

The Preachers’ Blues: Religious Race Records and Claims of Authority on Wax

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As one of the first nonessential commodities marketed to African Americans, the race record industry provides historical insight into the cultural ethos and competing ethical values of black communities during the interwar period. Both ethnomusicologists and historians have discussed the ways race records articulate intraracial conflicts that were exacerbated by social factors such as migration and urbanization.¹ Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, for instance, contends convincingly that the folk orality of religious race records contested the hegemonic ethical values and aesthetic standards of the traditional Protestantism of the black middle class.² As black denominational leaders embraced socially pragmatic yet culturally paternalistic Christian education programs of white northern missionaries in the post-Reconstruction era, Afro-Protestant congregations, particularly in the North, became institutional platforms from which the African American middle class could project an image of blacks as temperate, sober, rational, and literate toward countering cultural stereotypes circulating in the dominant imagination. A politics of respectability, characterized by the acceptance of, and even obsession with, Victorian morality, genteel manners, and New England aesthetic tastes, was promoted as the ruling religious ideal for racial uplift and social reform.³ Religious race records, however, undercut African American bourgeois obsessions with such expressivity and decorum. Many African Americans believed the program of bourgeois social uplift came with too high of a cultural price tag as southern migrants were not willing to toss out the baby of African American cultural creativity with the bathwater of slavery and racial oppression. And, according to Higginbotham, religious race records helped to transform the new urban proletariat into a “competing voice within African American communities” as the black working class “defined racial progress not merely in the context of black-white

relations but also in the context of a class-based contestation over group beliefs and practices."⁴

I would like to expand Higginbotham's analysis of the confluence of the recording industry and black vernacular culture by viewing religious race records from another angle. Rather than examining black working-class churches as an intraracial "counter-public" to middle-class mainline Protestantism and privileging a narrative of vernacular culture as hegemonic resistance, let's reframe the power relations by including the record companies. What happens when we pay closer attention to the vernacular culture of working-class churches when it is packaged and presented in public space as a consumer good? What does it mean for us to keep track of the boundaries between folk orality of working-class preachers and the technologies of the recording industry? The recording industry did more than tap into the cultural repertoire of black working-class churches and consumer tastes. Recorded sermons also amplified a particular theological orientation and social agenda while empowering and privileging particular preachers by granting access to the tools of production. The recording industry, thus, exemplified the sort of power that the "folk" had access to as consumers but rarely as producers. The purpose of this article, then, is to demonstrate the ways recorded religious sermons, wittingly or unwittingly, served as an active participant in theological and cultural debates taking place around the form and function of Afro-Protestantism and the image of the black working-class community during the pre-Depression and Depression eras—debates that I argue just as well reinforce raced, classed and gendered hierarchies while conferring cultural authority to black male preachers.⁵

Recording the Folk

In the mid 1920s, major record companies such as Columbia, Okeh, Victor, and Paramount began to record and distribute the religious songs and sermons of African American religious artists. As a critical component of the recently inaugurated series of "race records," these recordings were offered as religious alternatives to the immense popularity of the blues. The Reverend Calvin P. Dixon was the first preacher to record a sermon on a major label in February 1925. The Columbia race series released "The Prodigal Son" and "As an Eagle Stirreth Up Her Nest" while promoting Dixon as the "Black Billy Sunday" after the famed white urban revivalist. Sales of Dixon's sermons did not inspire the record label. The lukewarm response may have had to do with Columbia's failure to capture the participatory

nature of southern black preaching. Revivalist preaching associated with the South had many components other than the preacher's delivery. As W. E. B. Du Bois set forth in the earliest academic treatment of the "Negro church," traditional African American worship is constitutive of "the preacher, the music and the frenzy." Dixon's recordings featured his voice (the preacher) but failed to include spiritual music or the ecstatic frenzy that both structures and animates black homiletic activity.⁶

Columbia executives became aware of their production misce as a result of the success of a small midwestern record company that released recorded sermons later that year. Meritt Records was owned and operated by Winston Holmes, an African American singer and tap dancer who achieved regional fame on the southern minstrel show circuit. Holmes oversaw Meritt records from his music store in Kansas City where he pressed his own records and sold them at seventy-five cents each. Holmes's company also earned the historical distinction of being the first to record the now iconic comedienne and entertainer Hattie McDaniel.⁷ In late 1925, Meritt Records released a pair of sermons by a local preacher named J. C. Burnett entitled "I've Even Heard of Thee" and "The Downfall of Nebuchadnezzar." Burnett, an Alabama native that migrated to Kansas City, was popular along the Baptist tent revival circuit throughout the states of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. And Winston Holmes captured the full pneumatic texture of black southern revivalism on the recordings. The roughly three-minute sermons opened with Rev. Burnett and female vocalists "raising a hymn"—a long metered style of singing that elongates the words of the song—and the women's voices continued to respond to the call of Burnett's chanted style of preaching throughout the recording. These two sermons were among Meritt's most popular releases in 1925 as Burnett assisted in vending the records along his revival circuit. Columbia Records was so impressed with the recordings that, despite Burnett's contract with the Winston Holmes Music Company, Columbia convinced Burnett to record "The Downfall of Nebuchadnezzar" for Columbia.⁸ Released in November of 1926, "The Downfall" was a commercial success for Columbia, selling more than eighty thousand copies that year, outselling his famed secular label mate Bessie Smith four to one.⁹

By the summer of 1927, Vocalion Records achieved similar success with the recordings of the Reverend A.W. Nix. Nix was already a celebrity within black Baptist circles for compiling a convention songbook and for his own bluesy renditions of classical hymns. While singing at the National Baptist Convention in Chicago in 1921, Nix's performance of "I Do, Don't You?" spurred the spiritual conversion of

a young aspiring bluesman, Georgia Tom, who had just migrated to the city—Georgia Tom would later be revered the world over as Thomas Dorsey, author of “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” and acknowledged “father of gospel music.” A deep, raspy voice and a staccato yet crystal clear delivery characterized Nix’s singing and preaching. His style was well suited for the three minutes allotted, as he was able to fulfill the seemingly prescribed industry format flawlessly. On releases such as “Goin’ to Hell,” Nix demonstrates his capacity to sing an introductory hymn, read the scriptural text, offer his sermon title, get to his main idea, and end with a celebration without as much as a stutter or wasted utterance.

Despite this sort of rhetorical precision, Vocalion Records used Nix’s first release on their label to introduce the multipart sermon. This allowed Nix to record “Black Diamond Express to Hell” in two parts over the course of six minutes divided equally between the two sides of the record. “Black Diamond” was released in June 1927 with a full-page advertisement in the *Chicago Defender*. A cartoon depicting a train track swirling across the page with station stops like “Stealing Town,” “Gamblers Tower,” and “Dance Hall Depot” artistically captures the creative and vivid imagery imbued in the sermon.¹⁰ After reading his text from Matthew 7:13, he immediately begins describing the railway to hell. “Sin is the engineer. Pleasure is the headlight. And the Devil is the Conductor. I see the Black Diamond as she starts off for hell. The bell is ringing, ‘Hellbound, Hellbound.’ The Devil cries out, ‘All Aboard for Hell!’” Nix’s voice on the record is analogous to the momentum of a locomotive; his sermonic cadence picks up speed and intensity as the listener leaves the metaphorical station. He continues:

“First station is Drunkardsville!”
 Stop down there and let all the drunkards get on board
 They have a big crowd down there.
 Some drinking moonshine, some drinking red horse. . . .
 Alllll of you drunkards, you’ve got to go to hell on the Black
 Diamond train.
 The Black Diamond starts off for hell now. . . .

“Next station is Liars Avenue!”
 Wait there and let allllll the liars get on board.
 Have a big crowd of liars down there,
 you got some smooth liars, some unreasonable liars, some
 professional liars,
 some bare-faced liars, some ungodly liars, some big liars. . . .
 “Next station is Deceiversville!”
 Wait there and let all the deceivers get on board.

Some of you been deceiving one another ever since you been
in the world.
Friend deceiving friend, husband deceiving wives, wives
deceiving husbands,
But you got to go to hell on the Black Diamond Train.¹¹

Ecstatic response on the part of religious participants is essential to the effectiveness of the chanted sermon. To extend the previous metaphor, if Nix's voice is the train, the fervent responses of those heard in the background are the fuel. On the majority of these recorded sermons, a cacophony of female voices encourages the preacher with declarations of "Amen," "Oh, yes," "Well," and "Preach It!" Occasionally, a woman is heard humming a tune or even singing a song during the sermon. This unlikely occurrence comes across as a contrived attempt to make two or three women in the studio reenact the frenzy of a full congregation. But it also reveals how germane the female voice is to black preaching—unfortunately, not as a preacher but as an ancillary performative prop.

Though the Afro-Protestant tradition has been historically and overwhelmingly comprised of women (estimates range from two-thirds to three-quarters), women have found it difficult to break through the gender barrier that separates the pews from the pulpit.¹² Among the black mainline denominations, namely, Baptist and Methodist, few ordained women to preach in the 1920s. The African Methodist Episcopal Church did not allow the ordination of women until 1948, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was even later in 1970, and many Baptist congregations still prohibit female ordination.¹³ Religious race records reflect this reality. Out of seventy preachers that were recorded during the interwar era, only five or six were women.¹⁴ Moreover, among the female preachers who were able to resist being reduced to songsters in the studio—forced only to sing as opposed to preach—all represented the Pentecostal tradition. This is due in large part to the fact that it was within the nonaffiliated structure of the Sanctified church that women seized the space to organize and pastor independent, often storefront style, congregations. For example, the Reverend Leora Ross of the Church of the Living God was recorded in Chicago on Okeh in 1927. A chorus of female vocalists joined Ross in the studio, and her homiletic delivery was comparable to, if not better than, her male recording mates. Her sermon "Dry Bones in the Valley" recalls the familiar biblical tale of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel being sat down by God in a valley of dry bones to preach life back into the exiled nation of Israel. The recording begins with the opening song "We Shall Run" as the accompanying female singers antiphonally intersperse with Ross's

rhythmic call. From the outset as song leader, Ross's voice riffs with a distinguishable charisma above her background singers. Then she seamlessly reads her text from Ezekiel chapter 37 and moves immediately into the message. Ross's rhythmic cadence and oral dexterity are more distinctive on the recording than her clarity of enunciation. The intelligibility of the latter may have to do with the static-filled reproduction currently available. But static fails to obscure her vocal ability. She claims for herself the identity of the prophet and acts out his character on the record. Prophesying to the bones, she intones, "Ohhhhhh, dry bones . . . Ohhhhhh, dry bones . . . hear the Word of the Lawwd!" She then repeats the prophecy to the wind, "Ohhhhhh, east wind. Ohhhhhh, east wind, blow upon these bones!" And with this same repetitive cadence demonstrated throughout the sermon, Ross concludes by singing, "Ohhhhhh, Will You Come? Ohhhhhh, Will You Come?"¹⁵

Consistent with "The Downfall of Nebuchadnezzar" and the "Black Diamond Express to Hell," it appears that the most marketed and best-selling sermons of the pre-Depression era involve the demise of a powerful biblical ruler or the religious imagery of a train. The Reverend Nix followed up his "Black Diamond Express" with its sacred antithesis, "The White Flyer to Heaven." Nix's "After the Ball Is Over" reconstructs King Herod's birthday bash and the dance of Salome to warn against lasciviousness and wantonness, while "The Matchless King" juxtaposes the demise of history's greatest leaders against the everlasting supremacy of "King Jesus." The Reverend J. M. Gates, an Atlanta pastor who was among the most prolific preachers of the era, won instant acclaim when Columbia released "Death's Black Train Is Coming." Between 1926 and 1927, he also recorded "You Belong to that Funeral Train," "Hell Bound Express Train," and "Death is on Your Track" as well as "Lazarus in Heaven and the Rich Man in Hell" and "Rich Man and the Needle's Eye." The Chicago-based Pentecostal preacher the Reverend F. W. McGee also secured multiple hits with Victor between 1926 and 1929, which included "Babylon Is Falling Down."

The redundancy of themes has much to do with marketing strategy. Once record companies identified a formula for success, which included paying close attention to successful releases on rival labels, replication became the goal. But there may have been deeper meaning encoded within the sermons that connected with listeners on multiple discursive levels. For instance, consumers of religious race records may have interpreted sermons that speak to the demise of a powerful ruler in varying ways. Sermons like Nix's "Downfall" extend the biblical premise that "the last shall be first and the first

shall be last." This involves more than a "pie-in-the-sky" pipedream or "other-worldly" theodicy, though for some it may have. Narratives of God elevating the faithful, as demonstrated in the Reverend Gates's 1927 issue about the Hebrew boy Joseph imprisoned in Egypt, "From the Pit to the Throne," envisage how God can intervene in human affairs. Moreover, God's willingness to partner with the underprivileged and enact vengeance against the proud and powerful is a staple of African American Christian thought. As enslaved Africans converted to Christianity, they understandably embedded themselves in the Old Testament book of Exodus, singing with veiled though multivalent meaning directed at their "masters."

Didn't old Pharaoh get lost, get lost
 Didn't old Pharaoh get lost, get lost
 In the Red Sea, In the Red Sea
 True believer?

To be sure, preachers, cultural artists, and theologians throughout the twentieth century inverted the social order of American society that associated whiteness/wealth with purity/godliness and blackness/poverty with sin/evil. According to Arthur Huff Fauset, a major tenet of the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement of the Depression was consistent with this theological reversal. Believers professed that God incarnated Godself in the person of Major J. Divine, a black man formerly known as George Baker, because African Americans were among the lowliest of society. Thus Father Divine both embodied and demonstrated God's preference for and commitment to the weak and powerless.¹⁶ In many of W. E. B. Du Bois's writings published in *Crisis* during the interwar era, he associated the Christ figure with those on the underside of America, namely, poor black men and women. Du Bois thus conferred divinity on the victims of racial oppression and violence while dehumanizing those who were privileged by the racial and economic status quo.¹⁷ By the 1960s and 1970s, theologians James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, William Jones, and subsequent womanist voices such as Jacquelyn Grant and Katie Cannon systematized this tradition within academia.¹⁸ Black liberation theology as an academic project is constructed on the premise that God identifies with blackness and seeks to overthrow the domination of whiteness according to God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed. This theological tradition points to why one might surmise that there was little need for preachers to broach racial and economic injustice directly on records when recounting biblical narratives that demonstrate how God's justice brings wrath to the wicked while comforting the poor and oppressed. For black Christians familiar with

the evils of racial oppression, terrorized by the practice of lynching in the South, and trapped in the quicksand of a sinking pre-Depression economy, a message of divine reversal had resonant meaning on both cultural and personal levels.

The apparent ubiquity of the train in religious race records points to the pervasive travel motif that permeated black culture dating back to the antebellum period. For persons whose bodies were imprisoned and thus immobilized by the serpentine system of chattel slavery, train travel represented freedom and deliverance.¹⁹ It was the Exodus motif with a modern twist as the train ushered African Americans from slavery to freedom. We know that the Underground Railroad consisted of secret routes for slaves attempting to flee bondage, and the abolitionists who worked as guides and offered safe houses along the journey were known as “conductors” and “stations,” respectively. In the post-Civil War era, the train also provided the primary means for African Americans, particularly men, to migrate across states and regions in search of economic opportunities. One can see why train travel as a trope of racial deliverance assumed a religious quality. The capacity to “Git on board, little children” expressed an ultimate concern for human freedom, social mobility, economic power, and forward thrust—all signified by a speeding locomotive.

The train is an open metaphor within the black preaching tradition, however. As was the case with the Reverend Nix’s unfortunately implicit though racially unintended illustration of train travel, the “Black Diamond Express” represented evil and the “White Flyer to Heaven,” purity. African Americans affixed cultural meaning to the train according to context. Yes, many viewed the train as a source of liberty. At the same time, with the Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision that protected a Louisiana state law mandating racial segregation inside rail cars, the train also became the high symbol of American racial apartheid. African American passengers were relegated to unkempt conditions in waiting rooms and smoking cars and restricted from applying for higher-paid jobs and railroad union membership.²⁰

Gender also impacted how blacks perceived the train. If the train represented mobility for men, it just as readily evoked feelings of abandonment and loneliness for women. Some women, therefore, viewed the train as a vehicle of spousal desertion and family dissolution.²¹ What is more, white men commonly targeted African American women for sexual advances on the train, causing it to be a symbol of sexual vulnerability and terror. Whenever women bucked the culture of submissive domesticity and boldly rode the rails in search of opportunities in spite of the apparent dangers, many African

Americans, particular preachers, frowned upon them for their perceived moral laxity.

Historian John Giggie cites an additional reason that the train could be a source of contention for black ministers in the rural South. He notes that "excursion trips"—lowfare train rides to neighboring towns that railroad companies offered exclusively to blacks on Sundays—conflicted with faith communities. These popular open car outings allowed African Americans to visit friends and families in nearby areas but also were viewed as train rides for sin. Enjoying a day off from the fields on excursion trips provided blacks in the Delta region the opportunity to drink whiskey, fellowship with friends, and have a good time on the Sabbath. There was not a far stretch for the imagination of a preacher with creative and rhetorical gifts to connect these sorts of Sunday excursion trips with "Drunkardsville" and "Dancehall Depot." Yet this was the very sort of folk sensibility and rhetorical creativity typically associated with the southern region that religious race records sought to feature.

Regardless of the metaphor, what the previous sermon illustrations share in common is their ability to take the listener on journeys through time and space to witness the activities of the supernatural world. The words of the preacher broadened the boundaries of existence. The Reverend Nix, for instance, takes the listener along a rhetorical stroll through time in his sermon "The Matchless King" in order to detail how "all of the great men of the earth have had a match." Though chronologically out of sync, yet in a manner that was later commonly practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr. (most notably his famous "Mountaintop" address), Nix introduces the great Greek minds such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Euripides; he recalls great military and political leaders such as Napoleon, Hannibal, and Caesar; and he invokes the legacies of mighty biblical characters like Moses and Joshua. Nix ends each of the aforementioned introductions with the refrains "But he met his match" or "But he finally died" before celebrating Jesus who is "king of kings and lord of lords."²² This typifies how preachers painted word pictures extending back in time where participants were able to witness the handiwork of God while also reaching upward so that persons could pierce through the existential problematic of the material world. Thus, by way of these sermons, recorded preachers sang an old song in a new land using the tools and techniques of mass culture. They were preserving the oral customs of black religious tradition even as southern migrants attempted to assimilate to an urban, industrialized environment.

There was minimal difference in cadence or content among the vast majority of sermons issued in the pre-Depression era. Sermons

were chanted in style and were overwhelmingly pietistic in content. Religious race records, for the most part, refrained from overtly discussing matters of race or racial injustice in America. Preachers on wax simply “tell the story,” which involves a playful retelling of a well-known biblical narrative. As Albert Raboteau discusses in his writing on the chanted sermon, black preachers are not celebrated because they offer something new, *per se*. Rather the style of the performance dictates the originality of the sermon. One’s ability to perform the old with “skill, fluency, spontaneity, and intensity” determines the success of the preacher and the efficacy of the sermon.²³ The argument could be made, then, that the elocution of “tried and true” biblical narratives made the art of the traditional chanted sermon well suited for electronic recording. Records are to be played many times, and mass produced sermons eventually became a catalog of familiar biblical themes, an oral narration of favored biblical passages from the black Protestant tradition.

Noting these preachers’ predilection to adhere to the biblical narrative on wax is not to suggest that religious race records did not address social issues and material conditions. Contrary to charges that such sermons were “other-worldly” and “escapist,” these preachers used biblical narratives to speak to what they considered the ills of black people—i.e., a culture of fast living characterized by gambling, drinking, stealing, and sexual impropriety. They railed against nightclubs, bars, movie houses, and the perceived immorality such activities fostered, not to mention the ways consumer culture threatened the cultural authority of the church. In “Holes in Your Pockets” and “Shine-Drinking,” the Reverend F. W. McGee chides African American men for their fiscal irresponsibility due to sexual cavorting, conspicuous consumption, and their crapulent tendencies. The *Chicago Defender* advertised the Reverend J. M. Gates’s issue “You Midnight Ramblers” alongside photographs of a “gambler,” a “drunkard,” a “killer,” and a “crook.” An advertisement for two additional sermons, “Saturday Night Black Marier Riders” and “Meeting the Judge on Monday Morning,” featured a cartoon sketch of police officers beating a presumed villain with billy clubs while tossing another in a paddy wagon. The Reverend W. M. Mosley of Atlanta even speaks to the perceived culture of sexual entitlement among African American ministers in “You Preachers Stay out of Widow’s Houses”—a comedic yet macabre message in which he describes ministers standing before St. Peter’s gate headless due to the decapitating hands of a scorned widow.²⁴ Studio revivalists, then, with little acknowledged irony, used the tools of popular culture to prophesy a message of doom and gloom concerning the effects of popular culture on black life, even as these records were

advertised in black newspapers alongside promotions such as those for "New Manhattan Casino—Capacity 5,000 Dance Floor."²⁵

The long and productive recording career of J. M. Gates is instructive in regard to the pervious relationship between black preaching and mass culture. Most preachers, even acclaimed ones such as F. W. McGee, saw their recording careers come to an end with the Great Depression, but the Reverend Gates recorded more than two hundred sides on twenty different labels between 1926 and 1941.²⁶ Much of his success may be attributed to his distinctive preaching style and a willingness to adjust his recording format. Though Gates's early issues in 1926 and 1927 were consistent with other recorded preachers, in subsequent years he attempted to do more than "tell the story." Rather than offer an exposition of a biblical text, he began to provide what he saw as practical wisdom for daily living while expounding on contemporary themes and topics. For instance, in a 1928 release, "The Ball Game of Life," a sermon surely informed by the larger culture of religious muscularity that was sweeping American evangelicalism typified by former professional baseball player Billy Sunday, Gates begins by recounting the story of a man who hit a homerun at a baseball game yet was called out.²⁷ Gates says, "I wondered what was the trouble. They told me, 'He ran over the first base.'" Accompanied by shouts of "Amen" and "C'mon," he continued, "Children in this game of life, from earth to glory, you must make sure you touch the first base. The first base is 'repent.' The second base is 'believe.' And the third base is 'be baptized.'"²⁸

A gifted straining whooper with a lively singing voice, the Reverend Gates never fully discarded more traditional preaching. But sermons of the aforementioned style served as a sort of gateway to the scripted dialogues between Gates and his studio congregation that were to follow. Here his releases took on a more comedic quality, sounding similar to a vaudeville show with a minstrel influence. Producers sought to create a religious service where Gates would provide pastoral counseling to members of the congregation. Parishioners typically included "Sister Bell" (or, sometimes, "Sister Norman"), a faithful yet gullible church worker; "Sister Jordan," an inarticulate and unattractive "Mammy-like" character; and "Brother Deacon Davis," the guileless yet trouble-prone church deacon.²⁹ The spiritually happy though socially hapless characters listen attentively and appreciatively as their pastor engages them on subjects such as crime, sex, and their personal finances. In "You Midnight Ramblers," he begins by chiding "black haunted men and women" such as bank robbers, kidnappers, and cold-blooded murderers, and then asks Deacon Davis about his whereabouts the previous evening. Unable to produce a credible

response, Sister Bell all too willingly lets the pastor know that Brother Deacon spent the evening in jail. Neither could Sister Jordan account for her husband's late-night activity, as she alludes that he was out with unknown vagrants. This causes Gates specifically to condemn "You midnight ramblers, who lay awake at night just to rob and steal. Some of you so roguish," Gates declares, "that you will steal from yourself!"³⁰

Occasionally the Reverend Gates used the titles and themes of popular blues recordings as his sermon subject. His 1929 release "Dead Cat on the Line" appropriated a common blues expression. The sensory evocative phrase links the scent of a dead catfish to the smell of a woman who regularly cheats on her mate. Bluesman Tampa Red's rendition of the song includes:

You're brownskin, your husband ain't fair [light skin complexion]
 Your children all yellow, got curly hair.
 There's a dead cat on the line
 There's a dead cat on the line
 I ain't lyin, you is the cheatin' kind.³¹

Probably figuring the link between a "fishy" smell and a cheating woman as too overt and vulgar for a sermon recording, Gates's "cat on a line" referred to a pussycat that died atop a telephone pole. There is evidence that this aphorism refers to someone eavesdropping on the old party line phone services that were once common in the rural South. When someone suspected another of listening in on a conversation, they would suggest, "There's a dead cat on the line." But whether Gates was referencing a fishy smell or an unwanted listener on the phone line, the vernacular signification in terms of sermon content remained the same. A "dead cat on the line" represents an illicit, third-party intruder in a relationship. Gates begins the recording with, "I want to speak to you from the subject: if a child is no way like his father, there is a dead cat on the line." During the course of the message he engages his three church members:

Gates: Now, Sista Bell, do you know your chil'ren's father?
 Bell: Well, yes. Now I think I know my las' two chillun's father.
 Gates: Yeah, you think you know. Well, you may not know. But if you dudn't know, you got the last word of the question. Cause I am one man that thinks all chil'ren should favor their father. Did you hear me? I think that sure enough.

- Deacon Davis: Well, Brother Passa, I tell ya' I got one child that don't fava' me at all.
- Gates: Hmm?
- Deacon Davis: No, suh.
- Gates: It didn't walk like ya? Dudn't talk like ya? Hadn't got color like ya?
- Deacon Davis: No, suh.
- Gates: Well, there's a dead cat on the line! You know if a man makes a picture for me, then it should favor me. And, if not, there's a dead cat on the line. Now, Sista Juh'dan, what about your chil'ren?
- Sister Jordan: Well, you asin' me too much my bidness rightchere. You come to my house and I'se tell you'se all 'bout it.
- Gates: Well, I didn't go down to your house before the chil'ren was born. And I don't have to go down there now!³²

To be certain, these recordings come across today as more condescending than comedic and rudimentarily written and performed. But so do the "Amos n' Andy" radio shows as well as the slow-talking, self-deprecating Stepin Fetchit character. One could argue that it was this apparent opposition of the bourgeois class that made them so popular. The down home appeal of these preachers, which included rural allusions, African American colloquial phrases, and broken dialect, recreated a rural black existence for listeners. And similar to Philip Goff's examination of William Hogg's Little Country Church of Hollywood that appealed to Dust Bowl migrants during the Depression era, the circulation of crude images of ignorant southerners appealed to a cross section of listeners. Urbanites have the opportunity to mock southern neighbors just as rural listeners and new migrants adjust to changing social conditions while laughing at themselves.³³ These records, then, become financially profitable and humorously entertaining all the same. So much so that Gates soon thereafter released "Dead Cat on the Line, Part II," and "New Dead Cat on the Line" more than five years later. (The Reverend F. W. McGee also released his own version of *Dead Cat on the Line* on Victor in 1930.) In Gates's second "Dead Cat" release, he borrows directly from the traditional blues lyrics. Speaking to the same cast of characters, Gates tells the story of a brown-skinned woman, married to a dark-skinned man, who gave birth to a light-skinned child. Deacon Davis then confesses, "I gotta child that don't even walk like me." To which Gates responds, "You ought quit using the word 'I got a child. You ought to say there is a 'child in my house.'"³⁴

Commodifying the Folk

Like all forms of mass culture, religious records served multiple purposes and were interpreted by listeners at varying registers. There were surely those who superciliously regarded the singing and preaching of religious race records as backward vestiges of southern and even slave culture, just as others found religious race records both spiritually edifying and immensely entertaining. But there is no reason to believe that this form of religious commercial culture should be interpreted in two contrasting directions. Cultural accommodation in the form of what some may believe to be “cooning it up” versus cultural resistance and subversion offer limited interpretive options. Rather, following R. Laurence Moore’s analysis of religiously influenced commercial entertainment following the Civil War, religious race records might also be viewed through the prism of serving the interests of the working class, but not particularly well.³⁵ It would be wrong to assume, for instance, that record executives at Columbia and Vocalion Records manipulated working-class black preachers to restrict and control the behaviors of working-class black people in the service of the elites. Based on what we know of black bourgeois religious culture at the time, if they had had their way, the recording careers of J. M. Gates and F. W. McGhee would have been nonexistent. Yet it was the apparent opposition of these preachers to the bourgeois class that made them so popular. This still does not mean that both record executives and the black preachers who made the recordings did not have a stake, both financial and otherwise, in producing sermons touting sobriety, personal piety, and highly gendered moral rigor. According to Moore, this sort of class-based, seemingly paradoxical, interpretation, grounded in the cultural resistance of the working class that lends itself toward middle-class moral propriety, is a result of the confluence of religion and mass culture. Success in the broad consumer market follows morally sanitized and culturally acceptable products.³⁶ And for religious race records, the two were not always consistent. Producers balanced the moral teachings of the Christian faith over against representations of African Americans that would not overtly disrupt the cultural status quo. To support this claim I want to consider these sermons from the perspective of profitability for the record labels as well as vocational and masculine vulnerability of African American preachers. Each of these particular concerns illustrates how record producers and recording preachers possibly negotiated packaging a moral message on wax without overtly disrupting widely accepted cultural conceptions of race, class, and gender stratification during the interwar period.

First, in terms of profitability, we know that the industry privileged the aesthetic and theological voices of some while silencing others. Consider the sorts of sermons that were issued during this era. Record executives were not interested in the academically informed and homiletically staid articulations of professionally trained clergy. Yet by most accounts, it was typically the educated clergy, despite their uncritical embrace of perceived European culture, who challenged white supremacy, stressed social equality, and promoted a progressive social gospel that engaged critically the material conditions of black people. These were also the ones who tended to hold the view that too many sermons in the black church catered to what Benjamin Elijah Mays described as the "other-worldly and unpracticable aspects of life."³⁷ Simply "telling the story" of Daniel in the lion's den and celebrating his deliverance, many opined, did little if it could not be applied in assuaging racial injustice or acculturating African Americans toward social equality.

From the perspective of the record companies, however, labels had a financial interest in preachers that refrained from politically charged debates. This is true for a couple of reasons. For one, executives were confident that race records would sell, but records that addressed the "race problem" were considered too socially volatile and divisive for a broad consumer market. African Americans may have agreed about the reality of racial injustice in America, yet they have always diverged when it came to effective response. We have already noted how many African Americans found bourgeois racial uplift politics wanting. There was also the potential backlash from the white establishment as these records were distributed by mail order in northern cities as well as the deep south.³⁸ Any blatant reference to social equality or desegregation could have deleterious consequences for a company's capacity to distribute widely these race record series. Hence, record labels and preachers could find greater profit in not being prophetic or speaking against systems of power and oppression.

Record companies also had empirical evidence to support their claim. They already learned from their blues releases that the southern grit of country blues performers was displacing the more polished voices of northern vaudeville performers.³⁹ Blues historian Paul Oliver references the unsuccessful recording of Baptist minister, author, and social activist Sutton Griggs. A graduate of Richmond Theological Seminary and later president of American Baptist Seminary, in 1928 the Reverend Griggs recorded "A Hero Closes a War," one of few sermons released during the race records era that addressed explicitly the problem of the color line. Passionate yet controlled, the sermon concludes with a story about interracial cooperation involving

a capsized boat during the First World War. Griggs challenges the listener to "have the vision and the courage to go forth helping the various races of mankind to tolerate one another on the bottom of the upturned boat in the troubled, tempestuous sea of life."⁴⁰ According to Oliver, the pedantic nature of the record extinguished its appeal. It may also be safe to conclude that its lack of commercial success confirmed for executives that sermons with familiar biblical narratives and simple, largely open-ended conclusions could attract a broader consumer market.

Second, one cannot ignore the role these records played in reclaiming and solidifying the social status and cultural authority of the black male preacher. It is not without irony that the production of religious race records coincided with a growing anxiety in the African American community about black religious leadership. On the heels of Reconstruction, one half of black professionals in the South were clergy who played a prominent role providing social and political leadership. By 1930, however, ministers only constituted 10 to 15 percent of the professional class, with a growing sense in the community that black preachers should be socially decentered, if not displaced.⁴¹ This opinion was not isolated to a particular social class. A survey of black cultural production from the era reveals that intellectuals ranging from scholars to blues artists to kids cracking suggestive jokes on street corners found a myriad of ways to criticize the perceived sense of financial and sexual entitlement that had come to characterize African American clergy.⁴²

W. E. B. Du Bois documented this pattern of black ministerial devolution of authority two decades prior. In his findings on "The Minister," published as a part of the Hampton Negro Conference Annual Report in 1906, Du Bois expressed that there was a "deep and wide-spread dissatisfaction with the average Negro minister." He goes on, "There have been among Negro ministers in the past so many men of immoral life and men so lacking in dignity and high purpose that continually the educated classes of the race, the young aspiring graduates of our schools, the fathers of rising families have been dissatisfied with this class of men and have withdrawn themselves from them."⁴³ From another perspective, blues artists were unapologetic in terms of their sardonic descriptions of preachers and deacons. Bluesmen and women often appropriated the cultural stereotypes directed at African Americans in white southern folklore and minstrel shows and transferred the butt of the jokes to the preacher.⁴⁴ A racist folklore verse that extends back to the antebellum South went:

Some folk say that *a nigger* won't steal,
But I caught two in my cornfield.

But in 1927, former African American minstrel show performer Frank Stokes recorded "You Shall" with the lyrics:

Well, some folk say that a *preacher* won't steal
I caught about eleven in a watermelon field

And, in 1930, the married blues duo Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie modified the line in "Preachers Blues" to place greater emphasis on what they considered the lascivious and sexually promiscuous tendencies of black preachers.

Some folks say a preacher won't steal,
I caught three in my cornfield,
One had a yellow, one had a brown,
Looked over in the middle, one was getting down.
Now some folk say, that a preacher won't steal,
But he will do more stealing than I get regular meals.

I went to my house, about half past ten,
Looked on my bed where that preacher had been,
Now some folk say, that a preacher won't steal,
But he will do more stealing than I get regular meals.

He'll eat your chicken,
He'll eat your pie,
He'll eat your wife out on the sly.
Now some folk say . . .

I been trying so hard to save my life,
To keep that preacher from my wife,
Now some folk say . . .⁴⁵

Music and folklore were not the only means used to criticize the perceived corruption of black ministers. Representations of the black preacher as huckster in film were also common during the interwar era. Oscar Micheaux presents the huckster as the self-contemptuous "Old Uncle Ned" in "Within Our Gates" (1919) and as the nefarious, serial raping "Right Reverend Isaiah T. Jenkins" in "Body and Soul" (1925); white Hollywood director King Vidor depicts him as the sexually unrestrained "Ezekiel the Prophet" in "Hallelujah" (1929); and Trinidadian immigrant director Donald Heywood lampoons the charismatic yet quixotic leadership of famed 1920s black nationalist Marcus Garvey with the unorganized exploits of "Charcoal Johnson" in his comedy "The Black King" (1932).⁴⁶

This tells me, then, that African American preachers of the era shared a vested interest in maintaining and defending social authority to counter an impending climate of vocational vulnerability. At least two different strategies can be identified that were similar in

method; both involve scapegoating the less powerful. On the one hand, for the clergy of the upper echelons, countering vocational vulnerability took the form of dismissing the creative genius of the chanted sermon and demonizing preachers of the working classes that were most associated with this form of vernacular culture. They understood their responsibility to eradicate the vestiges of "slave religion" that served as a retarding force over black communities. This is the ecclesial and class contestation that Higginbotham details so well. On the other hand, for preachers afforded the opportunity to record on wax, the working-class members of the community become the buffoonish, ignorant, and criminal scapegoats. Recordings like Gates's "Dead Cat on the Line" and "Pay Your Policy Man/Pay Your Furniture Man" (where he chastens his congregation for refusing to pay their bills) allowed him to create an identity on wax that was distinctive from stereotypical representations of the black working class. Gates comes across as sexually chaste, fiscally responsible, spiritually wise, and an overall paragon of morality and decency, while we see black folk as sexually lascivious, financially irresponsible, and religiously unsophisticated. On the recordings, it is the folk who signify the dumb yet devoted followers, and the preacher is noble and proud as opposed to a punch line. Yet, without "Sista Juh'dan" and "Brotha Deacon Davis," the recordings could not prove that black preachers were more intelligent, more responsible, and, most important, still necessary in terms of community leadership.

Finally, just as recorded preachers used the industry as a means to resist vocational vulnerability, one could also interpret these sermons as reasserting a masculinist hierarchy in black popular culture. Other than the voice of the male preacher, women dominated the race recording industry in the early years.⁴⁷ Blues women of the 1920s such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ida Cox not only helped to popularize and solidify the place of the blues in popular culture, but they also impelled a public conversation about issues important to black women in the urban context. By placing topics of female sexual freedom, black women's labor, depression, domestic violence, and overall human agency on the cultural agenda, blues queens illumined just how much the realities of black female life in the urban, industrialized context were inconsistent with the cult of domesticity embraced by the black bourgeoisie and much of Afro-Protestantism.⁴⁸ Angela Davis, in her text *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, offers blues women as a constitutive component of the vocational vulnerability of black preachers. While male ministers were becoming a "professional caste," it was the blues women like Smith and Rainey who were "attracting large audiences at revival-like gatherings." These women, according

to Davis, were preaching a message of sexual love and human expression that reinforced to their audiences that they were indeed free from the bondage of slavery.⁴⁹ In response, black preachers became even more consumed with policing the bodies of black women and “empowering” masculine authority over them.

Once again the recordings of the Reverend Gates offer prime examples. He recorded more than his share of misogynistic messages. The two-part “Deacon Board Meeting” sought to recreate traditional Baptist church proceedings. Here, Pastor Gates and the deacon board flex their male muscle by censuring Sisters Jordan and Norman for “not speaking and being out late at night.” After Gates feverishly though unconvincingly displays his proficiency with *Robert’s Rules of Order*—possibly to remind the listener of the importance of the professional role beyond preaching—the two women testify to their personal squabble, of which Sister Jordan describes as “Nigga mess.” The sisters then plead with one another and the board for forgiveness that their gossip will not threaten their church standing.⁵⁰ Gates extends this theme of gossiping women on the recording “The Woman and the Snake.” Referencing the Garden of Eden, he suggests that, if God made woman from a man’s bone, then man must have had a bone in his tongue because “she’s a talking piece of [inaudible].” The reverend goes on to say, “A woman is like a snake. A snake can cross the road and you can’t see his tracks. And a woman, she can make up a thing and tell it. And play a trick and you can’t catch up with her. And she so smooth that she wink her eye at herself.”⁵¹

Along with these titles were “Smoking Woman in the Street” and “Women Spend Too Much Money.” The former was a forceful denunciation and warning to young single women who “lower the dignity of their race and themselves.” Rather than the typical cast of characters accompanying Gates on this record, there is only the demure and soft voice of a lone woman. As Gates declares, “Men, sho nuff men, single men . . . is not looking for a wife with a cigarette in her hand,” her affirming voice is heard interspersing, “No, they sure not . . . yes, that that is the truth.” While reportedly speaking to an all-female congregation, Gates chides, “You women always feel that these men are of no account. But, ahh, you just spend too much unnecessary money!”⁵² Yet it is in the sermon “Mannish Women” where Gates gives his most forceful denunciation of gender equality and freedom. “They’re trying to do everything that they see or hear a man doing,” he criticizes. Female congregants add “that’s right” and “my God” as Gates makes a not-so-veiled reference to lesbianism, which, of course, was practiced overtly and sung about by blues women of the era. “They’re wearing pants! And cutting their hair like a man. In

fact you got women who are getting so mannish until sometimes they try to walk and talk like a man." He then goes into a sermon run asserting unreasonably, "So mannish, until they stay out as late at night as any man. So mannish, until they will rob and steal like men. So mannish, until sometimes you can read about them being bank robbers and holding up at night. So mannish, until they won't raise their children." His sermon abruptly ends with a song that seems to contradict his assertions about the influx of mannish women in society. Along with the women and deacon, he sings, "Take the hem out the dress, let it down. Then let the church roll on."⁵³

Condemning the Folk?

The previous examples offer insight into the ways religious race records presented the doings and sufferings of everyday black folk, the communities to whom these records purportedly sought to represent and were created for. But what does it mean when the majority of voices represented recirculate mental images of immoral, spiritually unsophisticated men and women? And how do sermons that emphasize stereotypical depictions of African American humanity reinforce or challenge dominantly held conceptions about black life in general? These questions are important because Higginbotham is correct about religious race records reflecting the existence of conflicting subcultures within the black working class. There are certainly differences of consciousness and values among this community. But the varying consciousnesses may just as willingly embrace, as much as they reject, derogatory cultural representations about their own identity. Religious race records did more than call attention to the conditions of urban life, they participated in the condemnation of the urban poor by creating and codifying racist stereotypes during the Depression era.

Clearly this is not to suggest that there is only one way to interpret religious race records of the interwar era. Just as evidence points to how black audiences at this time viewed minstrel characters such as Stepin Fetchit as subversive tricksters who were passive-aggressively "putting on old mass," it is possible to invert the target of scorn.⁵⁴ One might suggest that Gates's recordings provided women with a womanish public voice that contradicts willful submission. When Gates chastises the all-female congregation for spending too much money on clothes, Sister Bell undauntedly rebuffs, "I have to always buy for myself and chillun, too. 'Cause dat husband of mine I got ain't no account. And the fact of da' bidness is ain't no men, no account!" And when sisters Jordan and Norman protest the charges that they were out too late at night in the "Deacon Board Meeting," it

is the nitwitted Deacon Davis who eagerly testifies to having seen the two sisters "coming out Darktown at 12:30 o'clock at night." When Sister Norman boldly proclaims Deacon Davis to be a liar, he insists, "Brotha Mod'rator I'se met her myself at 12:30 o'clock at night, and I don't think nobody got no bid'nness bein' in our church who staying out dat' late at night." This unintended confession then causes the board to withdraw the right hand of fellowship from Deacon Davis rather than sisters Norman and Jordan.

Because this essay seeks to widen the interpretive lens from which we view the explicit and implicit messages of religious race records—a lens that evaluates the power relations between producers and consumers—I feel it necessary to provide a culturally sustainable read of these recordings that moves beyond an essentialist view of the resistant black working class. When we privilege the vernacular culture of working class, we run the risk of being uncritically appreciative of these preachers and possibly overlooking the ways they, too, reinforced the perspective of the social elites.

Mass media represents power, the power to legitimate extant authority or cast a new ideal as the cultural standard. Record companies may have understood themselves as refraining from theological and political debates for the sake of profit, but apolitical commitments surely have political consequences. This is why the industry's initial decision to focus on theologically conservative sermons that focused on personal piety cast a powerful ballot in the culture debates concerning the style, content, and purpose of black preaching. Since the true "folk" were spoken to and not speaking through religious race records, we must be just as concerned about the recording industry's ability to reinforce social control over raced, classed, and gendered bodies as we are about investing these recordings with subversive meaning.

Notes

1. Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989); Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s," in *African-American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and

Eddie S. Glaude (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); and, to a lesser extent in terms of religious race records yet a very important work addressing the intersections of the chanted sermon, mass culture, and class contestation, Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

2. Higginbotham, "Rethinking Vernacular Culture," 979.

3. See Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

4. Higginbotham, "Rethinking Vernacular Culture," 980. At the center of Higginbotham's essay is an appeal for historians and cultural theorists to see the black public sphere not only as an internally contested terrain but also as pluralized. There are numerous "publics" and "counter-publics" within societies stratified along racial, ethnic, class, and/or gender lines that may or may not overlap. Here, she is extending an argument originally made in response to Jürgen Habermas's conception of a bourgeois public sphere in late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, a public sphere that resides between civil society and the state as a mediated discursive realm. Higginbotham ingeniously applied this conception of competing publics in her earlier work by describing the black Baptist church as a counter-public that stood in opposition to the dominant white society in the post-Reconstruction era. In the particular case of religious race records in the 1920s, she regards the public emergence of the folk orality representative of black working-class churches as an intraracial "counter-public" over against the religious sensibilities of the black middle class as well as the perceived wanton mores of the black poor as represented in the blues.

5. To be sure, this essay operates from the assumption that there are kinetic relationships within mass culture among producers and consumers, cultural production and consumption, as well as hegemony and contestation. There is always a dialogical dance between readers of popular culture and the actual cultural production itself that is based upon the material conditions, collective memory, and associated cultural meanings of the former. This essay, then, seeks to illumine the broader religious and

cultural context in which religious race records were produced and distributed in order to substantiate what I consider to be a culturally sustainable interpretation of the phenomenon.

6. Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 140; W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins (1986; New York: Library of America, 1996), 494.

7. Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 51.

8. Winston Holmes unsuccessfully sued Columbia and Burnett for breach of contract. Unfortunately, this was the very sort of oligarchic practice of major recording companies like Columbia, Victor, and Paramount that eventually led to the demise of most black-owned companies. Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 32.

9. Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 156.

10. "Black Diamond Express to Hell," *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1927.

11. A. W. Nix, "Black Diamond Express to Hell," Part I (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

12. Cheryl Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women—: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).

13. There are prominent examples of ordained women within the AME Zion denomination such as Julia Foote and Mary Small in the nineteenth century, but such notable exceptions justify the prevailing rule of excluding women from ordained ministry. Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Women and the Church," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), 143, n. 10.

14. Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 183–86.

15. Leora Ross, "Dry Bones in the Valley" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

16. Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (1944; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 62. Of course other historians such as Jill Watts interpret Father Divine's theology through the lenses of New Thought

philosophy. Father Divine's teachings were thus grounded in a belief that persons can overcome the negativity associated with blackness by tapping into their inherent god potential. This sort of positive thinking would allow black followers both to control their destiny and to overcome a sense of powerlessness characteristic of a white supremacist society. But even here it is a belief in the god within all human beings that radically democratizes the unjust relations of a given society. America may not be inverted according to a horizontal hierarchy where the "first shall be made last," but, according to Jill Watt's interpretation of his theology, the last shall be made first. Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 24.

17. See chapter 4, "Black Messiahs and Murderous Whites," in Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

18. James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969); James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971); William Ronald Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1973); Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979); and Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1985).

19. See the widespread references to train travel in and around the supernatural world by former slaves in Clifton H. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1993); and Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 11.

20. For an expansive and engaging treatment of this topic, see chap. 1, "Train Travel and the Black Religious Imagination," in John Michael Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

21. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," 476.

22. A. W. Nix, "The Matchless King" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

23. Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 142.

24. F. W. McGee, "Holes in Your Pockets" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005); F. W. McGee, "Shine Drinking" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005); "Saturday Night Black Marier Riders," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 30, 1930; W. M. Mosley, "You Preachers Stay out of Widow's Houses" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

25. "Display Ad 42 (No Title)," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 29, 1926.

26. Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 160.

27. Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Tony Ladd and James A. Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

28. J. M. Gates, "The Ball Game of Life" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

29. I describe Sister Jordan in this way based upon her being the butt of many jokes in regard to her physical appearance in recordings. For instance, J. M. Gates, "Kinky Hair Is No Disgrace" (Sony Music Entertainment, 1930; rereleased 2004).

30. J. M. Gates, "You Midnight Ramblers" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

31. Tampa Red, "Dead Cats on the Line" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

32. J. M. Gates, "Dead Cat on the Line" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

33. Philip Goff, "Early Christian Radio and Religious Nostalgia," in *Religions of the United States in Practice*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 309.

34. J. M. Gates, "Dead Cat on the Line," Part II (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

35. R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 190.

36. *Ibid.*, 191.

37. Benjamin Elijah Mays, Joseph William Nicholson, and Institute of Social and Religious Research, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933), 17.

38. Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 34.

39. *Ibid.*, 33–35.

40. Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 146.

41. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, rev. and enl. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 220; Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 55.

42. Folkloric tales of the gluttonous tendencies and the sexual exploits of preachers are legion. One joke rooted in the migration era goes:

The reverend and the deacon was sitting in church. The deacon said, "Reverend, I bet I have did it to more women in this congregation than you have." And the reverend said, "Shit, that what you think." He said, "Now I tell you what to do. When the church service starts, all that you did it to, say 'eeny meeny' and all that I did it to, I'm gonna say 'eeny meeny.'" "All right, that's a deal."

So the congregation started about 8 o'clock, you know. They all started walking in. Reverend came in. The first two sisters come in, the reverend said, "Eeny meeny." Second two sisters came in, deacon said, "Eeeny meeny." So then long come 'round about 10 o'clock, they still coming in, and the deacon's wife walked in. Reverend said, "Eeny meeny." The deacon said, "Hold it, reverend, I told all that you done did it to, you say 'eeny meeny.' But that's my wife." He said, "That's why I said 'eeny meeny.'" "And that's my mother in back of her, my four daughters, my granddaughter, my mother-in-law, my three aunts, and my great-great grandmother." Reverend said, "Well, eeny, meeny, meeny, meeny, meeny, meeny, meeny, meeny."

Printed in Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle . . . ; Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1964), 184.

43. W. E. B. Du Bois and Herbert Aptheker, *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, 4 vols. (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1982), 1:328.

44. Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (London: Cassell, 1968), 75.

45. Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe, "Preachers Blues" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

46. For an amazingly in-depth and entertaining analysis of race films of the interwar era, see Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

47. Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 33.

48. Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 10; Buzzy Jackson, *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 17; Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 20–26; and Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?" *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 57.

49. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 9.

50. J. M. Gates, "Deacon Board Meeting," Parts I and II (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

51. J. M. Gates, "The Woman and the Snake" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

52. J. M. Gates, "Smoking Woman in the Street" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005); J. M. Gates, "Women Spend Too Much Money" (Beckenham, U.K.: Document Records, 2005).

53. J. M. Gates, "Mannish Women" (Sony Music Entertainment, 1930; rereleased 2004).

54. Mel Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry* (New York: Vintage Books USA, 2006).

ABSTRACT As one of the first nonessential commodities marketed to African Americans, the race record industry provides historical insight into the cultural ethos and competing ethical values of black communities during the interwar period. Both ethnomusicologists and historians have discussed the ways race records articulate intraracial conflicts that were exacerbated by social factors such as migration and urbanization. But like all forms of mass culture, religious records served multiple purposes and were interpreted by listeners at varying registers. For many, religious recordings were spiritually edifying and liberating, just as they were wildly entertaining. And some may feel that these religious recordings contested the aesthetic values of the black middle class even as they reinforced prescriptive bourgeois behavioral codes. While the purpose of this essay is not to give voice to the listeners of religious race records, this essay does offer an initial attempt to illumine the broader cultural

contexts in which these records, namely, recorded sermons, were both produced and consumed toward providing tenable interpretations of these recordings based on resonant religious beliefs and meanings of the historical moment. This essay is concerned with such questions as: What theological and political discourses were these preachers participating in on wax? What cultural symbols, explicit and implicit, did these preachers commonly reference? And what were the possible ideological implications of these cultural significations? Despite the many interpretive possibilities of recorded sermons and even the "folk" aesthetic that defines them, this essay suggests that the religious race record industry served as a productive force in encouraging systems of social control over raced, classed, and gendered bodies during the interwar era. And the industry's decision to focus on theologically conservative sermons stressing personal piety cast a powerful ballot in the cultural debates concerning the style, content, and purpose of black preaching in the previous century.