“The Secret at the Root”: Performing African American Religious Modernity in Hall Johnson’s *Run, Little Chillun*

Judith Weisenfeld

> Our folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils even when there is no interest in the depths of its roots. But when leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root.
>
> —Hall Johnson[1]

Introduction

Perhaps no twentieth-century interpreter of Negro spirituals was as influential in shaping Americans’ impressions of this form of religious music as was Francis Hall Johnson (1888–1970).[2] To be sure, other talented musicians had collected, performed, and promoted spirituals throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the Fisk Jubilee Singers, R. Nathaniel Dett, J. Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson, Eva Jessye, and Paul Robeson, to name a few. However, Johnson’s status as many Hollywood studios’ chosen arranger of African American music in more than thirty feature-length films and many short films and cartoons from the late 1920s through the mid-1940s provided him with an international platform to which few of these other musicians had access. Not only did Johnson make significant off-screen contributions to film as an arranger, but his choir also became a common sight and sound on screen in major Hollywood movies. As biographer Eugene Thamon Simpson notes, “The Hall Johnson Choir was the only choir in the history of American cinema to become a movie star.”[3] With a choir that numbered as many as 150 singers organized into smaller units directed by assistant conductors,

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Johnson's group could perform at multiple venues at the same time, thereby expanding its scope of influence.[4] In addition, his hundreds of published arrangements of spirituals for solo voice and choir as well as his original compositions in the style of spirituals continue to be used by choirs around the world.[5]

Along with other arrangers and performers such as Eva Jessye and Paul Robeson, Johnson included a range of African American folk music in his repertoire, but he became closely associated with religious music and especially Negro spirituals during the course of his choral career. There is, in fact, an overdetermined quality to Johnson's path to becoming an internationally renowned arranger and conductor of spirituals. He was born in Athens, Georgia, the son of Alice Sansom Johnson and William Decker Johnson, the latter a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church who served as the AME Church's first educational secretary and also a term as president of the church's Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. William Johnson had graduated from Lincoln University in 1868 and was, by all accounts, a conscientious laborer for the church.[6] William also had musical training that he passed on to his son, teaching him to sight sing.[7] Hall Johnson would go on to receive a bachelor's degree from Allen University during his father's tenure as president, extending his exposure to the intellectual culture of the AME Church. He continued his musical education in violin, viola, and composition at the Hahn School of Music, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Institute of Musical Art in New York (which eventually became part of the Juilliard School of Music).[8] In addition to his formal education, Johnson cited the influence of his grandmother's humming, singing, and "ecstatic shouts" on his sense of the connection between religious experience and music. Years later, he reflected, "In those days I did not realize what it meant when Grandma sang at her work until she 'got happy.' But now I know that God—not the Lord of the Churches, but the very God of Hosts—occasionally visited my grandmother in our kitchen and that, for two or three minutes of mortal time, she would be the honored guest at his Welcome Table."[9] It impressed him deeply that she had sung these songs in slavery, having been thirty when she finally realized freedom. Surely, with such a background, it is no wonder that Hall Johnson's musical talents would be channeled into the preservation of Negro spirituals, which he believed constituted "the noblest and loftiest . . . of all folk music of any period and in any part of the world."[10]

Despite what might seem like a near inevitable path to becoming a performer of African American religious music, Johnson's relationship to his spiritual inheritance proved complicated, and his

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vocational journey not always smooth. He did not follow his father into the church and, in many ways, moved far from the religious views and lifestyle that his parents likely expected of him. Such wrestling as Johnson's with religious commitment is, of course, not remarkable in and of itself. Johnson's recognition of the broader cultural and political implications of his call to perform Negro spirituals, however, amplified the personal struggle. His negotiation of the relationship between personal religiosity and public career was shaped by the intersection of the early twentieth-century flowering of black arts and popular cultures, on the one hand, and the commodification of these forms by white artists for consumption by largely white audiences, on the other. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, for example, white playwrights such as Nan Bagby Stephens, Em Jo Basshe, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, and Marc Connelly created powerful and enduring images of African American religion that conditioned white audiences to expect certain signs of "authentic" blackness in theatrical productions, with religious themes and Negro spirituals operating as central elements of this crafted authenticity.[11] Like many other African American artists in the 1920s and 1930s, Johnson responded to white writers' representations of black religious culture by creating works of his own that engaged comparable themes and relied on similar artistic forms to those found in productions by white artists. Indeed, his entire career was devoted not only to promoting and performing Negro spirituals but also to preserving what he understood to be their cultural integrity in light of transformations under way in African American culture that relegated spirituals to the past and in the face of commodified performances of black religious cultures before white audiences. As part of an African American modernist move to counter older notions of culture as functioning solely in the service of racial uplift, Johnson and others sought to demonstrate that "the cultural milieu of the folk, particularly in the vernacular forms of the spirituals, jazz, and blues, offered a rich artistic source in addition to a worldview supposedly untainted by the materialistic values of industrial society."[12] But Johnson had a broader goal in mind in his work to interpret black religious folk culture than simply countering a commercialized use of the spirituals with what he saw as a purer form and purpose, although he was surely concerned with such issues. He marshaled his expertise with Negro spirituals to propose a more expansive scope of religious possibilities for African Americans than the traditional Protestant affiliations provided. In doing so, he presented "the secret at the root" of black culture not only as revealing the spiritual genius of people of African descent but also as offering eternal and universal truths not bound by race.

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In this essay, I examine Hall Johnson's 1933 "music-drama," *Run, Little Chillun*, as a way of illuminating aspects of a broader artistic challenge to African American religious orthodoxy in this period. For Johnson, this orthodoxy was marked by a church-centered Protestant theology focused on individual sin and salvation and an emphasis on black suffering, and his work shows interest in pointing his audiences to additional resources even as he insisted on the enduring value of African American religious culture. Such a challenge places him among a diverse group of African American artists and intellectuals in this era, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Eva Jessye, Oscar Micheaux, and George Schuyler, although each certainly had his or her own set of distinctive spiritual and social concerns and made unique artistic contributions. Johnson imbued the production with elements of both his personal spiritual quest and his interest in modeling theological options beyond the scope of conventional African American religious affiliations, drawing on a diverse set of religious and artistic sources for both agendas. Like other participants in what Joel Dinerstein terms "African American popular modernism," Johnson "created and performed within an aesthetic tradition [he] felt strongly about honoring, not rebelling against."[13] With his commitment to and expertise with vernacular forms of African American religious culture unassailable, Johnson presented a critique of the conservative tendencies and restrictive parochialism of some black church members and leaders and insisted on the ability of the individual religious self to range freely across a variety of spiritual possibilities.

In addition to serving personal and public religious purposes for Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun* also represents his most ambitious attempt to reorient artistic representations of African American religious life away from the visions put forward in many productions by white playwrights in this period who were convinced of the limited nature of the religious imagination of African Americans. Johnson's play, which premiered on Broadway in 1933 and was also produced under the auspices of the Los Angeles "Negro unit" of the Federal Theatre and Federal Music projects from 1938 to 1939, received a great deal of popular and critical attention, making it a potentially productive vehicle for his pursuit of his artistic and religious goals. In fact, *Run, Little Chillun* was the most successful of all the FTP productions in terms of attendance and length of run, with performances in Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco and at the San Francisco World's Fair in 1939.[14] Through this work, Johnson entered the complex and often charged terrain of commodified constructions of African American religion, resisting their frequent resort to constructions of innate and simple black religiosity. In contrast, he formulated a

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modern black identity grounded in black arts and cultures but also drawn comfortably on a variety of religious sources and cultural elements.

Authentically Speaking

Hall Johnson's impulse to respond to the vogue of black religion on the American stage in the 1920s and 1930s was amplified by the fact that his career and artistic reputation both were inextricably tied to one of the twentieth century's most enduring theatrical representations by a white playwright of African American religious life and thought. Marc Connelly's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Green Pastures*, a re-telling of stories from the Hebrew Bible in an all-black context, opened on Broadway in 1930.[15] Staged by Connelly himself, the play saw great success in national and international tours over the course of several years, and the Warner Bros. 1936 film version has given the production an enduring place in American cultural memory. [16] Audiences responded enthusiastically to Connelly's humorous presentation of heaven as a plantation fish fry with a God who resembles an alternately kindly and surly black preacher. "De Lawd," as God is referred to by the white robed, winged angels, often becomes frustrated by the antics of his heavenly and earthly creations and splits his time between disciplining rambunctious angels and dealing with the troubles caused by humans, whom Connelly locates in a contemporary New Orleans setting. Johnson's choir appeared in the play as well as in later incarnations, and he wrote the arrangements of the *acapella* spirituals that proved so central to the production's success.

White theater critics were extravagant in their praise of Connelly's play, lauding it both for the artistic merit they found in his setting of stories from the Hebrew Bible in an African American context with a black God and for what they took to be the insider's look at African American Christian thought. Robert Littell's review in the *New York World* captures the awe-struck tone of many of the white critics as well as their ready credulity regarding Connelly's explicit claim to having captured the true religious mind of the Negro.[17] "Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* is simply and briefly one of the finest things that the theatre of our generation has seen," Littell gushed.

> Take that as tribute from one who forgot time, space and deadlines and sat through it until the final curtain. . . . It is something at once so moving, so intimately childlike and simple, so lovable laughable and majestic that you feel you have spent an evening not in a modern theatre but in the

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> mind of some Negro as he sat listening to his preacher tell the story, with explanations and little touches out of everyday life, of the Lord's long battle with the sinful humans he created on this small dark earth.[18]

Although African American intellectuals, artists, critics, and the general public were very much present in the audiences of productions of *The Green Pastures* and were enthusiastic about the performers' achievements, some black critics distanced themselves in a variety of ways from the play's claim to religious authenticity. For some, the theology Connelly presented indeed may have represented the religious sensibilities of some "fundamentalist" black Christians, but these critics tended to insist on the small number of such African Americans as well as the increasing proportion of modern, liberal black Christians.[19] Many other black critics rejected Connelly's vision in its entirety, insisting that, for better or worse, the majority of African Americans did not envision God as black.[20] Zora Neale Hurston objected to Connelly's conception of heaven, reportedly saying that, "if there is anything that is not in the Negro's conception of Heaven, it is work. . . . This is the white man's idea of Heaven palmed off to perpetrate the belief that the Negro's status, even in eternity, will be that of a menial."[21]

Johnson himself forcefully repudiated the play's religious content in a letter to an MGM producer as he prepared to participate in the 1943 black-cast film *Cabin in the Sky*, writing,

> The Green Pastures, a third-hand derivation from a second-hand book, was never more than a white-washed burlesque of the religious thought of the Negro. On every program of this entertainment . . . was to be found a solemn pronouncement by the author that the nonsense it portrayed was actual belief,—the serious religion, of "thousands of Negroes in the Deep South." . . . But to this day Negroes have never forgiven the slanderous misrepresentations of the piece, and when, after five successful years on the stage it was finally made into a picture, they did not hesitate to express their true feelings about it.[22]

Although Johnson was biting in his criticism of the production in private, he held his tongue in public as he tried to deal with the implications of his reliance on *The Green Pastures* for work for himself and the members of his choir, his continued contributions to the reputation and legacy of the production, and the fact that, because of these contributions, his name and his choir had become, for some, a shorthand designation for what one reviewer of a later Hollywood film

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called "antebellum hallelujahing."[23] Along with other black artists, Johnson struggled with the unique challenges of navigating the complex of competing claims on Negro spirituals and other aspects of black folk cultures.

Hall Johnson penned *Run, Little Chillun* in the spring of 1932 while the generally enthusiastically positive reviews of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* were still fresh in the minds of theater audiences. Understandably, most of the accolades were reserved for Connelly himself as the playwright, but some critics recognized the contributions that Johnson's musical arrangements and direction of the choir made to the production.[24] Indeed, in recognition of his outstanding work on the show, the Harmon Foundation, a prominent supporter of black arts, awarded Johnson its top honor in the field of music in 1930.[25] While participation in *The Green Pastures* brought the Hall Johnson Choir to national and international attention, it should be noted that the group was already quite popular in New York City by the time Connelly staged *The Green Pastures* in 1930.[26] Individually, Johnson had achieved some fame in the city as a violist with a string quartet and as a member of the orchestra of the successful Broadway production of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake's *Shuffle Along*.[27] He was fully engaged with and contributed to the artistic and social culture of the Harlem Renaissance, appearing at events like A'Lelia Walker's 1925 fundraiser for a fresh air fund for Harlem children.[28] So prominent had Johnson become by the late 1920s that the black press even covered a surprise birthday party that friends had thrown for him in his apartment in 1927.[29]

Although Johnson had become well known as a violinist and violist, his desire to work with Negro spirituals turned him from instrumental performance to composition and choir directing. His compositional work brought him quick recognition as the winner of two prizes in the music category of the National Urban League's second *Opportunity* magazine literary and arts contest in 1927.[30] Beginning in the winter of 1926, the Hall Johnson Choir made appearances in major concert venues around the city and on the radio, receiving positive responses from black and white audiences and critics. New York music and theater critic, and active Methodist, Cleveland G. Allen characterized the group as "an institution in the city" by 1928. Concerning a 1929 concert at Harlem's Renaissance Casino, New York's *Amsterdam News* reported that there was "no end of hearty applause" from the audience. In assessing the impact of the Hall Johnson Choir's recent arrival on the arts scene, the reviewer concluded, "Other than the Fisk Jubilee Singers, no other aggregation of singers has gained such royal recognition as the Hall Johnson Negro Choir. The immediate

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success of the singers is measured only by the sheer genius of their capable musician and experienced conductor."[31] Enthusiastic audiences called the choir back for six encores during a 1929 appearance at City College's famed Lewisohn Stadium.[32] Johnson's influence in the New York music scene extended beyond the concert stage and into the theater with his work in providing the music for the 1927 Broadway production of *Earth*, another "Negro-themed" play by a Russian émigré playwright, prior to his participation in *The Green Pastures*.[33]

In writing his own drama and working to get it produced on Broadway, Johnson likely wanted to capitalize on his growing popularity as an arranger of Negro spirituals in a period when productions featuring African American themes were commonplace, if not always successful. No doubt his high profile in the early 1930s attracted the financial support for the production of entertainment lawyer Robert Rockmore, who represented Paul Robeson in this period.[34] Johnson certainly recognized the significance of this opportunity to generate work during difficult financial times for even more members of his choir than the thirty who were appearing in Connelly's production.[35] As appealing as the possibility of work for his choir and the personal recognition might have been for Johnson, he likely found the opportunity to set African American religious music in a dramatic context with a theological emphasis that differed in significant ways from Connelly's an even more compelling motivation to write his own work. His production would resist the narrow vision of African American religious life that *The Green Pastures* promoted in its emphasis on a simple and childlike theology peculiar to African Americans. Nevertheless, Johnson probably imagined that whatever he put forward would inevitably be read in light of Connelly's work, which had set many of the terms of "legibility" of African American religious life in American popular culture.

Johnson's play focuses on the tensions that arise for the members of the Hope Baptist Church when the followers of Elder Tongola's Pilgrims of the New Day arrive in the otherwise unidentified rural "Toomer's Bottom." Members of the Christian congregation complain to their leader, the Reverend Jones, that the Pilgrims are threatening the community's integrity and "de furderment of de True Gospel" with their "heathenish notions sich as holdin' meeting' in de woods, singin' unknown tongues, dancin' half-naked, playin' guitars, banjers an' sich, an' doin' all other sorts of things dat ain't fitten fer civilized folks to do."[36] The play's title song, "Run, Little Chillun," which Johnson wrote in the style of traditional spirituals, captures the sense of danger the Baptists feel at the Pilgrims' presence in their

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community. In the play's final scene, the church members sing for their own protection:

> Oh, run little chillun, run!
> 'Cause de devil done loose in de lan!
> Oh, run on down to de Jerdon River,
> Cover yo' face wid de fir-y piller,
> Plant yo' feet on de *Rocks* of Ages,
> 'Cause de devil done loose in de lan'.[37]

Early in the play, the Baptist lay leaders express their intolerance for religious beliefs other than their own, passing a resolution insisting that Rev. Jones find some way to make the Pilgrims leave town. Jones urges his congregants to focus on their own religious labors and to trust in God to return those who have been drawn to the Pilgrims back to Hope Baptist. Photographs of the sets from the Broadway production show how Johnson, director Frank Merlin, and set designer Cleon Throckmorton provided visual evidence of the Reverend Jones's investment in the ideology of racial uplift, which he encouraged his congregants to embrace. The walls of the modestly furnished parsonage are decorated with photographic portraits of Abraham Lincoln, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar.[38] The pastor's surroundings announce to the church members that thrift, hard work, and education should be their focus rather than trying to curtail the activities of the Pilgrims of the New Day. Despite Rev. Jones's attempts to turn his congregants' attention away from the Pilgrims, they remain focused on ridding their community of religious alternatives.

At the center of the conflict stands Jim, son of the Reverend Jones and the one to whom the congregation looks as its future leader.[39] Despite his marriage to Ella, who is devoted to her husband and to the church, Jim is having an affair with Sulamai, a local woman who has been attending the New Day Pilgrims' worship.[40] Jim is bowed under the expectation that he follow in his father's footsteps, and, in considering the Pilgrims, he seems to be looking for a way out of this obligation to lead a congregation whose members disapprove of him. When Ella raises questions about Sulamai's influence on his religious life, Jim denies that his relationship with her led him to the Pilgrims. Instead he emphasizes his vocational struggle, responding: "That's jes' it—I was raised like I was—born and brought up in Hope Baptist Church. When I come outa school I stepped right in de pulpit an' preached to these people I'd been brought up with. Now, I jes' can't do it no mo'. I can't do the things I tell them to do. I ain't never goin' preach agin'."[41] He tells his wife that he finds no support in religion

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for his desire to be "a man that wants a man's life" and is disappointed that he can't be himself and "still look God in the face."[42]

In attempting to get Jim to join the Pilgrims of the New Day, Sulamai portrays the group as providing theological and community space where they might be together without regret. Early on, Johnson establishes Sulamai's reputation as that of a temptress whom the congregation's members believe is doing the bidding of the leaders of the Pilgrims. She is an outsider in this community dominated by Baptists; even her name marks her as different from her neighbors and more like the vaguely African members of the Pilgrims. Sulamai tells Jim that Brother Moses, a leader of the Pilgrims, preaches that "Sin ain' what you *do* but it's what you feel after you done done it. He say dat sin is a punishment God put on human bein's fer thinkin' dey was better den all de other creatures He made."[43] Later, she talks about how the Pilgrims' theology makes her believe in new possibilities for herself, telling Jim, "Well, I know I ain't got a chance to be nothin' in dis town, specially wid de Hope Baptis' people down on me. But over at de Pilgrims I feel lak I'm jes' as good as anybody else."[44] Sulamai wants Jim to follow her and leave town with the Pilgrims, but Jim's eventual rejection of the group's "scandalous" worship moves her to turn her attentions to a more willing Brother Moses. This, in turn, angers the other Pilgrims, who then shun her. The conflict is resolved abruptly at the play's end when Jim returns to the Baptist congregation and Sulamai, pregnant with his baby, is struck down by lightning when she comes looking for him at the Baptist revival.

The majority of the play's narrative advances in the course of two of the total four scenes, one set in the Reverend Jones's house and the other on Sulamai's porch, and Johnson's limited use of dialogue had an impact on the nature of critical response to the production. The other two scenes consist almost entirely of the religious meetings of the Pilgrims of the New Day and the Hope Baptist Church, respectively, and contain primarily music and movement. Most reviewers of the various productions agreed with Lewis Nichols of the *New York Times* who wrote, "of 'Run, Little Chillun!' little need be said as to plot or theme," and saw the production's strength as located in the arrangements of the spirituals and in the energy of the two religious scenes.[45] Because of this strong sense on the part of most commentators that the real drama of the play lay in Johnson's musical arrangements and compositions, as well as in his conducting of the chorus, the contributions of the directors—Frank Merlin for the Broadway production and Clarence Muse for the Federal Theatre Project revival—received relatively little attention.[46]

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Many commentators also emphasized the importance for the play's power of what they saw as the religious and cultural authenticity of the church revival scene. Chappy Gardner, the film and theater critic for the *Chicago Defender*, wrote, "It is in the church room settings where 'Run Little Chillun' gets its realism. So true to life, and the characters of the revival scene inject so much honest-to-goodness reality into their work that many in the audience about me found themselves completely controlled by the spirit of the play."[47] Theater critic for the *New York Evening Post*, Henry Beckett, characterized the revival scene as "startling in its verisimilitude, gripping in its revelation of racial characteristics, touching in its humanness and humor, and ecstatic in its song."[48] The reviewer for the *Amsterdam News* compared the revival scene to the representation of African American religious life in Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* and found Johnson's work far superior. "The choir's superb rendition of 'In that Great Gettin' Up Mornin,' followed by the title spiritual, 'Run, Little Chillun' and other numbers lead you to a point where the stark tragedy of the closing scene . . . will make you forget—for the moment at least—all that has transpired on that or any other stage. That scene alone is worth twice the admission price for the best seats of any Broadway offering."[49] *New York Times* music critic, Olin Downes, saw in the church revival scene the seeds of a "real American opera," in part, because Johnson approached the production with an understanding of "music as an inseparable element of the drama." While Downes concluded that "no doubt the future of American opera as a whole is much broader and more inclusive than that of Negro folk-play," he genuinely admired what Johnson had achieved.[50] For some African American audiences, however, the play suffered from what they saw as an excess of realism. For them, the authentic rendering of a church revival scene did not lend power to the drama but rather made it routine and unremarkable. After the first Broadway run ended, the show began a brief tour, beginning with the Lafayette Theater in Harlem. *Run, Little Chillun* moved on quickly, however, as Harlemites reportedly snubbed the show for being "too much like church."[51]

While most reviewers agreed about Johnson's success at "work[ing] out in dramatic form the community background in which Negro spirituals were born,"[52] many were not quite sure what to make of the scene in which the Pilgrims of the New Day gather for worship in the "Dance of the Full Moon." Johnson included some easily recognizable elements in the group's appearance and practices. In his stage directions for the Broadway production, Johnson characterized the Pilgrims' religious sensibility as "something approaching

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voodoo—not too directly African, but with a strong African flavor."[53] Similarly, Johnson's description of the main characters among the group locates them in Africa and the African diaspora: he notes that Elder Tongola, the group's mute founder, is African, that Mother Kanda "looks like a powerful conjure woman," and, finally, that Brother Moses should speak "somewhat in the manner of our sensationalist present-day Negro revivalists."[54]

Whereas critical response to the Baptist revival scene with which the play ends emphasized the power of the music, reviewers focused primarily on the dance and movement in the Pilgrims' worship, which, for some, also produced responses of recognition.[55] Chappy Gardner, the *Chicago Defender's* theater critic, described the scene as follows: "Beginning with a setting of soft blue lights on a full stage, 175 people enter clad in white and purple robes, all chanting something much like a Chinese wedding march I've heard in Chinatown. The scene ends in a blaze of harmony in a folklore song with the sudden rushing upon the stage of 40 native Bahami [*sic*] dancers. It holds one speechless and all attention."[56] Gardner's reference to the dancers as performing material from the Bahamas was no invention on his part, and other commentators, including John Martin, the dance critic for the *New York Times*, made similar comparisons. In Martin's case, he evaluated the choreography in Johnson's play in light of Zora Neale Hurston's 1932 production *The Great Day*, writing, "Those who recall with pleasure the native dances presented a season or two ago by Zora Hurston and her company will regret that the material selected for 'Run, Little Chillun' is not up to the same standard."[57] The comparison between Hurston's and Johnson's productions emerged not simply because both productions attempted to represent some sort of African-influenced ritual dance but also because of Johnson's direct appropriation of Hurston's well-regarded "Bahamian Fire Dance" segment from *The Great Day*. Johnson was quite familiar with Hurston's work long before the premiere of *The Great Day*. Hurston had collected the material for the dance during fieldwork research in the Bahamas in 1929 and, some time after returning to the United States, set about organizing a show that would eventually become *The Great Day*.[58] She approached Johnson as a potential collaborator for her project, and, according to her account, while she found him initially enthusiastic, he eventually declined to participate, apparently arguing that the public wanted to hear only spirituals and would not be open to the Bahamian elements of her work.[59] Hurston pressed on, putting together a production that included African diaspora folk songs, tales, games, and dances.[60] Reflecting in her autobiography on the relationship between her earlier work and Johnson's

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subsequent production, Hurston wrote that Johnson had "built his 'Run Lil' Chillun' around [her dance group] and the religious scene from [her] concert."[61]

Clearly, Hurston's claim of some measure of ownership of the material was not dependent on her original creation of them—for that matter, neither could Johnson claim complete originality for much of his work with spirituals—but on the labor of her fieldwork and on her staged interpretations. As Anthea Kraut notes, "Obviously, Hurston did not invent the dance; nor did she refashion the individual folk forms by fusing them with other stylistic idioms, as did her contemporary Katherine Dunham. Yet by no means did the Fire Dance automatically issue forth from the group of sixteen dancers she assembled for her concert, some but not all of whom were native Bahamians, for Hurston *trained* this troupe, using her film footage to refresh her memory as she rehearsed them."[62] In the end, Hurston maintained that Johnson appropriated her research and choreography for his production and denied any contribution from white modern dancer Doris Humphrey, who was listed as having arranged the dances for *Run, Little Chillun*. The participation of some of the very Bahamian dancers from *The Great Day* in the Broadway production of Johnson's play no doubt facilitated the incorporation of Hurston's work. What is of interest for us here, however, is not the fact of Johnson's appropriation of Hurston's work but its effect.[63] For some reviewers and audience members, particularly of the 1933 Broadway production, the combination of "exceedingly African" dance styles and stereotypical "primitive" costuming evoked commonplace tropes in representing black religious life.[64] The notice in the *New Yorker* among the list of ongoing Broadway productions characterized it as "a Negro play with some grand choral singing in it, involving more of those gyrations which have become symbolic of all Negro worship."[65]

For other commentators, the inclusion of a Bahamian dance in the context of a play that was ostensibly about the African American rural South produced a distressing lack of realism. Carl Cramer, who reviewed the Broadway production for the National Urban League's journal, *Opportunity*, wrote that the Pilgrims "elicit no recognition, they are merely baffling . . . it is to be regretted that *Run, Little Chillun* was not as factual, as true to the lives of negroes in the deep South as that part devoted to depicting the little church community of Baptists."[66] A similar response was common among reviewers of the later West Coast FTP production. The *San Francisco Chronicle*'s reviewer described the conclusion of the first act as "a scene of orgiastic African excitement, as the New Day Pilgrims celebrate, in weird dance and weirder songs, the virtues of their cult."[67] Whether interpreted as

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representing Johnson's careless lack of attention to realism or as revealing an essential racial religious ethos, the theology of the Pilgrims of the New Day did not receive sustained and nuanced attention from contemporary critics.[68] The failure of most critics at the time to engage the theological content that informs the "Dance of the Full Moon" scene also characterizes the small body of secondary literature that addresses Johnson's play. Theater and dance scholars have tended to see Johnson as using the New Day Pilgrims simply as a primitive foil to the Baptists, who, in these readings, triumph definitively at the play's end through Sulamai's *deus ex machina* death.[69] Music historian Marva Griffin Carter's assessment that "the New Negro denominational religion triumphs over the Old pagan cult" captures well the scholarly consensus.[70] Similarly, Brenda Murphy argues, "Like the plays by the white writers, *Run, Little Chillun* represents the African side of African American culture as primitive, uncontrollable, and dangerous, the black man's salvation as simple, joyous Christianity."[71]

While the lack of current access to the staged performance of *Run, Little Chillun* constitutes a challenge for understanding the full texture of the production, in this case, that challenge might present an interpretive opportunity. I want to take advantage of the fact that we no longer have access to the performance itself, which was clearly dominated by the intensity of the worship scenes, to examine the text of Johnson's play and his comments about the work to understand the sources and nature of the worldview and theology he ascribes to the Pilgrims of the New Day.[72] At the same time that I privilege the written and spoken word for the moment, I do so with the understanding that the theology of Johnson's New Day Pilgrims cannot, in the end, be divorced from the embodied enactment of their ritual life as represented in the closing scene of the play's first act, nor from the music that was an integral part of the ritual.[73] However, I hope to illuminate the production's autobiographical gestures in order to consider how Johnson's personal struggles and spiritual seeking grounded his presentation of the Pilgrims' theology. By placing the autobiographical in the foreground for the moment, we ought to be able to see *Run, Little Chillun* as more than a response to the representation of African American religion in *The Green Pastures* and other white-authored productions or an attempt simply to capitalize on his own fame but instead as an effort to use the theater as a means of pursuing a deeply personal religious project. Moreover, Johnson located that project in the broader sweep of African American religious history and, through his work, hoped to open up new theological possibilities for African Americans. Johnson's artistic approach to charting novel religious paths for African Americans was, ultimately,

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part of a broader vision in which he imagined placing "the secret at the root" of African American spirituality at the core of a plan for far-reaching social transformation.

Hall Johnson with Key to the Scriptures

In his public comments about *Run, Little Chillun*, Johnson resisted the idea that he had intended to encode a theological treatise in the New Day Pilgrims. In fact, he distanced himself religiously and emotionally from his creation when he told a journalist during the 1938–1939 FTP production, "They're just a bunch of ideas I had—a little bit of Father Divine, a little bit of something else—to make a contrast to the Hope Baptists. But they certainly aren't voo-doo cultists. White folk are always bringing out that word 'voo-doo' without understanding what it means. Voo-doo exists in Haiti, not in this country (except perhaps in some out-of-the-way sections of Louisiana, I'm told)."[74] According to the stage directions, Johnson had, in fact, initially imagined the Pilgrims' worship as related to "voodoo," but this later disavowal of a connection between his creation and Haitian Vodou or even Louisiana voodoo might have emerged in response to what he took to be the misreading of the group as racialized primitives by critics.[75] While he had the musical expertise and understanding of Negro spirituals' cultural context to help shape responses to the Hope Baptists, it is likely that his own invocation of voodoo produced an effect among white audiences over which he had less control, and that genuinely disturbed him. Johnson's casual approach in his interviews to the question of how he came to formulate the Pilgrims' theology was perhaps one part of a larger strategy to defend against the quick resort by some critics to interpretations of racial primitivism.

At the same time that he adopted a casual stance in interviews toward how he came to create the Pilgrims' theology, Johnson went to great lengths to explain the group to his audiences, an indication of the profound investment he felt in how they would be construed. Perhaps in response to critics' interpretations of the Broadway production, Johnson included an extensive plot summary in the program for some of the FTP productions in California four years after the play's premiere.[76] In this summary, Johnson resisted a facile reading of his work as ultimately endorsing Christianity. He expressed this resistance discursively by using comparable language to describe the worship styles of the Baptists and the Pilgrims and by focusing on similar modes of embodiment rather than on distinctive theologies. The Pilgrims, he wrote "worship in the woods, amid pagan rites and

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ceremonial orgies" and are carried away in a "frenzied dance," while the Baptists engage "in a quaint and semi-barbarous riot of singing, moaning, wailing and weeping."[77] Johnson also used the opportunity of the lengthy summary to counter any sense that Sulamai's death at the end of the play marks the triumph of the Baptists over the Pilgrims or of Christianity over Paganism. To be sure, in the script's stage directions intended for the director and actors, Johnson raised but did not resolve the question of whether it is "Jehovah" or Tongola who achieves revenge with Sulamai's death.[78] By the time of the FTP productions, however, he felt the need to interpret her death to audience members and to move away from the open-ended approach he had taken in the earlier script. Johnson ended his summary with the straightforward assertion that "Tongola has had his revenge."[79]

Another strategy Johnson employed to redirect potential interpretations of the Pilgrims as practicing a religion inferior to Christianity was to emphasize that the theatrical religion he portrayed was grounded in research about the world's religious traditions. A San Francisco journalist reported after speaking with him that "Hall Johnson, author, made up the scene from bits taken here and there out of his study of comparative religions. He may have invented a new religion without intending to do so, but shudders at the thought of it."[80] It is difficult to determine the precise nature and extent of his research, but there is evidence that he read about African religions and folk traditions, including such texts as J. Torrend's *Specimens of Bantu Folk-Lore from Northern Rhodesia*. There are few markings in Johnson's copy of this particular book, but he highlighted a section on "the typical old Bantu tale" which may have influenced his approach to the "music-drama" of *Run, Little Chillun*. Torrend writes of the typical folk talk, "It consists of two distinct parts, one narrated, mostly in the form of dialogues, the other sung. It is melo-drama of a kind. . . . Of the two parts the more important is the one that is sung, so much so that in many tales the narrative is to it no more than a frame is to a picture."[81] Johnson's emphasis on music over dialogue may have represented an attempt to produce an African American folk opera following the pattern of Bantu traditions. Although southern African folk culture may have influenced how Johnson structured the play and how he developed the Pilgrims' theology, he continued to press critics and audience members to understand the group as representing broad religious trends rather than trends limited to a particular racial group.

The link that Johnson constructed between his Pilgrims and religious leader Father Divine, whose followers viewed him as God and who preached positive thinking and divine healing, reveals much

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about the investment he had in ensuring that audiences fully engage the Pilgrims' theology. Johnson's reference to Father Divine provides the only explicit clue that concern with spiritual healing and the power of mind over matter were important elements of his formulation of the Pilgrims' theology. That Johnson shared similar spiritual interests with Father Divine provides a key to interpreting the Pilgrims of the New Day as more than a foil for the Hope Baptists.

In fact, the Pilgrims' theology bears the marks of Johnson's engagement with Christian Science, and tracing this line of influence illuminates additional aspects of his artistic, religious, and political goals for *Run, Little Chillun*. We can probably never know for certain the degree of Hall Johnson's commitment to Christian Science, nor exactly how he came to be interested in its teachings.[82] Neither African American participation in the Christian Science movement nor its institutions have received much scholarly attention despite the existence of predominantly African American congregations such as the Eighth Church of Christ, Scientist in Chicago and the Twelfth Church of Christ, Scientist, Colored in Harlem, among others. Even a cursory survey of the black press in the 1920s and 1930s and of texts like *Who's Who in Colored America* and *Negro Year Book* reveals numerous prominent African Americans in a variety of fields who identified as Christian Scientists. Notable among this group were significant figures in the arts, some of whom, such as playwright Garland Anderson, incorporated Christian Science and New Thought teaching into their work. Anderson's goal was to deliver a spiritual message "to prove to everyone who sees it that they can accomplish much bigger things if they will but believe and trust in their own divine self."[83] A number of African American women in Los Angeles who participated in the film and music industries—including journalist Ruby Berkeley Goodwin and film actresses Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers—were involved with Christian Science, and it is possible that Johnson was influenced by them.[84] Prominent African Americans in New York City were also affiliated with Christian Science, including famed milliner Mildred Blount, whose work in the theater may have brought her into contact with Johnson.[85] Of course, they were not the only Christian Scientists with whom he might have had contact, nor must he have been exposed to the church and its theology through African American sources. Indeed, it is entirely possible that Johnson came to Christian Science simply through reading church materials, such as Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. Moreover, the broader currents of New Thought, which promoted the cultivation of a divinely attuned mind and emphasized the power of such a mind to heal the body, may have influenced Johnson outside of any

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formal connection to Christian Science or other institutions related to New Thought teachings. Indeed, Father Divine's movement, based in Harlem where Johnson lived and worked, was an important conduit for New Thought in the period.

Materials preserved in the Hall Johnson Collection provide some insight into how he may have pursued spiritual healing and reveal the influence of Christian Science teachings on his religious life. Among the correspondence, newspaper clippings and reviews, posters, awards, recordings, and manuscripts is a well-used and worn King James Bible—a National Bible Press red-letter art version—with a small, faded photograph, probably of Johnson's mother, pasted to the frontispiece.[86] Slipped inside the Bible is a four-page article on prayer, torn from the June 1922 issue of the *Christian Science Journal*.[87] Written by Nemi Robertson, the article explores Mary Baker Eddy's contention that Jesus' prayers "were deep and conscientious protests of Truth,—of man's likeness to God and of man's unity with Truth and Love."[88] Robertson assured her readers that, "when prayer is metaphysically understood, men will rely on the power of the divine Mind to free them from the cruel decrees of the so-called carnal mind, which 'is enmity against God.' Fear, disease, and sin will be summarily dismissed from thought."[89] One can imagine that, as Johnson turned to the text of his Bible, the article he kept inside reminded him of the Christian Science view that, like Jesus, humans can produce efficacious prayer if, in praying, they acknowledge "the allness of God and His perfect manifestation, spiritual man."[90]

No information survives about when or how Johnson came into possession of this particular Bible, nor is it possible to date the penciled markings he made on almost every page: brackets in the margin to highlight certain passages, circles around other passages, underlining of words and phrases, and labored cross-hatching to eliminate text.[91] In some cases, sections are both underlined and crossed out, perhaps indicating Johnson's ambivalence and changing stance toward the text at different moments of reading. The frequency with which his notations appear in the text gives vivid evidence of his intense and careful engagement with it and his search for religious meaning and for physical and spiritual healing. The basic outlines of his spiritual needs might be revealed in his notations in Psalm 25:

> [*4:* Show me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths.
>
> *5:* Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.]
>
> *21:* Let integrity and uprightness preserve me; (for I wait on thee.)

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Johnson seemed to have been waiting desperately for healing and transformation. It becomes painfully clear from reading the notations in his Bible, however, that he had difficulty apprehending "the allness of God" and felt a sense of disappointment in his relationship with the divine. In his notations on reading Psalm 16, which begins, "Preserve me, O God: for in thee do I put my trust," Johnson expressed both his own steadfast efforts to follow God's path as well as a sense of abandonment:

> *8:* I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
>
> ~~*10:* For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.~~
>
> ~~*11:* Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.~~

His reading of a number of verses from Psalm 34 indicates an attempt to approach God with humility, coupled with a sense of God's refusal to hear him.

> *2:* My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad. ~~*3:* O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. *4:* I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.~~

Similarly, in Lamentations 3, Johnson circled some verses and excised others, giving evidence of disappointment or frustration in his seeking spiritual fulfillment:

> *24:* The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.
>
> *25:* The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him.
>
> *26:* It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.
>
> ~~*56:* Thou hast heard my voice: hide not thine ear at my breathing, at my cry.~~
>
> ~~*57:* Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon thee: thou saidst, Fear not.~~
>
> ~~*58:* O Lord, thou hast pleaded the causes of my soul; thou hast redeemed my life.~~
>
> ~~*59:* O Lord, thou hast seen my wrong: judge thou my cause.~~

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Not even Jesus' words in this red-letter edition were spared Johnson's pen, as in the case of John 14:21, among others:

> ~~*21:* He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.~~

From what afflictions was Johnson seeking healing? He struggled with alcoholism throughout the 1930s, which produced both personal and professional difficulties. He was, according to one account, drunk and disheveled at the 1931 dinner when he won the Harmon Foundation award, causing him to lose an engagement for his choir.[92] It is also possible that part of Zora Neale Hurston's frustration at his unreliability during their early collaboration on what would become *The Great Day* had its source in his alcoholism. Johnson's drinking incapacitated him during the 1937 filming of *Lost Horizon* in which his choir appeared, and Jester Hairston, one of his assistant choir directors, was forced to take charge of the choir.[93] Johnson resisted his friends' attempts to persuade him to enter a treatment hospital, convinced that "the cause has been purely mental" and, thus, required nothing more than a mental approach, an attitude that shows influence of Christian Science teaching. Eventually, he did take treatment in Los Angeles in 1939—during the West Coast FTP productions of *Run, Little Chillun*, which required another assistant director to fill in for him—and seemed to have gained some measure of control over his drinking.[94]

While Johnson understood his alcoholism to constitute a problem, he was not explicit about the impact of his bisexuality on his personal and professional life. Clearly, however, it disturbed some colleagues. Johnson married Celeste Corpening in 1912, and she joined him in the migration north to Harlem in 1914. The couple would remain together until her death in 1935. Musician and educator Manet Fowler, a colleague, supporter, and sometime critic of Johnson's, wrote to him to express concern for his wife, who "clung to [him] with a sort of childlike simplicity" and seemed to be "hungry for that real something that only a faithful, manly husband can give." She felt moved to write her letter after having appeared at Johnson's apartment for an appointment and been made to wait while a barely clad woman (not his wife) and a man "moved in and out of the bedroom," with the implication that Johnson remained in the bedroom as well. Fowler was dismayed that Johnson gave in to "all the evil temptations that clutch[ed] at [his] throat" and wished that his wife had been present to hold him in check.[95] After his wife's death, Johnson

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maintained relationships with both men and women and never married again.[96] The notations in his Bible seem to provide evidence of his struggle with "evil temptations" through his repeated engagement with texts about flesh and spirit, as in the case of Galatians 5:17:

> ~~*17:* For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.~~

It is easy to imagine that his concern with the relationship of spirit to flesh emerges from his experience with alcoholism, and it is quite possible that, in highlighting passages about lust, Johnson was also seeking deliverance from sexual expressions that may have stigmatized him.

Johnson's marking of his Bible, particularly the practice of highlighting certain biblical verses and excising others, represented an attempt to produce a scriptural text that spoke to his particular spiritual longings and to the specific contours of his need for healing. In Johnson's case, that revised scripture emphasized the possibility of healing through intense spiritual communion with the divine, even as his work to re-produce the text revealed his frustration at the challenges of reaching this state. It is difficult not to read the plot of *Run, Little Chillun* as charting Johnson's various personal struggles—with his identity as the son of a clergyman who did not follow his father into the ministry, with his alcoholism, and with responses to his bisexuality—and identifying these autobiographical sources sheds important light on the deep investment he had in the work.[97] But reading *Run, Little Chillun* in light of the notations Johnson made in his Bible and the evidence they present of affirmation of his "likeness to God and . . . unity with Truth and Love" reveals additional layers of meaning in the production.[98] In fact, Johnson's incorporation of aspects of his spiritual quest into the theologies within the play points to a number of religious and political concerns far broader than those of attending to the details of his personal life.

Johnson's presentation of the Pilgrims of the New Day within the drama of the play as well as in the additional materials he provided for his audiences shows a clear influence of Christian Science and New Thought theology. A brief note on the theology of the New Day Pilgrims, which Johnson wrote for the programs for the FTP productions, informs audience members that Elder Tongola teaches that "God is not a testy old super-man living somewhere above the skies but that He is the All-Power, manifesting himself through nature." As the note continues, Johnson moved from the Pilgrims' understanding of the nature of God to explain their conception of humanity, writing,

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"Man, the human being, is part of that nature, he is supported by that power, and the realization of this truth must inevitably bring joy." The third significant theological theme Johnson raised in this introduction concerns understandings of sin, and he informed his readers that, for the Pilgrims, "Sin has no existence as fact but is only a sense of guilt inculcated by wrong education. The human body is not an object for shame or concealment but should be regarded in the same way one thinks of the trunk and branches of a beautiful fruitful tree." Johnson concluded the note by underscoring the goal of harmony with nature and the "all-power" and the resulting sense of "joy, always ever-increasing joy."[99] Even a cursory review of the *Christian Science Journal* in the early twentieth century, which we know that Johnson read, reveals overlapping discourse and theological perspectives with Johnson's Pilgrims, who seek a state of communion with the "all-power" and preach a liberating "Gospel of Joy."[100]

As was the case with some African American religious movements of the early twentieth century, Johnson presented an alternative history of humanity in the Pilgrims' theology, but one that also shows signs of Christian Science influence.[101] As Brother Moses relates the group's cosmology during the Pilgrims' worship scene, a race of people who lived on earth thousands of years ago "enjoyed the harmoniously manifested blessings of Nature" and had progressed so far toward spiritual perfection that they moved on to "higher planes" to make room for lower beings. The Pilgrims' leader, Elder Tongola, who does not speak but makes his thoughts known to Brother Moses, who then voices them, is one of the "Bright Ones" who has "consented to take on human shape and live among men and try to guide their footsteps."[102] Johnson's presentation certainly resonates with Mary Baker Eddy's assertion in the section on creation in *Science and Health* that "progress takes off human shackles. The finite must yield to the infinite. Advancing to a higher plane of action, thought rises from the material sense to the spiritual, from the scholastic to the inspirational, and from the mortal to the immortal."[103] Attention to Johnson's Christian Science sensibility illuminates his literary Pilgrims' emphasis on feeling the "all-power" and the joy it brings and provides useful context for some of the more curious elements of the group's theology.

The Book of ADAM

Although there is no doubt that Johnson found some personal spiritual fulfillment through his engagement with Christian Science theology, my aim in noting these intersections is not to make a limited argument that *Run, Little Chillun* represents an attempt to

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promote Christian Science as such. It is important to recognize that Johnson embedded his invocations of Christian Science and New Thought theological perspectives in a broader reflection on the relationship between race and religion in America. This broader scope included consideration of the degree to which a given racial identity demanded conformity to particular theological beliefs and religious community. Untangling the strands of the unconventional connections Johnson forged in his artistic work reveals the distinctive nature of his theological and social vision and illuminates the productive uses to which he thought such configurations might be put.

For most critics and, perhaps, many audience members, the recognizable signs of the African sources for the Pilgrims' theology overrode other components of Johnson's vision for the group, particularly the Christian Science and New Thought elements. Most commentators characterized the group's ritual activity during the scene of the full-moon gathering in the woods as an "orgy," allowing the term to function as a shorthand designation for primitive religious ritual stemming from an essential Africanness.[104] Despite this easy resort to interpretations of primitivism on the part of critics, it is nevertheless important that we account for Johnson's explicit grounding of the Pilgrims in a black cultural context and explore the relationship of this context to his larger vision. In his "Note on the Theology of the New Day Pilgrims," Johnson labors to get his audience not only to appreciate the excitement of the worship scene but also to recognize the group's commitment to the "Gospel of Joy" and belief in the unity of God and Nature. Johnson intends this to be taken as a universal religious message, but he also makes clear that Elder Tongola's theology emerges from and responds to spiritual and political concerns of black people. The note begins, "The Elder Tongola has spent a hundred and fifty years in all parts of our world teaching black people that they sorely need a new religion based upon and developed out of their own essential nature and not grafted on through contact with other peoples."[105] Within the action of the play, Brother Moses articulates the central contribution of the Pilgrims' theology when he tells those gathered that "the black man's God has never been a God of blood and malice. He has never meant that His children should suffer in His name. To know Him brings peace and joy and well being."[106]

Although Elder Tongola's message is for black people and derived from "their own essential nature," it seems that Johnson meant for the Pilgrims' theology to be interpreted as having broader applicability. Black people need to revisit their theological commitments, he argues, because of their history of racial subjugation and the complicity of "other peoples'" religions in that subjugation. "The secret at the root" of black spirituality, he offers, is not the "spiritual

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suffering of joy which characterizes the more orthodox religious services of the Negro" but "the religious attitude of joy and freedom toward life."[107] Such a religious attitude has unqualified human appeal, Johnson proposes, and he resists any notion that the group's theology represents a racially essentialized or limited sensibility. The Pilgrims function, then, as models of how to resist stark binary categories in the production of modern black identity even as they exemplify aspects of Johnson's understanding of a uniquely black spiritual and cultural genius.

Johnson signaled this modern black identity, in part, through the music he wrote to accompany parts of the Pilgrims' worship scene and which proved puzzling to many commentators. Recall Chappy Gardner's characterization of the scene as including chanting "something much like a Chinese wedding march I've heard in Chinatown." Another reviewer described this scene as marked by "weird songs." Other reviewers placed the Pilgrims' processional and "Credo" firmly in the realm of traditional opera, as in the case of Ada Hanifin of the *San Francisco Examiner*, who wrote, "any operatic maestro would survey the final scene of the first act of *Run, Little Chillun* covetously. . . . During this forest scene, the stately Negroes intone chants from their African heritage as a part of the moon-worshipping ceremony in which nature is God. Written by the conductor, Hall Johnson, this music is more affecting in its sincerity than the consecration scene in Verdi's *Aida*!"[108] Johnson's compositions for the Pilgrims' worship have "a distinctly modal flavor" that evokes medieval Christian chant rather than African tonality.[109] In combination with this chanted music, Johnson included lyrics meant to represent "the ancient tongue."[110] Audiences were probably not meant to be able to decipher words such as "Mo-ta-me-ko-la" but to feel themselves transported through time by "the language and melodies of ten thousand years ago."[111] This juxtaposition of the modal sound of the Pilgrims' chant and the African-influenced lyrics and dance no doubt helped to create the sense of "weirdness" that many critics experienced. However, it was through the production of this "weirdness" and in the combination of Western choral sounds, African-influenced dance and lyrics, and the promotion of the "Gospel of Joy" that Johnson presented his sharpest challenges to formulaic traditions of representing black religious thought and pressed at the boundaries of black religious orthodoxy.

Johnson's work to connect the Pilgrims' search for individual spiritual perfection and personal experience of the "all-power" to an earthly, corporate mission is significant and helps to reveal the racial, religious, and cultural politics embedded in his work. Elder Tongola enjoins the Pilgrims to "make ready for the coming of the New Day,"

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and Brother Moses continues to explain that the New Day will involve the Pilgrims working to "set [others] free with [their] Gospel of Joy." For Johnson, the ability to promote a gospel of joy derives, in part, from the black experience of past suffering but includes much more than this. Brother Moses concludes his teaching by telling the Pilgrims, "Rise, Oh Black peoples of the earth! Tell all the nations what *you* have learned past the possibility of any forgetting. This is the command of Elder Tongola to you and this is the message of the Pilgrims of the New Day." Significantly, the Gospel of Joy is to be carried in cultural form:

> You . . . must teach them the enduring spiritual qualities of laughter, dancing and song. For, from the accumulated torrents of your tears of sorrow, you have distilled the laughter which bespeaks the joy of living; the very chains that once bound your feet so securely have also taught them how to dance the rhythm which sets the Universe in motion; and out of the deep-throated cries of your most bitter anguish you have created the song that makes articulate the soul.[112]

In his professional life, Johnson mapped out a task that bears some resemblance to the Pilgrims' "Gospel of Joy" and its cultural sources and contributions. Throughout the 1930s, Johnson developed plans for the Alliance for the Development of Afro-American Music through which African Americans could present folklore, stories, and songs in contexts under their own control in order to avoid willful exploitation by white producers or simple misunderstanding of "the secret at the root" of black cultural forms.[113] Obviously, Johnson sought a way out of the literal situation in which he and his chorus had been placed repeatedly in productions like *The Green Pastures*. However, his ultimate goal was to make the Alliance for the Development of Afro-American Music part of a broader organization called the Alliance for the Development of All through Music (ADAM). He imagined the various local components of such a movement coming together into national shape through increasing levels of participants' involvement: as a word combines with others into a sentence, paragraph, page, chapter, and volume, finally the groups would achieve what he called "The Book of Adam."[114] Johnson concluded the proposal by drawing out the particular contributions that African American culture could make to this project, writing:

> *The Alliance for the Development of [Afro]-American Music* aims to unite under one construction program all who believe that the American Negro should make his contribution to

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> the culture of the civilized world, and that he should be, not only the chief apostle, but the chief beneficiary of this contribution. As Negro music is inextricably bound up with stories, dances, and pictures, a scientific development of Negro folk songs must inevitably foster the growth of all related branches of literature and art; while the education, social and economic advantages accruing to everyone who participates, in whatever capacity, must justify the existence of the organization as an Alliance for the Development of All, through music.[115]

Johnson would never be able to put the plan into full operation, but he nonetheless understood his choir's ongoing work as contributing to the project in its broadest sense.

Although it is difficult to identify an explicit connection between Johnson's plan for the book of Adam and his work in *Run, Little Chillun*, the fact that he was involved in both throughout the 1930s makes thinking about the two in relation to each other a useful exercise. It seems likely that he constructed the Pilgrims through the lens of his own search for healing and joy in a way that set a marked contrast to the "more orthodox religious services of the Negro." The group's emphasis on the distinctive ability of black peoples to give the world lessons about "the enduring spiritual qualities of laughter, dancing and song" provides an important link between the Pilgrims and Johnson's plan for ADAM which, itself, builds on aspects of the traditional cultures of black churches. In light of both his personal religiosity and his vision of black culture as having spiritually transformative social potential, the Pilgrims of the New Day appear not as a peculiar and incomprehensible cult but as a serious artistic engagement with questions about representations of African American religions. Through *Run, Little Chillun*, Johnson challenged the limiting political and social visions put forward in productions like *The Green Pastures* and positioned himself as a guardian of the "secret at the root" of black spirituality and culture. At the same time, he used his intimate knowledge of black cultural forms to link black religious and cultural contributions to broader universal spiritual strivings, pointing to new religious possibilities.

Notes

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1. Hall Johnson, "Porgy and Bess—A Folk Opera—A Review," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 14 (January 1936): 28.

2. I use the term "Negro spiritual" to refer to early twentieth-century interpretations of the religious music that emerged among African Americans in slavery.

3. Eugene Thamon Simpson, *Hall Johnson: His Life, His Spirit, and His Music* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 107. Films in which the Hall Johnson Choir appeared or to which they contributed music include the shorts *St. Louis Blues* (Gramercy Studios, 1929) and *Little Sinner* (Hal Roach Studio, 1935), the cartoon *Clean Pastures* (Warner Bros., 1937), and the feature length films *Wonder Bar* (First National, 1934), *The Green Pastures* (Warner Bros., 1936), *Lost Horizon* (Columbia, 1937), *Jezebel* (Warner Bros., 1938), *Meet John Doe* (Warner Bros., 1941), *Tales of Manhattan* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1942), *Cabin in the Sky* (MGM, 1943), and *Song of the South* (Walt Disney, 1946).

4. Simpson writes, "From this total number, Johnson established several groups: a concert choir of 16 voices, a *Green Pastures* choir of 30 voices, and a reserve choir of 84 voices. There were also several chamber-sized units: the Swanee Six, the Whispering Trio, and the Over Jordan Sextet." Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 11.

5. In addition to individual sheets, Johnson published two major collections: *The Green Pastures Spirituals* (New York: Farrar and Reinhart, 1930) and *Thirty Negro Spirituals* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1949).

6. On William D. Johnson, see Horace Talbert, *Sons of Allen: Together with a Sketch of the Rise and Progress of Wilberforce University, Wilberforce, Ohio* (Xenia, Ohio: Aldine Press, 1906), 244–45; *AME Handbook, 1909*, compiled by B. F. Lee (Nashville: AME Sunday School Union, 1909), 22-23; Richard R. Wright, *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Book Concern of the AME Church, 1916), 137; and William H. Ferris, *The African Abroad or His History in Western Civilization, Tracing His Development Under Caucasian Milieu* (New Haven: The Tuttle, Morehouse, and Taylor Press, 1913), 778.

7. On Johnson's father's contribution to his musical training, see John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame; The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 448.

8. Joseph J. Boris, ed., *Who's Who in Colored America, 1928–1929* (New York: Who's Who in Colored America Corp., 1929), 211.

9. Hall Johnson, "Some Aspects of the Negro Folk Song," n.d., in Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 232.

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10. Ibid.

11. Productions in this period include Nan Bagby Stephens, *Roseanne* (1923), Em Jo Basshe, *Earth* (1927), Marc Connelly, *The Green Pastures* (1930), Ethel Barrymore's adaptation of Julia Peterkin's novel *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1930), and George and Ira Gershwin's folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935), for which Dorothy and DuBose Heyward wrote the libretto and Ira Gershwin the lyrics.

12. Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 205.

13. Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 106.

14. The play's Broadway premiere was at the Lyric Theatre, and a 1943 revival, which ran for only sixteen performances, was mounted at the Hudson Theatre in New York. The FTP productions were staged at the Mayan Theatre and then the Hollywood Playhouse in Los Angeles, at the Alcazar Theatre in San Francisco, and at the Savoy Theatre in San Diego. See Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., *A Century of Musicals in Black and White: An Encyclopedia of Musical Stage Works By, About, or Involving African Americans* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 297–98, and "The Playgoer: The Magazine in the Theatre," Official Publication of the Mayan Theatre, n.d., 14. Federal Theatre Project Collection, 1935–1939, Box 2, Folder 2, Princeton University Library Manuscripts Division. The World's Fair (Golden Gate International Exposition) performances were held in the FTP theater on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay.

15. Connelly's play was inspired by white writer Roark Bradford's 1928 collection of stories, *Ol Man Adam and His Chillun: Being the Tales They Tell about the Time When the Lord Walked the Earth Like a Natural Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928).

16. Marc Connelly and William Keighley directed the 1936 film version. Radio versions were broadcast on NBC's "Cavalcade of America" in 1940 and 1941 and "Ford Theater" in 1948. The play was revived on Broadway in 1951 and broadcast on the Hallmark Hall of Fame television program in 1957 and 1959. Over the years, numerous amateur productions in the United States and abroad interpreted the play, which also contributed to its ubiquity as a popular culture representation of black religious thought.

17. Admittedly, Connelly's "Author's Note" in the published version of the play as well as materials included in the playbill for

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various productions do not make the claim that *all* African American Christians understand the Bible in this way. In situating the play's religious sensibility among "thousands of Negroes in the deep South," Connelly does, however, make a broad claim for the theology contained therein. Moreover, much in his public discourse about the play and material in the production itself supported the conclusion that his work was aimed at encapsulating a singular and, to him, authentic black theology. See, for example, Marc Connelly, *The Green Pastures: A Fable* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1929), xv.

18. *New York World*, February 27, 1930.

19. On the critical and popular reception of the play and film among blacks and whites, see Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), chap. 2, and, on responses of black intellectuals to the play, see Curtis J. Evans, "The Religious and Racial Meanings of *The Green Pastures*," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 59–93.

20. See, for example, the preface to Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, where Mays writes, "It has been taken for granted that the Negro is over-emotional and super-religious. . . . It has been assumed by many people that the ideas of God expressed in Green Pastures are wholly representative of what the Negro thinks of God. Although the author did not set out in this study to disprove anything presented in Green Pastures, the data themselves show that the Negro's idea of God is *not* now and has never been what Green Pastures may lead some people to believe." Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), n.p.

21. *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 4, 1930.

22. Hall Johnson to Al Lewis, July 24, 1942. *Cabin in the Sky*, Arthur Freed Collection, University of Southern California.

23. See Bosley Crowther's review of *Tales of Manhattan* in the *New York Times*, October 4, 1942.

24. See, for example, *Los Angeles Times* music critic Isabel Morse Jones's review in which she credits Johnson for producing "something very much like a native opera" through his skillful scoring. *Los Angeles Times,* June 26, 1932.

25. *Chicago Defender*, January 31, 1931.

26. Johnson founded the group as the Harlem Jubilee Singers in 1926 and renamed it the Hall Johnson Negro Choir shortly thereafter,

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although they also appeared under the name "The Carolina Serenaders" at least once (see *Chicago Defender*, October 29, 1927). According to one account, the name Harlem Jubilee Singers had been suggested to Johnson by white writer Carl Van Vechten. Verna Arvey, "Hall Johnson and His Choir," *Opportunity* 19 (May 1941): 159. The famed Fisk Jubilee Singers, founded in 1867, solidified the concept of the African American "jubilee" choir and located spirituals at the core of such choirs' repertoires. Although Johnson apparently used the term jubilee for his choir for only a brief time, his inclusion of Harlem in the name creates a striking juxtaposition with the images of other jubilee choirs at the time, which generally pointed to southern roots. The Dixie Jubilee Singers, perhaps Johnson's most direct competition in New York in the late 1920s, serves as a good example of a group that deployed the term "jubilee" to evoke southernness. The group had come to the city from Baltimore and, under the direction of Eva Jessye, had considerable concert and radio success and went to Hollywood in 1929 to appear in King Vidor's film *Hallelujah* (MGM, 1929). Jessye transformed the Dixie Jubilee Singers into the Eva Jessye Choir around 1930. See Judith Weisenfeld, "Truths that Liberate the Soul: Eva Jessye and the Politics of Religious Performance," in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, ed. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 222–44.

27. In addition to songs by Blake and Sissle, the 1921 Broadway production of *Shuffle Along* featured a book by the African American comedy team Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles. It ran for more than a year and popularized a number of songs, including "I'm Just Wild about Harry."

28. *Chicago Defender*, December 5, 1925.

29. Ibid., March 19, 1927.

30. Ibid., May 14, 1927. The judges for the music prize were William Grant Still, Olga Samaroff, and Daniel Gregory Mason. Johnson had won third prize for composition the previous year in a competition judged by Frank Damrosch, R. Nathaniel Dett, and David Mannes. See *New York Amsterdam News*, May 5, 1926.

31. *New York Amsterdam News*, July 3, 1929.

32. *Chicago Defender*, August 3, 1929.

33. Em Jo (Emanuel Jochelman) Basshe's *Earth* starred Daniel L. Haynes, who would appear in the stage productions of *The Green Pastures* as Adam and Hezdrel. Although Haynes and Johnson generally received positive reviews, the play was panned and ran for only twenty-four performances.

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34. *New York Times*, March 5, 1933; Albert Glinsky, *Theremin: Ether Music and Espionage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 157. Rockmore was married to Clara (Riesenberg) Rockmore, who gained international fame as a virtuoso performer on the theremin, an early electronic instrument.

35. Membership in Johnson's choir reached as many as 175 in some productions. The *Baltimore Afro-American* noted that the cast of *Run, Little Chillun* came from the large choir that Johnson had put together for a performance on Lincoln's birthday, comprised of singers who did not have other work during the Depression. Juanita Hall, one of Johnson's assistant choir directors, oversaw the choir at his New York Studio while he was on tour and made sure that the choir's members were fed at least once daily. The article concluded, "There were occasional special feasts to keep up their morale in the days when there were no definite plans for a production. Juanita Hall was the guiding spirit among them all, and is still the unseen commander, god-mother, sister, confidant and advisor of this group." *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 8, 1933.

36. Hall Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920–1940*, ed. James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 235.

37. Ibid., 273. Johnson recorded this song with his choir on RCA Records in 1939 with "I Can't Stay Here By Myself" on the other side. In her review in the *San Francisco Examiner*, Ada Hanafin wrote, "In this music drama, the music reigns supreme" and noted that the title song received "an explosive response from the audience, who demanded that it be repeated." *San Francisco Examiner*, January 14, 1939, quoted in Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 186–87.

38. Throckmorton worked with Eugene O'Neill on many productions, including *Emperor Jones*, on a number of black-cast plays, and many other Broadway productions. Photographs of the sets for *Run, Little Chillun* are preserved in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

39. Alston Burleigh, the son of famed baritone, composer, and arranger of Negro spirituals Harry T. Burleigh, played Jim in the original Broadway production. Harry was the baritone soloist at St. George's Episcopal Church in New York City for more than fifty years and also served as the soloist at Temple Emmanu-El for twenty-five years. See Anne Key Simpson, *Hard Trials: The Life and Music of Harry T. Burleigh* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990). Alston, also a composer, appeared in a number of Broadway productions in the late 1920s and early 1930s, had a concert career, and was on the faculty at the Virginia State College for Negroes.

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40. Veteran stage actress Edna Thomas played Ella in the Broadway production. Sulamai was played by Fredi Washington, an established Broadway actress by that time who would achieve Hollywood fame with her work with Paul Robeson in *The Emperor Jones* (United Artists, 1933) and *Imitation of Life* (Universal, 1934). Washington's appearance in the play received an added measure of attention in the black press because her sister Isabelle, a nightclub entertainer, had recently married Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the son of prominent Baptist minister Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., the pastor of New York's Abyssinian Baptist Church. The marriage of this scion of black Baptist aristocracy generated considerable scandal in black church circles. Some of the coverage interpreted Johnson's story of Sulamai's rejection by the Baptist congregation as mirroring the love story of Washington and Powell. See *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 11, 1933. On Washington's career, see Laurie Avant Woodward, "Performing Artists of the Harlem Renaissance: Resistance, Identity, and Meaning in the Life and Work of Fredi Washington, 1920–1960" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2007).

41. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 242.

42. Ibid., 243.

43. Ibid., 249.

44. Ibid., 250.

45. Lewis Nichols, "Negro Spirituals," *New York Times*, March 2, 1933. John Houseman took the production to be "less a play than a choral and declamatory tour de force." John Houseman, *Run-through: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 186.

46. In fact, by the time Merlin was hired as the play's director, the company had already been in rehearsal for five months, and he interpreted his job as trying to limit the improvisational additions the group had grown accustomed to making during rehearsals. In one interview, Merlin argued that this practice of adding materials to a text was a unique characteristic of Negro actors. *Daily Mirror*, March 12, 1933, in Fredi Washington Papers. Four years after the Broadway production of *Run, Little Chillun* ended, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., published a scathing denunciation of Merlin, who was then the head of the FTP's "Negro vaudeville unit." Powell related the story of a one-day strike called by black performers to protest WPA layoffs to which Merlin responded by dismantling the unit. Powell, who had been friends with Merlin, denounced him as "a Negro hater" and chided the WPA leadership for sacrificing African Americans to save themselves. Powell concluded, "Poverty makes of all men kin. The day must come when 'not some of my

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best friends are Negroes or Jews or whites but all of my real friends are people of the earth.'" Adam C. Powell, Jr., "Soap Box," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 23, 1937. African American director and actor Clarence Muse has been credited with adding humor to the production, which some reviewers saw as contributing to its popularity in the West Coast FTP revival. Nevertheless, Johnson received the overwhelming measure of attention.

47. Chappy Gardner, "Hall Johnson Docks Choir Duties; Sails into Dramas," *Chicago Defender*, March 18, 1933.

48. Henry Beckett, "'Run, Little Chillun!' by Hall Johnson, Produced at the Lyric," *New York Evening Post*, March 2, 1933, in Fredi Washington Papers. Unlike most other reviewers of this production, Beckett applauded Johnson's skills as a playwright, evaluating it as "a play with real plot development, with some splendid lines, and with subtle philosophy."

49. *New York Amsterdam News*, March 8, 1933. The song "Run, Little Chillun" was not a traditional spiritual but was written by Johnson for the production.

50. Olin Downes, "Final Scene of Hall Johnson's Negro 'Folk-Play' Indicates One Direction for Developing Native Genre," *New York Times*, April 2, 1933, X5. Recent scholars have also characterized *Run, Little Chillun* as an opera. See Elise R. Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 196.

51. *Chicago Defender*, December 20, 1933, 19. It was, perhaps, the combination of this sense of realism and the fact that a production by a black artist had made it to Broadway and was receiving a great deal of attention that led to the production's usefulness as a fundraiser for political causes, including for the NAACP, the Scottsboro defense, and local New York aid societies. *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 25, 1933. The NAACP sold 205 tickets to the benefit performance of *Run, Little Chillun*, for which it received 25 percent of the price of each or a total of just over $75. See Sondra Kathryn Wilson, ed., *In Search of Democracy: The NAACP Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and Roy Wilkins, 1920–1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 155. On the Scottsboro defense benefit, see *Chicago Defender*, March 25, 1933; *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 6, 1933; and, on a Brooklyn fundraiser, see *New York Times*, April 25, 1933.

52. Quoted in Arthur Ruhl's review of *Run, Little Chillun*, *New York Herald*, March 2, 1933, in Fredi Washington Papers. At the core of Johnson's interests in music and performance lay the dual claim that

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black religious music constituted a central element of the folk songs of the United States and that Negro spirituals were the unique product of the experiences of African Americans in slavery. In this regard, Johnson was in accord with the assessments of many other scholars and performers of spirituals in arguing for the influence of African musical forms and the cultural encounter in slavery on the development of Negro spirituals, making them deeply American and yet profoundly distinctive. He was committed to preserving this music as it had been sung in its period of "fullest flowing in the early years of the Emancipation when the ex-slaves gathered in great numbers to sing in their *own* churches—without let or hindrance." Hall Johnson, "Notes on the Negro Spiritual," in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 273.

53. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 251. Indeed, the intimation of voodoo led one reporter to compare the material presented in the scene to William Seabrook's description of Haitian Vodou in his controversial book *The Magic Island*. See "'Run, Little Chillun' Has Dancing as Well as Song," *Chicago Defender*, May 20, 1933, in which the article's author contends that Seabrook gave a copy of his book to playwright Marjorie Barkentin who then gave it to Johnson.

54. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 251.

55. Among the dancers were Bruce Nugent and Ollie (Olga) Burgoyne.

56. Chappy Gardner, "'Run, Little Chillun' Decides Not to Close," *Chicago Defender*, June 17, 1933, 5.

57. John Martin, "The Dance: A Negro Play," *New York Times*, March 12, 1933, X7.

58. Hurston described the fire dance as "exceedingly African" and serving social functions. In the dance,

> The players form a ring, with the bonfire to one side. The drummer usually takes his place near the fire. The drum is held over the blaze until the skin tightens to the right tone. There is a flourish signifying that the drummer is all set. The players begin to clap with their hands. The drummer cries, "Gimbay!" [a corruption of the African word gumbay, a large drum] and begins the song. He does not always select the song. The players more often call out what they want played. One player is inside the ring. He or she does his preliminary flourish, which comes on the first line of the song, does his dance on the second line, and chooses his successor on the third line and takes his place in the circle. The chosen dancer takes his place

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> and the dance goes on until the drum gets cold. What they really mean by that is, that the skin of the head has relaxed until it is no longer in tune. The drummer goes to the fire and tunes it again. This always changes the song.

Zora Neale Hurston, "Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas," *Journal of American Folklore* 43, no. 169 (July–September 1930): 294.

59. Hurston later wrote that the two had attempted to collaborate but that Johnson failed to appear at scheduled rehearsals. She also claimed that Johnson's singers were culturally insensitive to the Bahamian dancers who worked with her. See Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 95–98, and Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 227–31, on the brief collaboration between Hurston and Johnson.

60. *New York Times*, January 11, 1932; *New York Amsterdam News*, January 13, 1932; *Chicago Defender*, January 16, 1932.

61. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 194.

62. Anthea Kraut, "Everybody's Fire Dance: Zora Neale Hurston and American Dance History," *Scholar and the Feminist Online* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 2, http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/Hurston/kraut_01.htm.

63. Hurston had difficult working relationships with other artists in addition to Hall Johnson. In 1930, she collaborated with Langston Hughes on the play *Mule Bone*, which was never produced in their lifetimes because of a dispute over ownership of the work stemming from Hurston's registration of a copyright in her name alone. See Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, 198–217, and Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes,* vol. 1, *1902–1941: I, Too, Sing America*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 194–98.

64. The costumes for the Broadway production were designed by white costumer Helen Pons, who had a long and distinguished career designing for the theater, ballet, and opera. See *New York Times*, April 20, 1990.

65. *New Yorker*, May 27, 1933, 4.

66. Carl Cramer, "*Run, Little Chillun*: A Critical Review," *Opportunity* 11 (April 1933): 113.

67. John Hobart, "'Run, Little Chillun' Proves to Be Rousing Theater, Bounces Audiences Out of Seats," *San Francisco Chronicle*,

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January 14, 1939, in *Run, Little Chillun* scrapbook, Hall Johnson Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

68. A notable exception, although not by a professional critic, nor published at the time, was the response of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who saw the original Broadway production in May of 1933 and noted in his journal the striking narrative similarity to I. J. Singer's play, *Yoshe Kalb*, "a Hassidic folk drama" which had been produced in New York the previous fall. Kaplan wrote that "both dramas exhibit the human soul being tortured by a sense of sin, in both it is illicit love which gives rise to the sense of sin, in both the heroine meets with tragic death and the hero finds redemption." Kaplan attributed the likeness of *Run, Little Chillun*'s story to that of *Yoshe Kalb* to "the fact that Jews and Negroes resemble each other to so large a degree in their sufferings, in their yearnings and in the primitive force and character of their religiousness when untouched by the skeptical spirit of Western Civilization." Mel Scult, ed., *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, vol. 1, *1913–1934* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 501. On *Yoshe Kalb*'s opening, see *New York Times*, October 3, 1932. Novelist Meyer Levin also saw the religious cultures presented in *Run, Little Chillun* as having much in common with Hasidic traditions. See Hasia R. Diner, "Between Words and Deeds: Jews and Blacks in America, 1880–1935," in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, ed. Jack M. Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89–90. In addition to Kaplan, at least one other rabbi in New York City found *Run, Little Chillun* worthy of religious reflection. The play was the subject of a sermon by Reform Rabbi Louis I. Newman of Temple Rodeph Shalom titled "Black and White Religion with Reference to 'Run Little Chillun.'" *New York Times*, April 23, 1933.

69. See, for example, Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk*, and Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

70. Marva Griffin Carter, "The 'New Negro' Choral Legacy of Hall Johnson," in *Chorus and Community*, ed. Karen Ahlquist (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 197.

71. Brenda Murphy, "Plays and Playwrights: 1915 to 1945," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol. 2, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 310.

72. It should be noted that I am working from the published version of a typescript at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture that had belonged to Juanita Hall, one of Johnson's assistant conductors. Johnson's play was never published in his lifetime.

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73. Unfortunately, no complete score of the music Johnson wrote for the production survives in his papers, and the Hall Johnson Choir made only a few recordings of music from the show, leaving a less than complete sense of the sound of the production. A number of Johnson's arrangements of spirituals for the show were published, as was the title song, "Run, Little Chillun."

74. *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 1939, in *Run, Little Chillun* scrapbook, Hall Johnson Collection. Father Divine was the spiritual head of a multiracial religious movement that contained aspects of New Thought positive thinking and Pentecostalism. Divine's followers regarded him as God come to humanity in the form of a black man in order to do away with racial categories and gender hierarchy. See, for example, Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), and Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

75. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 251.

76. Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 189.

77. Ibid., 188, 189.

78. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 279.

79. Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 189.

80. Marsh Maslin, "This Is the Life," *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, March 16, 1939, in *Run, Little Chillun* scrapbook, Hall Johnson Collection.

81. J. Torrend, *Specimens of Bantu Folk-Lore from Northern Rhodesia* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1921), 3. I am grateful to Kathryn Lofton for her generosity in securing Johnson's personal copy of this text for me.

82. Biographer Eugene Thamon Simpson notes that Johnson's sister, Alice Foster, wrote that "his interest in organized religion was confined to Scientology." While this could have been the case later in his life, I am persuaded that she conflated Christian Science and Scientology. Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 58.

83. Anderson's *Appearances* was the first full-length play by an African American author to be produced on Broadway. The play ran for a month in 1925, was performed on a national tour, and returned to Broadway in 1929 before moving to London. Anderson had difficulty finding support to produce other plays he had written and turned to different means to spread his teaching, including writing a religious treatise

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entitled *Uncommon Sense: The Law of Life in Action* (London: Fowler, 1933) and lecturing. Garland Anderson, "A Black Man's Philosophy," *New York Evening Graphic*, January 31, 1925, L. S. Alexander Gumby Collection of Negroiana, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library; Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 234–36.

84. See Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 263-64. McDaniel listed her religion as "Truth Student" in the 1950 edition of *Who's Who in Colored America*, and Ruby Berkley Goodwin gave hers as "Metaphysical-Christian." G. James Fleming and Christian E. Burckel, eds., *Who's Who in Colored America* (Yonkers-on-Hudson: Christian E. Burckel and Associates, 1950), 363, 217.

85. Fleming and Burckel, *Who's Who in Colored America* (1950), 37; Karl E. Downs, *Meet the Negro* (Los Angeles: Login Press, 1943), 136–37.

86. The National Bible Press sold Bibles by subscription beginning in the years after the Civil War. See Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 77-78. The copy in Johnson's collection bears a 1901 copyright and had become so worn that the archivist had it re-bound for research purposes. My use of Johnson's Bible is by permission of the Hall Johnson Collection, Rowan University.

87. Nemi Robertson, "After This Manner Therefore Pray Ye," *Christian Science Journal* 40, no. 3 (June 1922): 85–88.

88. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: First Church of Christ Scientist, 1994), 12. Robertson studied with Mary Baker Eddy at Massachusetts Metaphysical College in 1887. See Eddy, *Science and Health*, xi, and Ernest Sutherland Bates and John Valentine Dittemore, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Truth and the Tradition* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1934), app. 2.

89. Robertson, "After This Manner," 87.

90. Ibid., 86.

91. Unfortunately, the Bible in Johnson's personal collection is not marked with his name. The fact that there is a small photograph of his mother pasted into it and that the few instances of textual marginalia match his handwriting persuades me that it belonged to him. Hall Johnson archivist and biographer Eugene Thamon Simpson is convinced that this Bible, the only one found in Johnson's apartment after his death, was his personal Bible. Eugene Thamon Simpson, e-mail to author,

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March 10, 2009. On readers' markings of Bibles in earlier periods, see William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), chap. 4.

92. Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 61–62.

93. Ibid., 104, n. 81.

94. Ibid., 65, 69.

95. Ibid., 62–63.

96. See ibid., 72–79. Simpson believes that Johnson was the father of Wathea Sims Jones's son, Jan Hall Jones, who was born in 1943.

97. Eugene Thamon Simpson suggests an autobiographical concern in *Run, Little Chillun* and argues that "the struggle between the two religions [is] a metaphor for the struggle between the bad and the good in Hall Johnson." Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 63.

98. Eddy, *Science and Health*, 12.

99. "A Note on the Theology of the New Day Pilgrims,"*Playgoer*, Mayan Theatre, Los Angeles, n.d., 21.

100. See, for example, Richard Woolfenden, "Spiritual Therapeutics," *Christian Science Journal* 30, no. 2 (May 1912): 79; Edward A. Meritt, "Spirit Against the Flesh," *Christian Science Journal* 40, no. 9 (December 1922), 345; and Anne E. Herzog, "Loyalty," *Christian Science Journal* 40, no. 3 (June 1922): 107.

101. The Nation of Islam is the most influential of the groups that emerged in this period and presented alternative cosmologies to the biblical narrative.

102. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 252.

103. Eddy, *Science and Health*, 256.

104. Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 188. On reviewers' descriptions of the ritual as orgiastic, see, for example, *New York Times*, March 2, 1933; *New York Herald Tribune*, March 2, 1933; *Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 1933; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 14, 1934; *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1938; and *New York Times*, August 14, 1943. The fact that the dancers' costumes were quite revealing contributed to this understanding of the ritual, as did choreographer Doris Humphrey's comments on the work. John O. Perpener III writes, "Humphrey described how a ritualistic mating dance had found its way from Africa to the Bahamas and the choreography of *Run, Little Chillun'* by way of a group of Bahamian dancers

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who were members of the cast." John O. Perpener III, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 75–76.

105. Johnson, "A Note on the Theology of the New Day Pilgrims," 21.

106. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 253.

107. Ibid., 251.

108. Gardner, "Hall Johnson Docks Choir Duties"; Hobart, "*Run, Little Chillun* Proves to be Rousing Theater"; Ada Hanifin, "*Run, Little Chillun* Is a Musical Treat," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 14, 1939, in Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 186. See also *New Republic* (March–April 1933), in Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 178.

109. Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 192. Writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten claimed that composer Virgil Thomson was inspired by *Run, Little Chillun* to use an all-black cast in his opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, for which Gertrude Stein wrote the libretto. See Carl Van Vechten, introduction to *Four Saints in Three Acts* (New York: Random House, 1934), 7. Most scholars have emphasized the contributions that Negro spirituals and jazz made to Thomson's work, but it seems possible that Johnson's use of modal music in an African American setting also made an impression. On *Four Saints*, see, for example, Barbara Webb, "The Centrality of Race to the Modernist Aesthetics of Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*," *Modernism/Modernity* 7, no. 3 (2000): 447–69, and Lisa Barg, "Black Voices/White Sounds: Race and Representation in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*," *American Music* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 121–61.

110. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 253.

111. Ibid., 253. It is possible that the materials collected in Torrend's *Bantu Folklore* influenced Johnson as he created the language of the Pilgrims' worship. In addition, there seem to be Latin elements sprinkled throughout the brief lyrics of these compositions. See Hall Johnson, "Processional" and "Credo" from *Run, Little Chillun*, in Hall Johnson Collection, Rowan University.

112. Johnson, *Run, Little Chillun*, 264, 252–53.

113. Hall Johnson, "Plan for The Alliance for the Development of Afro-American Music," in Simpson, *Hall Johnson*, 84–85.

114. Ibid., 86.

115. Ibid., 87.

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ABSTRACT Francis Hall Johnson's (1888–1970) work to preserve and promote Negro spirituals places him among the twentieth century's most influential interpreters of African American religious music. Johnson was most closely associated with Marc Connelly's 1930 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Green Pastures*, for which he served as musical arranger and choral conductor. His participation in this production, which became a lightning rod for discussions about the nature of black religious thought, made him sharply aware of the complex terrain of popular culture representations of African American religious life for the consumption of white audiences. This article examines Johnson's 1933 "music-drama," *Run, Little Chillun*, through which he hoped to counter the commonly deployed tropes of African Americans as a simple, naturally religious people. Moderately successful on Broadway, the production did particularly well when revived in California in 1938 and 1939 as part of the Federal Theatre and Federal Music projects.

Most critics found Johnson's presentation of black Baptist music and worship to be thrillingly authentic but were confused by the theology of the drama's other religious community, the Pilgrims of the New Day. Examining Johnson's Pilgrims of the New Day in light of his interest in Christian Science and New Thought reveals a broader objective than providing a dramatic foil for the Baptists and a platform for endorsing Christianity. With his commitment to and expertise with vernacular forms of African American religious culture unassailable, Johnson presented a critique of the conservative tendencies and restrictive parochialism of some black church members and leaders and insisted on the ability of the individual religious self to range freely across a variety of spiritual possibilities. In doing so, he presented "the secret at the root" of black culture as not only revealing the spiritual genius of people of African descent but also as offering eternal and universal truths not bound by race.

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