to a hasty end and evacuate the church.

The other "sermon" recorded by Bert Williams, "Elder Eatmore's Sermon on Generosity," is consistent with the first in its depiction of his character and his relations with his congregation, though not as rich a performance. The Elder takes his text this time from the Book of Caesar: "the Lord loveth a cheerful giver." There is no Book of Caesar, of course. The text comes from 2 Corinthians 9:7, but the misattribution indexes the famous passage in Mark 12:17, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Either way, Elder Eatmore wants his share of the proceeds. The scriptural theme notwithstanding, however, the ensuing "sermon" is a very worldly and self-interested exhortation for the congregation to cough up more money for the Elder's support, because they are "way back in my salary" and "I need! I need!" It won't do for Elder Eatmore to have to eat less. The castigation of the congregation for its tight-fistedness is a venerable theme in parodic sermons (recall the opening of "New Parson at Darktown Church"); Gilman cites a medieval exam-

ple of a "poor country preacher, striving to obtain the necessary financial support from his congregation" (Gilman 1974, 67; cf. Russell 1991, 242, 248–49). Interestingly, though, the theme seems to have figured sufficiently strongly in actual black preaching for Pipes to have noted it in his 1942 field study of black sermons in Macon County, Georgia (1945, 17).

Elder Eatmore's straitened situation is exacerbated by the increasingly "scientifical" security measures that make it "harder for all of us" to gain access to smokehouses and henhouses. Accordingly, he exhorts his parishioners with an extended series of scriptural allusions (e.g., to "the bread of life"), proverbs ("the Lord helps them that helps theirself"), and hymn titles and lyrics ("We shall build our mansions in the sky," "We shall reap our joys in the by and by") to provide for his material needs. All the high-sounding quotations and allusions he reels off might well lend themselves to spiritually and morally uplifting ends, but here they are solely in the interest of persuading the Elder's tight-fisted parishioners to open their purses and provide more liberally for his support. Taking no chances, though, as passing the plate has proven unreliable, he calls the congregation to file past him one by one and drop their money on the table before him. The message of the performance is ambiguous. It may be heard as grasping and self-interested extortion by a venal preacher or as an indictment of stingy congregations, but either way, there is little spirituality or religious inspiration in "Elder Eatmore's Sermon on Generosity," only a conspicuously worldly appeal for cash.

As I suggested earlier, Bert Williams's Elder Eatmore recordings are not so much burlesque sermons as they are character sketches of the flawed preacher. Unlike the examples we have considered by white blackface performers, the poetics of the black sermon and the artistic virtuosity of the black preacher are not foregrounded in these performances. But what kind of character does Williams enact? On the one hand, I would propose, Elder Eatmore is aligned to the long comic tradition of the morally compromised preacher: self-absorbed, venal, vindictive, hypocritical, doctrinally ignorant, and—if his name is any indication—gluttonous. But the Elder is also more than simply a blackface version of a venerable comic type. Williams himself is explicit about his focus on character. When asked by an interviewer what aspect of his work interested him most, Williams replied, "Character," and went on to state that "I try to portray the shiftless darky to the fullest extent. . . . There is nothing about this fellow I don't know. I have studied him" (Rowland 1923, 94). While Williams was at pains to portray the folk wisdom of his "shiftless darky" characters, his very use of the term makes clear his willingness to sustain the negative aspects of stereotype

as well, and I would suggest that Elder Eatmore foregrounds that tendency. I will have much more to say about this in my conclusion.

Conclusion

For white performers, the "old-time colored preacher down South," to use George Graham's characterization, was a variant on the nostalgic construction of the "old-time Negro," invented to valorize a mythic past in which black people were unthreatening, ignorant, yet expressively attractive and potentially entertaining. The old-time preacher and his sermons served the white interests well, simultaneously showcasing how even the moral and intellectual leaders of the black community were ignorant in their use of scriptural sources, illogical in the development of homiletic themes, prone to linguistic misfires in their use of cultivated liturgical registers, but capable, withal, of impressive virtuosic performance. Parody was an especially effective resource for white entertainer's purposes, insofar as it allowed for manipulation of the intertextual links and gaps between their own mock sermons and the African American source genre. White performers in blackface could undermine the authority and spiritual power of the sermon by rendering the thematic features of the sermon ridiculous and marking the linguistic—grammatical, phonological, and lexical— aspects of the delivery as incompetent, but preserving, and even foregrounding, the expressive virtuosity of the delivery as a showcase for their own skill as performers.

What is most striking about the white parodies of black sermons, I would argue, is that notwithstanding the incompetencies and infelicities with which he is burdened by the mocking portrayals of the white performers, the preacher is represented as an oral poet, with an impressive mastery of the verbal art of preaching. Even within the truncated format of the recording, the preachers all launch their sermons in a form appropriate to the genre, and while Graham's preacher is cut off by the time limit of the record, and Brother Jones by the delinquent white boys who disrupt his service, the fault is not theirs, and Brother Wilberforce at least carries his sermon to appropriate completion. Far more importantly, however, all three preachers deliver their sermons in a recognizable and highly credible variant of the elevated style, clearly marked by multiple poetic devices and patterning principles: initial particles, intonation contours, breath pauses, emphatic exhalations, congregational responses, grammatical parallelism, organization into verses. None of the published minstrel-show sermons I have seen come close to this degree of poetic complexity. Indeed, I believe strongly that for all that they draw on minstrel conventions, all of our per-

formers must have had direct, firsthand familiarity with black preaching to have represented it in such detail. These white blackface performers were closer observers than many critics realize. At least with regard to sermons, they displayed impressive ethnopoetic understanding, a quarter century before James Weldon Johnson's effort to recuperate and revalue the black sermon. Moreover, they all recognized in the style of the African American preacher an artistic accomplishment worthy of their own performance skills, an appropriate vehicle for their own displays of virtuosity.

For black performers, artists, and intellectuals, the situation was far more complicated. Among intellectual leaders, especially, there was a profound preoccupation from the mid-1890s through the first several decades of the twentieth century with the need to shed the burdens of an oppressive past and the persistent shadow of debilitating stereotypes that stood as impediments to social, economic, political, and cultural advancement. Increasingly useful as summarizing tropes in the effort to recreate African American society and culture, from the mid-1890s onward, was the contrast between the "old(-time)" and the "New Negro," inscribed in such influential works as Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N. B. Wood's *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900) and Alain Locke's cultural manifesto, *The New Negro* ([1925] 1992), first published in 1925 and soon established as the charter of the Harlem Renaissance.

In the eyes of many, Bert Williams was the shining epitome of the New Negro. He was educated, economically successful, an Episcopalian, and enthusiastically admired by black and white audiences alike. W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, who were vehemently opposed in their conceptions and strategies for the realization of the New Negro, were nevertheless agreed that Bert Williams exemplified the best of the race. While Du Bois praised Williams's great skill as a performer (DuBois 1924, 310), Washington was more explicit and effusive about his potential contribution to the cause of black advancement: "Bert Williams is a tremendous asset of the Negro race. He is an asset because he has succeeded in actually doing something, and because he has succeeded, the fact of his success helps the Negro many times more than he could help the Negro by merely contenting himself to whine and complain about racial difficulties and racial discriminations" (Brooks 2004, 123). Moreover, Williams aligned himself with Washington's ideology and program. Responding to Washington's praise, Williams suggested that "The negro actor will . . . take rank with the negro teacher in the negro school. Booker Washington will then have strong allies in his work of elevating the social standard of the black man" (Smith 1992, 110).

While all who were engaged in this effort of symbolic construction agreed on the need to overcome the debilitating effects of racial stereotypes, there was considerable debate about what elements of the black cultural experience might be worthy of retention, recuperation, and, perhaps, recreation, in the effort to create the New Negro. African American religion, understandably, occupied an important place in these debates. Some intellectual leaders, including prominently W. E. B. Du Bois, insisted upon the deep centrality of the black church—itself a symbolic construction of these debates—to the integrity and spiritual sustenance of African American people throughout their existence in the New World, celebrating the black preacher for his "singular eloquence" and the moral power of his oratorical skill (DuBois 2003, 191). At the same time, however, even Du Bois expressed some ambivalence about the "stirring and wild enthusiasm" and "the wilder spiritual emotionalism of the black man," reaching back to "the unlettered childhood of the race rather than to the thinking adult life of civilization" (1924, 331–32). For those of "the better classes," as Du Bois called them (2003, 207), who believed that the new way for the New Negro lay in the direction of discipline, education, cultivated and refined decorum, the unlettered enthusiasm of the old-time holiness preacher was an embarrassment, a corroboration of the stereotype of the black person as ignorant, unsophisticated, undisciplined, and linguistically incompetent. All the worse, when the preacher embodied also the stereotype of the manipulative, immoral schemer, like Elder Eatmore, a discredit to his religious office (Johnson 1912).

Parody is a vehicle of critique, and Bert Williams's Elder Eatmore sermons aim their critical barbs against aspects of African American "old time" religion that the champions of the New Negro considered an impediment to black respectability and advancement. Undermining the stereotype by enacting the stereotype is a tricky business, though, especially insofar as Williams played to enthusiastic white audiences at the same time that he was lauded by blacks. Elite black audiences could hear Elder Eatmore's sermons as a critique of old-time holiness preachers they wanted to leave behind, but for whites, the performances may well have perpetuated the very images that had burdened African American people all along.

As I suggested earlier, however, there were other participants in the effort to redefine African American culture in the early decades of the twentieth century who had different conceptions of the value of "old time" vernacular religion and how it might be recast to the credit of African American people. James Weldon Johnson, in particular, recognized the affecting power of the "folk sermon" and the poetic skill of the old-time preacher and saw in them a potentially valuable

resource for a new "Aframerican" literature. More specifically, he sought to capture the preacher's masterful use of rhythm, intonation, tempo, timbre, parallelism, and the other devices we have examined—in conjunction, of course, with the spiritual resonances of religious themes and symbols—in fashioning a new register for African American poetry to replace the compromised language of "*traditional* Negro dialect" ([1927] 1976, 6). The Aframerican poet, he insisted "needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor." The poetic devices of the traditional sermon, he suggested, might represent the basis of just such a form, separable from "the mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation" and able to stand on its own as a poetic register. Thus Bert Williams and James Weldon Johnson represented strongly contrastive stances on the "old time" preacher and his sermons within the larger cultural movement to construct the New Negro and transcend the old negative stereotypes. The white parodies, while they exploited the same poetic power that Johnson built upon, were nevertheless vehicles for the preservation of a racist past, foils against which the African American intellectuals and artists sought to imagine a new future for their people.

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