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Reading with Conviction

Abraham Johnstone and the Poetics of the Dead End

Abstract: This essay proposes “reading with conviction” as a method for elaborating the alternative possibilities for living that can obtain a degree of visibility when dead ends—or points of absence, fragmentation, and distortion within the documentary record—frustrate the conventional protocols or the desired progress of research. As recent historical and literary studies scholarship has shown, slavery’s archives expose the enslaved to the palest, most perverse imitation of representation, entangling the memory of their lives with evidence of their exclusion from the province of human being. Yet each encounter with one of these dead ends, and thus with the limits of what an archive can verify, presents an occasion to relinquish positivist historiographic approaches and begin devising alternatives that valorize instead that which resists verification—most notably, the heterodox concepts, philosophies, and counter-facts that survive the convergence of omission and distortion. To this range of unverifiable alternates, this essay adds the convictions that archived subjects might have held, but that the conventions of archival texts would have prevented them from disclosing outright. Turning to The Address of Abraham Johnstone (1797)—the gallows confession and address of a formerly enslaved man sentenced to death for the crime of murder—the essay argues that careful, credulous attention to the residues of subversive conviction that breach the surface of Johnstone’s disfiguring textual performance enables us to turn inward on the space of enclosure he inhabited and become acquainted with the otherworldly designs it might have contained.

KEYWORDS: archives; blackness; slavery and emancipation; possessive individualism; respectability; gallows literature; African American religion; abolition.

*How can we live?*¹ This question suffuses the many gaps that appear in the story of Abraham Johnstone, a black man who was born into slavery, and later breathed free air, but was ultimately strangled by the hangman’s noose. Born in Sussex County, Delaware, in the 1750s with the given name

Benjamin, Johnstone was traded between five different enslavers before he earned his manumission, likely around 1785.² His formal emancipation did not, however, introduce him to a condition of substantial freedom. Rather, it exposed him to a novel array of injustices that repackaged the degradations of enslavement and accelerated his movement toward premature death. The only known record of his existence—a bundle of three short documents published together, after his 1797 death, as *The Address of Abraham Johnstone, a Black Man*—amounts to a catalog of these injustices.³ It enumerates his struggles with persistent poverty, exploitation, and displacement, as well as his unfair treatment at the hands of jailers, constables, and the courts. It also traces how these hardships culminated in the violent event that prompted his entry into print: his dubious execution for the crime of murder. Johnstone's *Address* thus fulfills contradictory functions familiar to all who study black lives in early American contexts. The text not only introduces him into the historical record but also crowds out of view virtually all there is to know about his life, rendering it synonymous with the vulnerability to violence that defined it. Filtered through this text's disfiguring latticework, his life appears to us not as a distinctive crescent involving relations, desires, aversions, events, and possibilities—as, in short, a human life—but rather as a deathward march, a mere by-product of overwhelming force's unyielding expression. Any attempt to tell another story about Johnstone, one that would recuperate this absent plenitude, would be undone by the lack of further evidence that results from his consignment to perpetual residence within an archival dead end.

This essay's aim, therefore, is not to recuperate Johnstone's life. Rather, it is to reanimate his belief that another life was possible. More generally, this essay considers how to elaborate the alternative possibilities for living that can obtain a degree of visibility when dead ends—or points of absence, fragmentation, and distortion within the documentary record—frustrate the conventional protocols or the desired progress of research. The premise of this undertaking is a conception of archives as repositories of historical documents that double as sites of congealment and continued expression for historical relations of force.⁴ As a number of influential theorists of "the archive" have shown in recent decades, the dead ends that archives contain are not accidents; rather, they are material expressions of past and present inequities that permeate archives as institu-

tional and epistemological formations. The very structures and exercises of power that cut short the lives of subjects like Johnstone, these theorists argue, are reincarnated in the biased principles of selection that govern the assembly of archives and, moreover, in the often disfiguring grain of archival texts themselves. These forces not only influence minoritized subjects' partial and total disappearance from recorded history, but also, by rendering them indistinct from the linguistic measure of their subjugation, constrain profoundly the possibilities for narrating their lives with much specificity.⁵ As one of the aforesaid theorists has put it, "The power which lay in wait for these lives . . . , which marked them by a blow of its claws, is also the power which instigated the few words which are left for us of those lives"—words that make those lives known as focal points of study and, in the same stroke, place them beyond recovery (Foucault 79). By turning to the case of Johnstone, whose sole archival footprint materializes his life's irretrievability, this essay pursues an interpretive method that picks up at those points where the maldistribution of archival power throws into crisis the vital historiographic practice of telling and enriching stories of past lives.⁶ It argues that such moments of crisis for storytelling invite us to supplement our concern with the lives that archived subjects lived in fact with an attunement to their own incipient visions of how to live otherwise.

The recent work of scholars in the transdisciplinary field of slavery studies has shown that the archives of slavery and emancipation in early America demand such movement from the veridical to the visionary, and this essay seeks to extend their work by alloying their methods with conviction. In the article that set this body of work into motion, Saidiya Hartman demonstrates that slavery's archives expose the enslaved to the palest, most perverse imitation of representation, entangling the memory of their lives with evidence of their exclusion from the province of human being ("Venus" 3). Yet each encounter with one of these dead ends, and thus with the limits of what an archive can verify, presents an occasion to relinquish positivist historiographic approaches and begin devising alternatives that valorize instead that which resists verification—most notably, the heterodox concepts, philosophies, and counter-facts that survive the convergence of omission and distortion.⁷ To this range of unverifiable alternates, this essay adds the convictions that archived subjects might have held but that the conventions of archival texts would have prevented them from dis-

closing outright. At the fraying edges of Johnstone's *Address*, where slight breaks appear in its inventory of hardships and in the rhetoric comprising its exterior, one finds subtle residues of Johnstone's belief in the ability of black subjects brutalized by slavery and emancipation to form themselves into thriving communities—a belief that, as we will see, stands in stark tension with the reality his *Address* depicts.⁸ Though subtle, these residues are dense with meaning; viewed affirmatively and with a measure of care, they emerge as conduits for the belated articulation of Johnstone's vision of another reality, one in which the viability and richness of black social life would grant access to a life worth living. Viewed, in other words, with a sense of conviction that counteracts the subtlety of their expression, these residues do not carry us past this archival dead end; rather, they enable us to turn inward on the corresponding space of enclosure and become acquainted with the otherworldly designs it might have contained.

By adopting such a view, this essay models a method that it calls *reading with conviction*: an approach to thin or fragmented archival sources that seeks to spotlight their disclosure of subversive beliefs, to amplify such beliefs by means of a principled credulity, and to transform them into points of transit from the domain of the verifiable into the realm of possibility. It proceeds in three sections: first, an account of Johnstone's critical vantage on the world he inhabited; second, an examination of the shape and probable sources of his belief that another world was possible; and third, a brief reflection on the broader implications of this critical approach. The first section, by tracking the text's uneasy figuration of Johnstone as a self-possessed subject of penance, suggests that he recognized the injustice of his condition and harbored a critical understanding of the social forces that had produced it and that had in turn influenced his inscription into archival memory. The second section, building on this view of Johnstone as a knowing critic of emancipation and of archival power, traces the concrecence of his belief that the potential to build an existence apart from these forces resided in the ordinary lineaments of black life, and of religious life in particular. Tucked away amid the seams holding together his compulsory performance of amenability to the burgeoning ideology of possessive individualism, the residues of this conviction gesture toward a poetics of relation that would refuse the "burdened individuality" of emancipation and prefigure its abolition, cultivating in its place a practice of consensual, collective thriving.⁹ The third section considers how this essay's proposed

method for approaching archival dead ends gives rise to new dimensions through which to move from archives of domination to liberated futures.

“FOR I WELL KNEW”: THE VIEW FROM THE GALLOWS

The inextricability of Johnstone’s life from the fatal tribulations that ended it is a result of its conveyance through a genre designed to contort the biographies of the socially marginal into cautionary fables of justified demise. The *Address* is an example of gallows literature, a popular genre that would compel people condemned to death by execution to recount their stories of indiscipline, and to appeal for upright conduct on the part of those who would outlive them. The allure of this genre was enduring, dating back to the earliest English settler colonies in North America, and was propelled by readers’ fascination with its central figure: the criminal transgressor.¹⁰ Its resurgence toward the end of the eighteenth century coincided with this figure’s utility as a vehicle for the articulation of new norms for black life in the early national period. As the spread of emancipation laws forced racist polities to consider how to integrate large numbers of freedpeople into civic life, the figure of the condemned “black malefactor” emerged as a device for papering over the tensions between blackness—the paradigm of civic and social exclusion—and the measure of inclusion that legal personhood would entail.¹¹ To that end, gallows texts such as Johnstone’s functioned, on the one hand, to naturalize the historically persistent link between blackness and moral degeneracy and, on the other, to persuade readers of the need for black subjects to submit to the disciplines associated with divine salvation and civic inclusion. Such texts would thus present the figure of the black malefactor not only as a negative exemplar, the bearer of an uncivil personhood consisting in criminality, but also as a subject performing belated amenability to another kind of personhood, one sanctioned by the law and governed by the possessive logic of contract.¹² Before the nineteenth-century ascendancy of fugitive slave narratives, this figure provided an uncommon and therefore significant avenue for English-speaking black diasporans to enter the print record under their own names.¹³ For these individuals, however, the very condition of entry into archival memory was tacit submission to their “narratively condemned status”: their position at the joint of presumed criminality, social and political exclusion, and state-sanctioned death.¹⁴

The erosion of texture from Johnstone's life, therefore, is an effect of its sacrificial conscription into the telling of a tall tale about the salvific potential of possessive personhood, with his own demise portrayed as the result of his recurring failure to adhere to its prescriptions.

Yet Johnstone manages at times to undermine this tale's credibility by wrinkling the fabric of his compulsory performance. Specifically, throughout the *Address*, as he inhabits the figure of the condemned black malefactor, he illuminates the process by which he became materially bound to it. For portions of the first of the three documents comprising the *Address*—Johnstone's "address to [those of] his colour . . . , together with some general observations" on their condition—he performs an enthusiasm for penance and discipline that complies with the expectations attached to this figure (2). He calls repeatedly for his fellow people of color to resist presumptions of their criminality and demonstrate their eligibility for civic inclusion by maintaining "a just, upright, sober, honest and diligently industrious, manner of life and a purity of morals" (13). But a crucial fact about the *Address*, a fact that stretches the credibility of these appeals, is that the occasion for its writing was the execution of its author for a crime he maintained he did not commit. Following a trial that, as the publisher's preface notes, "ha[d] of late been the general subject of conversation," a court in the town of Woodbury, New Jersey, convicted Johnstone of the murder of a West African man (a "Guinea Negro") called Thomas Read (2). Johnstone's guilt in this matter was presumed rather than proven, resting primarily on the establishment of a motive: Read had brought a lawsuit against Johnstone over a tenancy dispute that the *Address* does not describe in detail.¹⁵ Moreover, as Johnstone asserts in his dying confession, the second document of the *Address*, the prosecution relied on false testimony. In fact, he devotes some of his dying words to naming those who had testified falsely against him in this case, as well as in prior incidents of petty theft that had heightened his vulnerability to police harassment and indebtedness, a self-reinforcing nexus of problems that first arose only after his emancipation and that he could never escape (35–36). By placing these distinct instances of "false swearing" in apposition, Johnstone evokes their connectedness and their cumulative effect: each played a part in the social machinery that manufactured his criminality and rendered his free life unbearable and, ultimately, disposable (23).

The seeds of Johnstone's binding to this inexorably condemned figure

are visible even in the events leading up to his emancipation, where the burdensome impositions of possessive personhood outrun its mere provision. Johnstone's address recalls in passing the moment when he intervened to stop an attempt on the life of his fifth and final enslaver, James Craig, and, consequently, received his manumission: "[W]hen another negro man attempted killing him with a knife, . . . I instantly throwing myself between, saved my master who did not see the knife the fellow had concealed and endeavoured to stab him with" (13). It was this act "together with my always being fond of work," Johnstone adds, that "induced [Craig] to give me my manumission" (13). This initial account construes Johnstone's manumission as a reward earned through moral conduct and diligence, a rendering that harmonizes with his generic and figurative trappings. But his later return to the incident introduces some dissonance: it is an extended assertion that his emancipation was, to use Hartman's term, a "nonevent," the paltry outcome of a long process in which he passed through indebtedness, incarceration, and fugitivity on a path to more of the same.¹⁶ For, in fact, Craig did not simply liberate Johnstone; rather, he permitted him to seek out waged work until he had earned enough to purchase his liberty.¹⁷ Thus engaged, Johnstone went to Baltimore, where he was eventually jailed as a fugitive, transferred to the Dover jail at Craig's request, and forced into a similar arrangement with a Dover merchant after Craig "died drunk" (33). By the time the noted Quaker abolitionist Warner Mifflin finally helped Johnstone arrange his formal manumission, over a year after the incident with Craig, Johnstone had barely eluded capture by fugitive slave catchers, an occurrence that prompted him to leave Delaware for New Jersey and adopt his brother's given name (Abraham) to avoid detection, "for I well knew that my poor colour had but few friends in that country" (33–34).¹⁸ With his second account of these events, then, as with his catalog of false swearers, Johnstone exposes the incoherence of the ideology that is supposed to render his textual performance intelligible. Specifically, by making visible emancipation's role in precipitating the injustices mounting against him, he conjures a divergent conception of possessive individualism: as a portal to continued suffering, not a prerequisite for living well.

For Johnstone, then, what was freedom, if not emancipation? And, indeed, who was Johnstone, if not the penitent criminal into which the *Address* forms him? The *Address* marks a dead end for these lines of inquiry,

omitting Johnstone's explicit reflections on the first question and denying visibility to any evidence that would shed irrefutable light on the second. Faced with these obstacles, one could of course settle for reading the text, against its own grain, as evidence supporting a now-familiar argument about formal emancipation. As Johnstone's recorded experiences illustrate, chattel slavery's whip persisted in the self- and external disciplines of possessive individualism and other structural incarnations of antiblackness, such that freedom and unfreedom became knotted under the incoherent sign of the "free black."¹⁹ However, as this essay has so far suggested, the text also stands as a *knowing* account of the transmission of slavery's abuses into the fibers of free life. Other scholars share a sense of the *Address*'s critical perspicacity, reading it as a multifaceted critique of racial injustice in America.²⁰ But in attending admirably to Johnstone's use of print to address problems of political urgency, these readings have stopped short of considering as carefully as possible how he envisioned the world that might have followed the resolution of these problems. As the next section suggests, the questions posed at the beginning of this paragraph—questions culled from slight breaks in Johnstone's compulsory performance—ought to be viewed not solely as queries for contemporary readers of the *Address* but also as active, pressing concerns for Johnstone himself. If the foregoing has demonstrated that Johnstone engaged critically with self-possession, then what follows will demonstrate—through continued attention to his fleeting departures from generic convention—that his critical view gives rise to a fragmentarily expressed belief in the possibility of living beyond its lethal grasp. Read with a careful and credulous attunement to these residues of conviction, the dead end of Johnstone's *Address* emerges anew as a scene of radical thought, where an inchoate vision of what freedom might have been and who Johnstone might have become—a vision, that is, of how to live otherwise—comes into vivid focus.

"I EARNESTLY PRAY YE": READING WITH CONVICTION

As the foregoing has shown, certain features of Johnstone's textual performance undermine his compulsory endorsement of possessive personhood as a sufficient alternative to slavery's degradations. Yet his *Address* goes on to propose a theory and practice of communal life that takes self-possession as its founding premise. In the passage that conveys the crux

of this vision, he begins by exhorting his fellow people of color to maintain and perhaps improve their social standing by embracing their status as proprietors of their own labor and cultivating a lifestyle geared toward reliably meeting the demands of possessive market society.²¹ He writes:

My dear breth[re]n I earnestly pray ye, to be diligent and industrious in all your callings, manners of business and stations in life, be punctual, upright and just in all your contracts, engagements and dealings of what kind or nature soever, be faithful, tende[r, and] affectionate in all the relations ye bear in society whether as children, servants, husbands, wives, fathers, or mothers. Be decent in your dress and frugal in all your expences, for by that means you will provide for the wants of sickness and old age, refrain from the too great use of spirituous liquors a little is serviceable, but by all means beware of t[o]o much, for that irreparably injures the constitution, and cannot add to the enjoyment of those innocent pleasures and recreations necessary to ye as human beings and members of society.—But above all my dear friends avoid frolicking, and all amusements that lead to expence and idleness for, they beget habits of dissipation and vice, and lead ye into many inconveniences. (27–28)

Obligations toward diligence, thrift, moderation, and affective restraint define this communal ethos, which forms subjects of emancipation into a cohesive group only to tightly circumscribe their ability to exercise their newfound freedom. It gathers together multiple genres of black being (“children, servants, husbands, wives, fathers, or mothers”) and elides the differences and overlaps between them, calling for the voluntary realignment of their actions with the habitus of the male-bodied worker (“brethren”). What Johnstone “earnestly” outlines here thus anticipates what we might now term a black politics of respectability: a collective effort to accord individual behaviors and attitudes with the dominant society’s norms as a means of contesting the logic of racial subordination (Higginbotham 187). He prescribes a mode of communal life that would strategically limit the plurality and capacity of black lives in the hope of insulating them from, and perhaps mitigating, the harmful “inconveniences” associated with idleness and disrepute—inconveniences that Johnstone, to his cost, knew well.

The prospect of antiblack violence thus haunts and tacitly structures

this vision of community. Johnstone goes on, however, to make its influence more explicit. He continues:

In the first place then my dear friends, by a few hours frolicking, ye will spend the fruits of many an hours hard labour, and [the] oftener ye go to frolicks the greater will be your de[s]ire to go to them, and by frequently going to such places ye unavoidably incur such a heavy expence, and contract such a dissolute manner of, not only soon swallowing up all your earnings, the fruit of many a days hard toil and sweat; but also leaves ye considerably in debt, ye are then harrassed by processes [press gangs], Constables and duns [debt collectors] and if ye fortunately can avoid being lodged in jail, ye can but barely prolong your existence from day to day, while your merciless and rapacious creditors, exact such an exorbitant interest. (28)

Here Johnstone lays bare the corrosive environs in which black social life would occur in the wake of slavery. This hypothetical, which thinly veils his own experiences, renders brief lapses in conduct as harbingers of inexorable, violent reprimand: one moment, “ye” are merely overspending in hours of leisure; the next moment, “ye” are barely evading the clutches of impressment officers, law enforcement, debt collectors, and mortality itself. It depicts a slippery slope, but one whose slipperiness is of a particular kind, rooted in the workings of the corrupt social machinery that Johnstone’s own testimony makes visible. “[A] few hours frolicking” becomes oversaturated with potential risk because it occurs in a climate of antiblackness designed to punish minor indiscipline with excessive carceral and dispossessive force and, eventually, with effective revocation of the ability to survive.²² By appending this parable of declension to his prescription of respectability, Johnstone makes clear the racialized character of his vision of black community, positing as its primary purpose the ongoing erection of temporary barriers to racist violence. Born out of injustice and sustained by trepidation, it would be a negative formation held together by its stakeholders’ shared fear of exposure to punitive harm, not by any desire to thrive or to radically transform their given reality.

Johnstone’s putatively “earnest” prescription of this mode of communal life grounded in compliance with the terms of the given should not, however, be understood to signal his total abandonment of a critical disposition toward the ideology of possessive individualism or his quiet acceptance

of black death's power to shape and degrade black life. For there reside throughout the *Address* a small number of partial, glancing allusions to moments when Johnstone transiently detached his own life from this ethos of respectability and the impoverished simulacrum of community it entailed, pursuing instead undisciplined forms of togetherness that gestured toward alternatives. Consider, for example, the text's allusions to his own involvement in the aforesaid "frolicks," diversionary gatherings that, in his words, "undoubt[ed]ly make yourselves detested and justly hated by your neighbors, inimical to society, and helps to throw an odium on the whole colour" (30). Johnstone consistently dismisses these gatherings in the act of mentioning them, invoking them solely to expedite his endorsement of respectability, but the mere suggestion that he was habitually present at such gatherings raises the contrary possibility that the disordered sociality they encompassed harbored some promise or potential he regarded as worthwhile.²³ Consider also the text's brief account of an incident in which Johnstone and his wife Sarah, a black woman born formally free in Delaware, managed to extricate themselves temporarily from the exploitative conditions compromising their freedom.²⁴ Soon after Sarah joined her husband in New Jersey in 1792 and began working "as cook and house maid" at a boardinghouse, her employer—a Mrs. Lockwood—accused her retrospectively of stealing some disused bedspreads ("carpets") that she had been given in exchange for her future wages (34). She failed to compensate Lockwood for the bedspreads, but this failure was a result of her refusal to work for a period of time in order to care for Abraham when he could not work due to grave illness—a refusal that stands as a contextually transgressive assertion of the value of black life over the value of white patronage (35). Johnstone similarly constrains the significance of this anecdote by embedding it within the litany of false allegations that appears in his dying confession, but the content of the story exceeds this framing, materializing yet another contrary possibility: that Sarah and Abraham came to know intimately, perhaps through this very episode, that the work of subsistence and mutual aid could be disarticulated from customary, seemingly inevitable relations of exploitation.²⁵ These faintly present possibilities in no way disrupt the textual consistency of Johnstone's performance of belief in respectability's salvific potential, but they do raise a question that compels us to view this performance differently: could it be that Johnstone harbored another set of beliefs about what black life could or should

look like, one that the requirements of his textual performance rendered inexpressible?

I wish to suggest that these subtle residues of a subversive conviction on Johnstone's part prime us to detect amid the *Address's* rigid prescriptions his covert disclosure of an alternative vision of black community: one in which his fellow people of color would aim not to absorb dominant norms or perfect possessive personhood but, rather, to prefigure a reality in which it would be possible for them to live, and to thrive, on terms of their own making. Specifically, he anchors this vision in scenes of religious worship, where, as he insinuates, the inculcation of respectability among black churchgoers overlays a more fundamental process: their incipient coalescence into communities held together by agreement on and practical adherence to common values. After detailing the "cruel rigid and inexorable tyrann[ny]" of the nation's founders, he again prescribes respectability and the aid of white abolitionists as direct responses to the persistent challenges of black life (11). He calls on fellow freedpeople to strive for "irreproachable conduct" in order to "make yourselves not only respectable but beloved, and also . . . thereby furnish your friends with strong arguments and inducements to endeavour the relief of the rest of our breth[re]n, as yet in thral[l]dom" (14–15). But this prescription digresses slightly, opening space for Johnstone to depict churchgoing as a mode of being and acting in concert. He writes:

I most earnestly recommend to you a serious, and regular attendance on divine worship every Sabbath day at least, and as often at other times as you conveniently can. . . . For religion being the best practical system of virtue and good actions consonant to the will of our heavenly father, that is known, it sooth[e]s and comforts the mind of the afflicted and troubled, alleviates all our distresses, and disposes us to a perfect obedience to the divine will; and good will and peace to all mankind. (15)

Here Johnstone urges regular attendance at services as part of a program of self-discipline, of merging one's newly sanctioned volition with "the divine will"; however, his urging also places special emphasis on the imbrication within scenes of worship of the "practical" with the collective, and more specifically with the project of repairing afflictions and cultivating "good will and peace" in and through social relations. Indeed, "in speaking of practical religion," he adds, "I do not mean that religion which springs

from fear, but I mean a religion founded on a love of virtue and a detestation of vice . . . and a sense of those obligations which creatures formed to live in a mutual state of dependence on one another lie under” (15). Religious collectivity thus emerges here not only as a terrain of discipline but also as a medium of collective affirmation: its practice expresses a passion for virtue and results in the further expression of relations of mutual support and dependence, as well as the concrescence of such relations into something greater than the sum of their parts. For, as Johnstone suggests, “to receive and communicate assistance, constitutes the happiness of human life: man may indeed preserve his existence in solitude, but can enjoy it only in society” (16). There thus appears here another meaningful wrinkle in the fabric of Johnstone’s rhetoric of respectability. His “earnest” recommendation subtly recasts religious gatherings as sites where the practice of mutual concern, as well as the fulfillment of mutual obligations and acts of goodwill, give rise to a higher state of being grounded on a common desire to thrive rather than on a shared fear of racial violence.

With this slight digression from his moralizing itinerary, then, Johnstone weaves into his compulsory endorsement of respectability a competing vision of communal life, suggesting in particular that religious practice—divested from the solicitation of white patronage and oriented toward the autonomous cultivation of black sociality—holds open the unlikely possibility of black thriving in a world conditioned by the inevitability of premature black death. The fact is, however, that the *Address*, combined with Johnstone’s archival invisibility outside it, renders impossible the telling of a story in which Johnstone himself was able to pursue in a sustained fashion this alternative mode of communal life. On the one hand, the vision he puts forward resonates with insights that contemporary historians have expressed, in retrospect, concerning the world-making potential of religious life in black diasporic contexts.²⁶ Social, cultural, and religious historians of the African Americas have long argued that organized religion constituted essential spaces for enslaved and freed black diasporans to negate the effects of their “dysselected” status.²⁷ The remembered, deracinated ritual practices that survived transatlantic passage formed a medium through which heterogeneous groups of enslaved people came to understand themselves as communities, and as sharing a common identity across specific communities.²⁸ As the “invisible institution” of so-called slave religion became entangled with externally imposed doctrines and ideologies, scenes

of worship remained key moments of expression, deliberation, and consolidation for mutual dependences, shared values, and common, often subversive desires.²⁹ On the other hand, though, the empirical grounds for conscripting Johnstone into this historical narrative are, at best, unstable. For his experience of the structural translation of slavery's degradations into emancipation's racial burdens rendered him profoundly alone in the grips of precarity: "an individual, doomed to procure food and raiment for himself," who could barely manage "to keep off death from day to day," but who still desired to be "useful to his fellow creatures in a greater or lesser degree according to his ability" (16). His consistent facility with scriptural allusion—on display in the previous quotation, where he improvises with the book of Acts—suggests that he possessed some knowledge of Christian doctrine, but it is unclear where this knowledge came from: could it have been the fruits of Johnstone's autodidacticism, the collaborative influence of an amanuensis, or the memorized remnants of prior forays into group recitation and worship? Other possible markers of Johnstone's connection to religious life are similarly obscure and inconclusive, such as his links to the aforementioned white Quaker abolitionist Warner Mifflin and his brother Daniel Mifflin. Though the former was responsible for arranging Johnstone's manumission, and though the latter had custody of Johnstone's "son now aged 13" at the time of his death, there is no indication—beyond, perhaps, Johnstone's hardly peculiar tendency to address his readers as "friends"—that his attachments to Quakerism extended beyond these particular individuals or involved black people other than him or his family (34).³⁰ Johnstone's biography thus resists incorporation into the broader historical narrative whose conclusions his covertly expressed vision would seem, at least in spirit, to affirm. His *Address* marks a dead end for this historiographic project, obscuring from view the very details that would enable his story's comfortable inclusion within an expansive chronicle of religion's power to enable the making of alternative lifeworlds.³¹

But this dead end is not without an epitaph, a commemorative remark in which Johnstone mourns the absence of collective thriving from his own story and, moreover, invests this irretrievable possibility with precise, transformative significance. Inscribed out of place amid Johnstone's dying confession, this remark conveys not evidence but understanding: its recollection of a particular memory from his thwarted life doubles as a subdued

assertion of *why* black subjects caught up in the toxic estuary of slavery and freedom required an alternative way of living. Right after declaring himself innocent in response to a litany of petty theft allegations, but right before “speak[ing] of the crime that I am to die for,” Johnstone offers “a few words” on his lapsed standing within a religious society. He writes:

While in Delaware I was a chosen member of the Methodistical society, and in William Thomas’s class. But the manner of my departure from there precluded my getting a certificate there, whereupon, when I came here [to New Jersey], I could not according to the mode of discipline be considered a member until I went thro’ a probation, and thereby regularly have got admitted which though extremely well inclined to do, I some how omitted until it alas was too late—and I die in the profession of that faith, tho’ not an actual member. (36)

This passage reveals that Johnstone once belonged to a known Methodist congregation, but that his membership was ill fated.³² Circumstances conspired to halt his participation in religious life at least twice, when his forced flight from Delaware cut him off from his church there and when the instability of his life in New Jersey prevented him from laying down new roots. The climate of antiblackness that scripted his premature death thus also compelled his withdrawal from organized religion, causing him to die professing, though not belonging, to his faith. But why does he emphasize this distinction between membership and mere profession? The location of this passage, as a bridge between lists of “false swearers,” is crucial: it suggests that what he required from religious life was not the comfort of belief but the concert of group worship. Positioned in between painful recollections of his powerlessness before false allegations, the passage disrupts the continuity of the violent social machinery to which these recollections give textual form. It suggests that, insofar as there was any hope of interrupting the pattern that manufactured Johnstone’s unjust demise, he believed it would have consisted in his belonging to a durable community of believers, rather than belonging merely to himself. By both memorializing the foreclosure of such belonging and encrypting its memory within an archival text inhospitable to it, this passage materializes the bond between what is lost, what remains, and what might have been.³³ It fastens the unfulfilled promise of a more livable life to a record of the oppressive reality that crowded it out, thus rendering the tragic circumstances that

shaped Johnstone's life inseparable from the bygone, irrecoverable scenes of collective life under whose aegis he might have discovered, given time, how to live.

CONCLUSION

The Address thus identifies a pathway leading toward the abolition of possessive personhood's lethal impositions, toward the cultivation of a poetics of relation that would arise in the midst of these impositions and enable thriving apart from them.³⁴ However, only when it is read with conviction—that is, with a credulous attunement to the residues of belief that the text contains despite its own structuring conventions—does the *Address* undergo the metamorphosis necessary to lend this pathway visibility. Viewed through this lens, the text comes to stand not solely as a dead end, a document that manufactures subalternity by rendering a life indistinct from the vehicles of its detainment and death, but also as a kind of elegy for otherwise possibility.³⁵ It emerges as an unlikely register of Johnstone's relationship to the alternative possibilities for living that he could envision but was not fated to enjoy. By illuminating these fleeting projections, reading with conviction counteracts the disfiguring power of archival texts in a restrained fashion. In observance of the impossibility of prying archived subjects apart from the structures and exercises of power that shaped their lives and defined their inscription into archival memory, this approach tries instead to understand how these very subjects envisioned their improbable attainment of meaningful distance from such vectors of oppression.³⁶

To read with conviction is, therefore, neither to fabricate a "romance of resistance" nor to read documents of subalternity for their speculative content.³⁷ It is, rather, to proceed deliberately from the premise that the incremental, frustrating, and invariably thwarted work of manifesting livable realities has often taken place in regions of close proximity to power's expression and has thus occasioned the implantation of such realities' germinal traces within this terrible soil. It is therefore an approach that can, in its most wholehearted applications, recast archival dead ends as sites of utopian communion, sites where absence, fragmentation, and distortion render obsolete the protocols of recovery and, in doing so, position us to

relate to the subjects of our research differently—to come to know them not as subjects of power or agents of resistance but as savvy, conspiratorial fellow believers in the attainability of a more just world.

NOTES

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1. For the clearest statement of this question, and of its enduring uncertainty with respect to black social life, see Hartman, “Dead Book” (214). Versions of this question, posed with a variety of intonations, permeate recent influential work in black studies. See, for example, Crawley; Chandler; Sexton; Sharpe; Wilderson.
2. Johnstone reports the names of the five men who enslaved him, but who nonetheless “all . . . liked and loved me”: “Doctor John Skidmore who died while I was very young”; “his Nephew Samuel Skidmore, he being the heir at law”; “John Grey a blacksmith, and from whom I learned that business”; “Edward Callaghan, him I did not like, therefore I would not live with him”; and James Craig (13, 32). Researching these individuals, however, yields no further concrete connections to Johnstone and enables only some grounded speculation about his age. Probate records from Kent County, Delaware (adjacent to the county of Sussex), indicate that a John Skidmore died there in 1762, with his estate to be administered by a relative named Samuel (presumably the aforesaid “heir at law”); that a John Gray died there in 1783; and that a James Craig died there, intestate, in 1784. These parameters, combined with the few remarks Johnstone provides about these four men, would suggest that Johnstone was born in the latter half of the 1750s, freed from slavery in about 1785, and executed, in 1797, at approximately forty years of age.
3. As its title page indicates, Johnstone’s *Address* was printed “for the purchasers” in Philadelphia in 1797. In her chapter on Johnstone, DeLombard affirms this claim about Johnstone’s archival invisibility outside of *The Address*: “No legal or print records documenting his trial, execution, or involvement in prior civil proceedings have been discovered, and the circumstances of the *Address*’s authorship, editing, publication, and circulation remain a mystery” (121).
4. The archives engaged and discussed throughout this essay are repositories of

- written and, in particular, printed documents, a conception that is far from exhaustive.
5. On archives as institutional formations, see Guha; Derrida; Trouillot; Mbembe; Lowe. On archives as epistemological formations, see Spivak; Stoler; Hartman, "Venus"; Gikandi; Fuentes.
 6. On the distribution of archival power, see Trouillot 55.
 7. See all of the essays collected in Helton et al. and in Connolly and Fuentes, but in particular the contributions from Davis; Kazanjian (in both issues); and Smallwood, as well as the editors' introductions.
 8. This focus on fraying edges, and on discerning the "black messages" that were contorted to fit within "white envelopes" during the late eighteenth century, derives from Sekora.
 9. C. B. Macpherson defines *possessive individualism* as a theory of social organization that conceives of each individual subject as the sole proprietor of their body, their faculties, and their skills. This essay's use of that term (as well as *self-possession* and *possessive personhood*, two interchangeable terms for the condition that is this ideology's consequence) follows Macpherson. Drawing on Macpherson's framework, Hartman offers the term *burdened individuality* to describe the insubstantial condition of formal freedom (as self-possession) that ex-slaves were forced to accept after their emancipation, which turned them loose upon the world as newly constituted individuals who lacked the material means to support themselves and who indeed possessed only themselves (*Scenes* 115–24). On the poetics of relation, see Glissant.
 10. See Cohen, *Pillars*. On this genre's significance as a tool opposing capital punishment, see Jones. For a comprehensive catalog of the genre, see Bosco.
 11. On the emergence of gradual emancipation debates as sites where racial and national identity were negotiated, see Melish. On the later articulation of ideas of black racial inferiority and criminality in the postslavery context, see Muhammad.
 12. For deep and wide-ranging context on the emergence and significance of the black malefactor, see DeLombard (1–48). On the contract as the predominant logic of social control in the period of emancipation, see Hartman, *Scenes*; see also Stanley.
 13. As a number of scholars have noted, the figure of the penitent black fugitive was an important predecessor of, and a productive foil for, the exceptionally pious and forbearing eyewitness figures that told later slave narratives. See Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*; Aljoe, "Introduction"; Starling 1–104; Foster 3–43; Andrews 1–56.
 14. Wynter offers this term to describe black Americans' multifarious experiences of subjection yoked to premature death ("No Humans Involved").
 15. Newspapers and official records from the period are silent on the particulars of this case. Worth noting here, for this reason, is Stephen Hartnett's reminder that for black people accused of crimes in Johnstone's moment (but not only in his

- moment), “the line between legal executions and extralegal lynchings was thin” (151). Given that Johnstone was punished on the basis of testimony and circumstantial evidence for the murder of an enslaved man whose body was apparently never found, Hartnett harbors a suspicion that local whites executed Johnstone “as retaliation for his aiding Tom’s successful dash to freedom” (125). On this possibility, see Hartnett 123–60.
16. On the nonevent of emancipation, see Hartman, *Scenes* 116.
 17. This immediate release from slavery into debt bondage was customary in the age of gradual emancipation. See Melish.
 18. The fate of Johnstone’s brother is unknown. It is unknown, too, whether they spent their childhood together. That Johnstone was willing to adopt his given name suggests that the original Abraham might have died some time before this rechristening took place.
 19. On the transfiguration of the whip of chattel slavery, see Hartman, *Scenes* 126–40. On the “knotting” of freedom and unfreedom, see Warren 50–51 and *passim*. On antiblackness as the essential, form-giving substrate of American modernity, see Wilderson.
 20. These interpretations construe Johnstone as a reformist, a view that this essay rejects. For Hartnett, what Johnstone calls for is the outlawing of slavery and the death penalty (125); for DeLombard, it is the undoing of “the racialized logic of citizenship and criminality that ensured the continuity of black political exclusion” (122); and for Schorb, it is the inclusion of black freedpeople within the overlapping domains of civic participation and alphabetic literacy (64–69). The full complement of Johnstone’s contemporary interpreters also includes Cohen (“Social Injustice”); Finseth; Hunter; and Otter 40–46, all of whom position *The Address* as a factor in broader contestations over the relationship between race and criminality.
 21. My usage of this term draws from Macpherson 48–49.
 22. On antiblackness as total climate, see Sharpe 102–34.
 23. Late eighteenth-century usages of *frolic* that most nearly match Johnstone’s denote, simply, a “scene” or “outburst of fun, gaiety, or mirth” (*OED*, s.v. “frolic,” accessed 29 October 2019, <https://oed.com/view/Entry/74878>).
 24. This incident is the only mention Sarah (referred to as Johnstone’s nameless wife) receives in Johnstone’s address or dying confession, save for a passing mention when Johnstone claims to “have no child living by my wife” (34). She is, however, the addressee of the *Address*’s third and final document: a brief, apologetic letter written to her by Johnstone after she had declined to visit him in jail before his execution (42–47). It is possible to infer that Sarah (also known as Sally) survived Johnstone, but beyond that her fate is unknown.
 25. Specifically, Johnstone intends this story as an answer to the spurious charge that *he* had stolen the bedspreads.

26. For a definitive historical and theological study of this dynamic potential in the African American context that Johnstone inhabited, see Wilmore.
27. On dysselection as the mode of black peoples' exclusion from the Euro-colonial province of the human, see Wynter, "Unsettling."
28. See, e.g., Blassingame; Brown; Genovese; Gomez; Levine; Mintz and Price.
29. See, e.g., Gravely; Johnson; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*; Raboteau, *Canaan Land*.
30. See Nash for background on Mifflin, including a brief mention of Johnstone's story (196).
31. For a poignant reflection on black subjects' insistence of alternative lifeworlds into unlivable conditions, see Robinson 167–71. Robinson's influential conception of the black radical tradition registers as an apt name for the broader narrative of tenacious commitment to mutual affirmation with which Johnstone's vision resonates, but *within* which his own story cannot be placed with certainty.
32. As DeLombard has shown, a small chapel in present-day Kent County, Delaware, bears the name of William Thomas (346n8). It is almost certain that Johnstone, during his time in this congregation, belonged to a group of black worshippers, as it was customary during this period (before the rise of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in the early 1800s) for Methodist congregations to be segregated and, furthermore, for their black congregants to be served by a black preacher.
33. On the slippage of the question "What is lost?" into the question "What remains?," see Eng and Kazanjian 2.
34. An etymological curiosity underwrites this formulation and shapes this essay's approach. The word *abolition* derives from the Latin *abolere*, whose components denote, literally, "to grow or increase" (*olere*) "away from" (*ab-*). *Thrive*, meanwhile, derives from the middle English *þrīve*, which encompasses the activities of growing, increasing, and prospering (*OED*, s.v. "abolish," accessed 29 October 2019, <https://oed.com/view/Entry/451>, and "thrive," accessed 29 October 2019, <https://oed.com/view/Entry/201292>).
35. DeLombard has remarked that black-authored gallows texts such as Johnstone's "do not participate in the mournful rites of cultural memory" and indeed "possess a relative lack of investment in memorialization" — that they are, in short, "[n]either elegies nor epitaphs" (18). Yet it is precisely into the habit of mourning and the mode of elegy that Johnstone slips in the passage just cited, as he opens space amid the ledger of his persecution to lament ("alas") the loss of an alternative timeline, one in which his life might have turned out differently. On otherwise possibility, see Crawley 2.
36. The acquisition of such understanding is perhaps not always possible. A qualitative, though not fundamental, difference between Johnstone's *Address* and, say, a line in an enslaver's ledger must be acknowledged.
37. On the allure of romances of resistance, see Hartman, "Venus" (9). On documents of subalternity as scenes of speculation, see Kazanjian, "Scenes"; Kazanjian, "Freedom's Surprise."

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