

Joseph Johnson's Hat, or, The Storm on Tower Hill

Because they take place over time, containing more text and music than is convenient to reproduce in passing, we refer to songs synecdochally: formally by title or first line, informally (or forgetfully) by a melodic phrase or part of a refrain. Because they are usually small things, songs themselves are synecdochal. Any performance of a song has the capacity to enfold a host of times and places within the moments of its own happening. In this article, I will focus on one man's performance of a single song, in order not to contract but to expand our sense of the dimensions a song might contain. My process is, at heart, the unpacking of another synecdoche: the one Georgian writers, later scholars, and many of my own close colleagues have taken to calling "the man with the ship on his head."

This man, Joseph Johnson—a disabled ex-sailor, ballad-singer, and busker of Afro-Caribbean origins—has fascinated many over the past two centuries. First documented by the antiquarian John Thomas Smith in an 1815 print and his 1817 study of London street figures *Vagabondiana*, Johnson was repeatedly referenced in accounts of street life and ballad culture throughout the nineteenth century.¹ Like many of London's poorest performers, he was more often exoticised than understood by contemporary writers: used as a cipher, or reduced to the dimension most of interest to the writer. In recent years, the figure of Johnson has reappeared in

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¹ John Thomas Smith, *Vagabondiana; or, Anecdotes of Mendicant Wanderers through the Streets of London; with Portraits of the Most Remarkable Drawn from the Life* (London, 1817); "London Ballad Singers," *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* 6, no.150 (9 July 1825): 42; John Timbs, *Curiosities of London* (London, 1855; new edn 1867), 10–11.

British culture, with cameo appearances on page and screen.² Modern scholars have situated him productively within a broader racial and colonial context: Kwame Dawes, Mark Stein, and Eddie Chambers have each interrogated his London performances; Peter Reed and Kathlee Wilson have both discussed him with reference to the history of Jonkonnu.³ Yet, since none of these accounts have made him their focus, an understanding of Johnson as an individual still eludes us. For instance, I am uncomfortable with a perspective that sees a vessel upon the head of a man of African descent, and interprets it *only and necessarily* as a reference to the slave trade. Therefore, while I cannot of course get *inside* that head, I would like to try to understand what Johnson's performance might have meant in all its dimensions, to himself as well as to others. Rather than frame this as a 'rescue' from the condescension of both posterity, and some of his contemporaries, I would prefer to think of this as an engagement with the multiplicities of song culture. To understand a song in a global city like Regency London, we must travel: to Jamaica and Versailles, and perhaps even Australia. We must also travel in time. Such is the nature of a performance like Johnson's—represented, recalled, misunderstood—that the thread leading to its centre only unravels when tugged from its end: in this case, 2017.

10:04:25 On screen caption on black screen

² Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2004); Steven Knight, Tom Hardy, and Chips Hardy, *Taboo* (BBC TV, 2017).

³ Kwame Dawes, "Negotiating the ship on the head: Black British fiction," *Wasafiri* 14 (1999): 18–24; Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 103–4; Eddie Chambers, "Black British Artists: Celebrating Nelson's Ships," <https://www.theibtaurisblog.com/2014/07/02/black-british-artists-celebrating-nelsons-ships/>. Accessed 10 October 2017; Peter Reed, "'There Was No Resisting John Canoe': Circum-Atlantic Transracial Performance," *Theatre History Studies* 27 (2007): 65–85, 80; Kathleen Wilson, "The Performance of Freedom: Maroons and the Colonial Order in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica and the Atlantic Sound," *William and Mary Quarterly* 66 (2009): 45–86, 81.

London 1814.

10:04:32 EXT. WAPPING WALL LANE, WAPPING – DAY

It is afternoon in the busy dockside street. [. . .]

We are taken along by a STREET BEGGAR. Strapped to his head he has a perfect replica of an English naval battleship, made from sticks and paper and leather. It is twice as big as his head and he balances it with care. He is accompanied by a gang of delighted children who follow him bare foot and hoot and laugh at his words as he chants out a rhyme . . . Suddenly they stop. They have seen something coming.⁴

From its opening credits, the 2017 BBC TV series *Taboo* nails its colors to the mast: Regency London is a global city. Though the program’s aesthetics owe more to a steampunk take on Victoriana, and though its plot and dialogue are cavalier with anachronisms, its vision is in one sense more historically percipient than most period dramas, in conceiving of London as being in dialogue with both west and east—from the respective “ends” of the metropolis itself, to North America, Africa, and Asia. Throughout its six-episode first season, *Taboo* develops a critique of the British slave trade, gradually expanding its scope from the metropolis, to the global network of human trafficking of which, the series suggests, London is the centre, even after its formal abolition. And in the scene above the writer, Steven Knight, has certainly done his research, featuring a version of Joseph Johnson as an iconic figure in the establishing shots of London’s

⁴ Steven Knight, “Episode 1,” *Taboo*, Post-Production Script (12 December 2016), 5. <https://www.downloads.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/Taboo-Ep1-UK-Tx-Final-Script.pdf>, accessed 10 October 2017.

docklands. Appropriately, “Street Beggar” was played by the late Larrington Walker, a sixty-nine-year-old Jamaican veteran of television and the RSC, who immigrated to England at the age of nine.⁵

Taboo does not name its beggar, unlike another recent work that also had an incarnation as a BBC TV series. Susanna Clarke’s 2004 novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* constructs a London equally enmeshed with other places: Yorkshire, the West Indies, Africa, and most notably, the realm of faerie. Though it posits an alternative, magical history of England, *Jonathan Strange* is one of the most sensitive recreations of the period in recent memory. One plot strand concerns Stephen Black, a butler and person of color manumitted by his master, Sir Walter Pole. Black struggles to establish a sense of self in what he comes to perceive as a foreign country, increasingly identifying with his enslaved mother, who died in childbirth. In the following scene, his encounters with faerie have estranged him from mundane London, and he is wary of any further signs of the supernatural:

As Stephen walked up St James’s-street, he saw a strange sight—a black ship sailing towards him through the grey rainy air above the heads of the crowd. It was a frigate, some two feet high, with dirty, ragged sails and peeling paint. It rose and fell, mimicking the motion of ships at sea. Stephen shivered a little to see it. A beggar emerged from the crowd, a negro with skin as dark and shining as Stephen’s own. Fastened to his hat was this ship. As he walked he ducked and raised his head so that his ship could sail. As he went he performed his curious bobbing and swaying movements very slowly and carefully for fear of upsetting

⁵ https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0907955/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cl_t33. See also <https://www.thebritishblacklist.com/thebritishblacklist/larrington-walker/>, both accessed 10 October 2017.

his enormous hat. The effect was of a man dancing amazingly slowly. The beggar's name was Johnson. He was a poor, crippled sailor who had been denied a pension. Having no other means of relief, he had taken to singing and begging to make a livelihood, in which he had been most successful and he was known throughout the Town for the curious hat he wore.⁶

For the purposes of her narrative, Clarke sites Johnson on St James's Street, just off Piccadilly, a well-heeled locale a world away from Wapping. In every other respect, however, she is faithful—to the point of paraphrasing—to her source: Smith's *Vagabondiana* of 1817. This was an elaboration upon a series of plates Smith had produced two years earlier, including one singularly arresting image: a depiction of Joseph Johnson, reproduced as Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1]

Besides Smith's image, which I shall return to below, Johnson was also documented in the anonymous 1825 article "London Ballad Singers," and in John Timbs' rather later compendium, *Curiosities of London*.⁷ In *Vagabondiana*, Smith's etching is accompanied by the following account of Johnson's performative strategies:

[I]n order to elude the vigilance of the parochial beadles, he first started on Tower-hill, where he amused the idlers by singing George Alexander Stevens's "Storm." By degrees he ventured into the public streets, and at length became

⁶ Clarke, *Jonathan Strange*, 319.

⁷ "London Ballad Singers"; Timbs, *Curiosities*, 10–11.

what is called a “Regular Chaunter.” But novelty, the grand secret of all exhibitions, from the Magic Lantern to the Panorama, induced Black Joe to build a model of the ship Nelson; to which, when placed on his cap, he can, by a bow of thanks, or a supplicating inclination to a drawing-room window, give the appearance of sea-motion. Johnson is as frequently to be seen in the rural village as in great cities; and when he takes a journey, the kind-hearted waggoner will often enable him in a few hours to visit the market-places of Staines, Rumford [*sic*], or St. Albans, where he never fails to gain the farmer’s penny[.]⁸

Smith’s biographical sketch necessarily exceptionalises its subject, marking him out from the masses as a person worthy of special consideration. Yet in the case of Johnson, it also serves to demystify and de-exoticise, attributing a pragmatic economic motive to his remarkable headgear, and presenting a narrative common to many performers and traders in the London street, whose acts were attributable primarily to a legal technicality whereby they could evade official persecution if they sold or performed rather than begged.

Smith also situates Johnson in tangible spaces: Tower Hill, “the public streets,” and the marketplaces of satellite towns. The second of these was the ballad-singer’s usual home, a mixed commercial space with heavy footfall, where passers-by might be induced to delay their business in order first to hear, and second to purchase, broadside copies of Johnson’s song. The first and third invite closer attention. Staines, Romford, and St Albans boxed the compass on three sides, lying west, east, and south of London on a radius approximating to today’s M25 ring road. We may suppose Johnson to have visited on market days, involving a semi-rural audience in his performances. His presence may not have been altogether dissonant. Staines marketplace, for

⁸ Smith, *Vagabondiana*, 33.

instance, features a Georgian public house called “The Blue Anchor,” that would have constituted a suitably maritime backdrop for the ex-sailor. Johnson also took the sea with him: by bobbing and weaving to make his model “sail,” he fashioned a seascape from the surrounding crowd, in a *coup de théâtre* that transformed those around him into unwitting nautical scenery.⁹ Besides, the late Georgian marketplace still carried connotations of the fair, with its attendant and appropriate traces of carnival: the singing sailor from London knew what he was doing in soliciting “the farmer’s penny.”

Tower Hill, meanwhile, referred to the open space immediately west of the Tower of London, a prominent spot used until late into the previous century for executions and the pillory, and subsequently thronged with tradespeople and promenaders. Though hemmed about by ancient and modern bastions of the state in the Tower and the newly erected Mint, the Hill itself afforded an open space for genteel recreation and thereby custom for the singer, as idealized in Robert Bremmel Schnebbelie’s illustration for Hughson’s *Depiction of London* (1810), available on the website of the British Museum— an image that predictably does not feature figures like Johnson.¹⁰ This urban-pastoral take on the London landmark was not the only form in which it might be represented, however, as evidenced in a satirical print by Charles Hunt held by the British Museum.¹¹ Tower Hill marked the boundary between the City of London and the insalubrious—though commercially vital—East End. From its heights, Johnson’s auditors had a view over the Thames, its docks, and its staggering volume of shipping. This gave the area a marked nautical as well as mercantile character that, in the years of depression following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, made for a decidedly mixed message. Hunt’s caricature places Tower

⁹ With thanks to Matthew Ingleby, whose questioning provoked this observation.

¹⁰https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3234085&partId=1. Accessed 6 September 2018.

¹¹https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3015006&partId=1. Accessed 13 September 2019.

Hill in conversation, not only with the Royal Navy, but with the alehouse and the pawn shop, with which the Tower itself is juxtaposed, whilst a crooked cannon-cum-bollard serves as a bathetic echo of the midshipman's own career, now equally askew.

While Hunt's superannuated midshipman is reduced to blacking boots, Johnson's chosen employment was ballad singing. Tower Hill, where he began, lay two miles east of Seven Dials, home of the leading ballad printers, from whom he might be expected to source his physical wares, the songs themselves. However, there was a printer of ephemera, R. Harrild, located a few streets away from the Tower at 20 Great Eastcheap, who is known to have stocked Johnson's signature song "The Storm" at around this date.¹² Harrild's edition may be seen below as Figure 2.¹³

[Insert Figure 2]

Besides "The Storm," known works in Johnson's repertoire were "The British Seaman's Praise" and "The Wooden Walls of Old England," as well as "the best of Dibdin's songs," presumably meaning those on nautical themes.¹⁴ Johnson himself had been a sailor in the merchant marine, rather than a true Jack Tar, and his choice of songs exploited this association.¹⁵ "The Storm," like later nineteenth-century stalwarts "The Sea"¹⁶ and "A Life on the Ocean Wave", is not a *naval* but simply a *nautical* song, its manly maritime character enough to confer the stamp of

¹² See Edward G. D. Liveing, *The House of Harrild, 1801–1948* (London: Harrild & Sons, 1949).

¹³ The text varies across editions. This edition condenses the text, making one line from every two for reasons of space.

¹⁴ *Vagabondiana*, 33; "London Ballad Singers," 42. Charles Dibdin the Elder's posthumous reputation rested almost exclusively on his "sea songs." See Oskar Cox Jensen, David Kennerley, and Ian Newman (eds), *Charles Dibdin and Late Georgian Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ *Vagabondiana*, 33.

¹⁶ A recent performance of which is available at <https://rnsn.glasgow.ac.uk/concert/concert-video/>, accessed 13 September 2019.

patriotism upon its singer. Johnson's choice, besides carrying this personal significance, was well judged to resonate with his sites of performance, from Staines to Tower Hill, and helps us begin to make sense of his most captivating attribute: the vessel on his head.

This headgear warrants extensive consideration. For both Kwame Dawes and Mark Stein, the image of “the ship” on a black man's head recalls the slave trade.¹⁷ For Dawes, it is “the badge of his immigrant status—his sense of alienation and difference,” while for Stein, “this hat is *doubling* Johnson's blackness . . . [it] confronts white guilt by making it more explicit . . . it turns Johnson into a spectacle of otherness.”¹⁸ While a perfectly valid reading, representing one probable association for Johnson himself, this seems unlikely to have been the vessel's primary association for most Londoners—perhaps unlike their Bristolian and Liverpoolian compatriots—who, circa 1815, were likelier to have leapt to more comfortable frames of reference: profitable trade in non-human commodities, and above all, naval supremacy, thereby conflating state and commercial incarnations of patriotism in similar manner to the monuments of Tower Hill and the public houses of market towns. Model ships were often made by British sailors, and also featured, famously, in contemporary effusions of metropolitan theatrical patriotism: on-stage at Sadler's Wells, or on the Serpentine, as part of the Prince Regent's 1814 victory celebrations.¹⁹ Smith calls Johnson, not an ex-slave, but an ex-sailor, before proceeding to refer to his headgear as a model of “the ship Nelson.” This nomenclature, echoed by art historian Eddie Chambers²⁰, was made more precise in both Timbs and the 1825 article, each of which speaks of “the brig

¹⁷ The ship as a Bakhtinian chronotype of the infamous Middle Passage is a concept first fully developed in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), esp. 4, 27, 118, 221.

¹⁸ Dawes, “Negotiating the ship,” 18; Stein, *Black British Literature*, 103–4.

¹⁹ For first-hand accounts, see respectively George Speaight (ed.), *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1956), 87; and Charles F. Lawler (pseud. Peter Pindar), *Lilliputian Navy!! The R—t's Fleet; or, John Bull at the Serpentine* (London, 1814).

²⁰ Chambers, “Black British Artists.”

Nelson”—for Johnson’s model was technically a brig, not a ship, as it only had two masts, rather than three.²¹

This distinction is important if we are to invest meaning in the specific identity of the vessel constructed by Johnson. I think this is worth attempting if we wish to think ourselves into Johnson’s act: contemporary Londoners were often astonishingly well versed in naval matters and were practiced at making significant distinctions between vessels, both as a matter of course and in relation to major political and theatrical events.²² As one of those Londoners and, moreover, an antiquarian, curator, and architectural artist, I think we can trust the fidelity of Smith’s image. Thus the model cannot be, as Chambers suggests, *HMS Nelson*, a 126-gun first rate launched in 1814, nor the East Indiaman *Lord Nelson* (1799), as both were substantial ships.²³ Conversely, three hired armed cutters named *Lord Nelson* (1798, 1803, 1803) were smaller one-masters.²⁴ This leaves the Nova Scotia privateer *Nelson* (1799)²⁵ and the armed survey vessel *Lady Nelson* (1798), this last being the nearest visual fit and enjoying a distinguished record of Antipodean exploration.²⁶ Though unlikely, it is tempting to make a connection to the final vessel’s Australian adventures, if only to underscore the truly global discourse in which one East London singer was participating. The practical application of the

²¹ The vessel used in *Taboo*, for example, is a ship: much larger, with three square masts, and quite unlike the brig in Smith’s sketch.

²² I discuss this in far greater detail in Oskar Cox Jensen, “Of Ships and Spectacles: Maritime Identity in Regency London,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 46, no.2 (2019): 136–60.

²³ Chambers, “Black British Artists”; Brian Lavery, *The Ship of the Line*, 2 vols. (London: Conway Maritime Press, revised edn, 2003), 1:187; Rowan Hackman, *Ships of the East India Company* (Gravesend: World Ship Society, 2001), 148.

²⁴ Rif Winfield, *British Warships in the Age of Sail 1793–1817* (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2010), 389–94.

²⁵ Mentioned at https://www.threedecks.org/index.php?display_type=show_ship&id=12745. Accessed 3 May 2016.

²⁶ Winfield, *British Warships*, 337. A model of the *Lady Nelson* is held by the *National Maritime Museum*, object SLR0601, viewable at <https://www.collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/66562.html>, and a plan of its rigging may be viewed at <https://www.ladynelson.org.au/ship>, both accessed 3 May 2016. As the *Lady Nelson* never returned from Australia, it is unlikely, though not impossible, that Johnson had been among its crew. Though destroyed in 1825, a replica *Lady Nelson* sails to this day.

model is plain enough, combining potent and appropriate iconography with both visual interest and extra height, helping Johnson draw and entertain a curious crowd. Yet it remains unclear how anyone knew by name exactly which brig Johnson had constructed: did he tell them? Did the identity matter to performer and audience; to the antiquarians; or was “Nelson” merely a detail invented after the fact for the sake of posterity? Given the 2017 controversy engendered by that admiral’s unsavory views on race and slavery, it is of no small irony that his name became attached to Johnson’s model, raising the tantalizing possibility of a black subaltern voice appropriating the cultural capital of the “white supremacist” Nelson.²⁷ Episode Six of *Taboo* presents a similar act of appropriation when, in his second cameo, the “Street Beggar” sings an invented song with the following lyrics:

I sailed aboard the Vincent. She rolled this way and that.

Then we turned her on the French, the mouse for Wellington’s cat.

And know ya this. I saw him there, standing on the deck.

It was the cursed Bonaparte, I threw a rope around his neck.²⁸

Perhaps deliberately, in keeping with *Taboo*’s unsettling aesthetic, the specifics of this song are cut adrift from historical reality: in an uncanny echo of Johnson’s own chosen nomenclature, there was no *HMS Vincent* in 1814, though the 120-gun *St Vincent*, again named after a celebrated admiral, was launched a year later.²⁹ *Taboo*’s beggar therefore performs an especially

²⁷ For example, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/22/toppling-statues-nelsons-column-should-be-next-slavery>, accessed 10 October 2017.

²⁸ Knight, “Episode 6,” *Taboo*, Post-Production Script (12 December 2016), 36–7.

<https://www.downloads.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/Taboo-Ep6-UK-Tx-Final-Script.pdf>. Accessed 10 October 2017.

²⁹ Lavery, *Ship of the Line*, 1:187.

fantastical piece of self-fashioning: an inauthentic song set aboard a fictitious ship, imagining a ‘tall tale’ confrontation with the French emperor—the purpose apparently being to position the beggar positively, if apocryphally, within the context of the British war effort. Was Johnson, in calling his vessel “Nelson,” similarly bidding for a share of reflected glory in defeating the French and Spanish? If so, his self-fashioning was close to that of his more famous theatrical contemporary and fellow ethnic outsider, the composer, tenor, and theatre-manager John Braham, born John Abraham, whose success story in the face of anti-Semitism owed much to his signature patriotic song, “The Death of Nelson.”³⁰

The London theatre was itself a circum-Atlantic institution, no more so than in the case of Matthew Gregory “Monk” Lewis: playwright for the *Haymarket*, Gothic novelist—and slave owner.³¹ On 1 January 1816, one year after Smith’s preparation of *Vagabondiana* and one year before its publication, Lewis had his first sight of Jamaica. He records in his journal that:

the sudden sounds of the drum and banjee called our attention to a procession of the *John-Canoe*, which was proceeding to celebrate the opening of the new year at the town of Black River. The John-Canoe is a Merry-Andrew dressed in a striped doublet, and bearing upon his head a kind of pasteboard house-boat filled with puppets, representing, some sailors, others soldiers, others again slaves at work on a plantation, &c. . . . the John-Canoe is considered not merely as a person

³⁰ See Susan Rutherford’s article “John Braham and ‘The Death of Nelson’” in this issue. “The Death of Nelson” remained iconic for a century, coming nearest Johnson in an uncannily relevant reference in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where it is sung by a street beggar who also happens to be an ex-sailor with a crippled leg. My thanks to Daniel Karlin for drawing this to my attention: Karlin’s further observations may be found in his *Street Songs: The Clarendon Lectures 2016* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³¹ See Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), for a full development of this terminology.

of material consequence, but one whose presence is absolutely indispensable.

Nothing could look more gay[.]³²

Five days later he met the houseboat's maker, John Fuller, who "had made every bit of the canoe with his own hands . . . And indeed it was as fine as paint, pasteboard, gilt paper, and looking-glass could make it!"³³ Twenty-one years later, this populated, intricate houseboat had become the sturdier model depicted by the Sephardic Jewish painter Isaac Mendes Belisario (Figure 3). Belisario was the London-trained creator of a "taxonomic" series of Jamaican prints modeled on London Street Cries who, in our first intimation of circum-Atlantic circularity, had studied Smith's *Vagabondiana* prior to making his own studies.³⁴ By contrast, Smith was understandably ignorant of "John-Canoe" or Jonkonnu, the only recorded appearance of which in England prior to Johnson seems to have been as a burlesque representation in John Fawcett's pantomime *Obi; or Three Finger'd Jack*, set in Jamaica, which debuted at the Haymarket on 2 July 1800, wherein the character of "Jonkanoo" was "equipped with a ludicrous and enormously large false head" rather than a model boat.³⁵

[Insert Figure 3]

³² Lewis, *Journal of a Residence Among the Negroes in the West Indies* (London, 1845, repr. Stroud: Nonsuch, 2005), 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

³⁴ Gillian Forrester, "Mapping a New Kingston: Belisario's *Sketches of Character*," in *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*, eds. Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 65–87, esp. 74–81.

³⁵ Peter Reed, *Rogue Performances: Staging the Underclasses in Early American Theatre Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 101. Quotation from the *Dramatic Censor's* reviewer Charles Dutton, cited *ibid.*, 115. See also Susan Valladares, "Afro-Creole Revelry and Rebellion on the British Stage: Jonkanoo in *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack* (1800)," *Review of English Studies*, New Series (2018): 1–21.

It seems reasonable to identify in the performance of Johnson, a form of Jonkonnu, and either to surmise a Jamaican heritage (the practice itself has been traced backwards, perhaps via Dutch Guinea, to Nigerian and Congolese tribes) or to conclude, as Peter Reed does, that Johnson visited Jamaica in his career as a sailor.³⁶

Modern scholarship has emphasized the function of Jonkonnu among Jamaican slaves as an enabling tool of resistance, insubordination, carnivalesque inversion, and even the appropriation of traditional English ritual.³⁷ Reed concurs, recalling Dawes and Stein above in his view that “Johnson’s costume embodies and perhaps criticizes the systems of labor discipline that impelled his own circulations and left him unemployed in the metropolitan center of the empire.”³⁸ Yet as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon observes, echoing Simon Gikandi’s analysis, “Jonkonnu wears two faces”—it “operates in dual registers of Europeanized and African culture, and of play and resistance.”³⁹ It is a stimulating thought that, under a mask of patriotism, Johnson may have been in some sense “mocking” (Gikandi’s term)⁴⁰ the dominant culture in which he now found himself, invoking what Dillon calls “a presencing of something else – of both a remembered African culture and an Africanization, or an indigenization of the colonial ground.”⁴¹ Transposed from Jamaica to London, his performance may thus be read as an exhilaratingly anti-colonial act, creating a non-western space in the center of a western

³⁶ Reed, *Rogue Performances*, 118, and Robert Farris Thompson, “Charters for the Spirit: Afro-Jamaican Music and Art,” in *Art and Emancipation*, 89–101. The connection with Johnson is also asserted in Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, “Sketches of Memory: Visual Encounters with Africa in Jamaican Culture,” *ibid.*, 103–119, 114. Reed, ““There Was No Resisting John Canoe,”” 80.

³⁷ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 164; Reed, *Rogue Performances*, 117–120; Barringer et al., *Art and Emancipation*, 1, 31, 72.

³⁸ Reed, ““There Was No Resisting John Canoe,”” 81.

³⁹ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014), 203.

⁴⁰ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 273.

⁴¹ Dillon, *New World Drama*, 204. Dillon borrows the term “indigenization” from Sylvia Winter.

metropolis. Yet we should take the idea of “two faces” seriously: since Johnson had been a British sailor, his patriotic display may also have been a sincere act—especially as this gesture of assimilation was in his direct personal interest. Kathleen Wilson has written convincingly of the extreme difficulty of overcoming “cultural ideas about race and racialised notions of nation” in Britain at a time when “rationality, nationality and physical difference become intertwined, and where acquired cultural characteristics are transformed into innate ones, the intangible inheritance of ‘blood.’”⁴² This ethnic articulation of Britishness—for which Wilson would have us read “Englishness”—became “difficult, if not impossible, to acquire or naturalise.”⁴³ Clarke understands this in *Jonathan Strange*. The encounter between Stephen Black and Johnson concludes: “Johnson held out his hand to Stephen, but Stephen looked away. He always took great care not to speak to, or in any way acknowledge, negroes of low station. He feared that if he were seen speaking to such people it might be supposed that he had some connexion with them.”⁴⁴ For Black, it is the color of his and Johnson’s skin that forms the insuperable barrier to belonging, and at this stage of the novel his assimilative strategy rests on minimising all possible reference to that barrier. Black responds to Johnson on the basis of his color, in a manner not dissimilar to Smith’s, who in his portrait, as Dawes notes, “gave him [Johnson] stereotypical features such as thick lips, bulging eyes and a broad nose, marking him as a splendid specimen of curiosity.”⁴⁵ Yet it was in the face of just such difficulties that Johnson assembled his potent markers (songs, headgear) of nation and, via his indisputable identity as a seaman, of *belonging*. That this was achieved by recourse to a West Indian slave tradition unknown to the vast majority

⁴² Wilson, *The Island Race*, 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁴ Clarke, *Jonathan Strange*, 319.

⁴⁵ Dawes, “Negotiating the ship,” 18.

of his audience, thereby enabling him to claim one identity by the secret assertion of another, remaining true to both, made his a doubly ingenious form of circum-Atlantic performance.

This meeting of British maritime iconography and Jonkonnu was far from a reconciliation of opposites. Attention has been drawn to the spiritual dimension of Jonkonnu,⁴⁶ which one could apply equally to the triumvir of Church, King, and constitution as reified in the British ship or brig—especially when named Nelson. Indeed, the 1816 Jonkonnu documented by Lewis itself referenced to Britannia and Waterloo, even featuring: “‘Nelson’s car,’ being a kind of canoe decorated with blue and silver drapery, and with ‘Trafalgar’ written on the front of it.”⁴⁷ More prosaically, the percussion in Jamaican Jonkonnu appears to have been performed on British army drums⁴⁸—unsurprising in an age when many military bands featured black musicians—again blurring two cultural registers. There is even a parallel between Jamaica and the London street in the language of condescension employed by our sources, since Belisario’s critique of the singing that accompanied Jonkonnu is indistinguishable from contemporary accounts of London ballad-singers: “These songs, are chanted at the top of their voices, with an accompaniment of instruments, for the most part out of tune, and played by musicians, rather carelessly dressed. . . . It would appear, that *sound*, without the slightest attention to *harmony*, delights these personages.”⁴⁹ The comparison endorses Saree Makdisi’s argument that elite rhetoric racialised the London underclass, making a colony out of its grubbier streets: the singing

⁴⁶ Thompson in *Art and Emancipation*, 92; Martinez-Ruiz, *ibid.*, 105, 479.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Journal*, 35, 37, 48. As Stephen Banfield observes, these imperial elements were almost certainly the result of “coercive or co-optive” oppression “by its white patrons.” Banfield, “Anglophone Musical Culture in Jamaica,” in *Art and Emancipation*, 137–149, 144, 147.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Bilby, “More Than Met the Eye: African-Jamaican Festivities in the Time of Belisario,” *ibid.*, 121–135, 127; Banfield, *ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁹ Verene A. Shepherd, “Work, Culture, and Creolization: Slavery and Emancipation in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Jamaica,” *ibid.*, 27–39, 28, and *ibid.*, caption to “Jaw-Bone, or House John-Canoe” (unpaginated; plate three).

of Jamaican slaves and metropolitan balladeers was equally unbearable in the rhetoric of elite commentary.⁵⁰

Returning to Johnson, we find another unlikely parallel in a maritime context that drew its lines of identity along national rather than racial lines. I wish to suggest a secondary analogue for Johnson's headgear: the court of Versailles in 1778. Though a direct influence on Johnson is extremely unlikely, the consonances help illuminate Johnson's performances. For—as is evident from extant images—the headdresses worn by Marie Antoinette and other court ladies, *à la Belle Poule* and *à la Frégate la Junon*, correspond far more closely to the model in *Vagabondiana* than does Belisario's houseboat.⁵¹ The *Belle Poule* and the *Junon* were French frigates, celebrated in 1778 for single-ship actions wherein the former bested the larger, heavier *HMS Arethusa* and the latter took the 28-gun *HMS Fox*. The coiffure *à la Belle Poule* featured “ingenious . . . sails of gauze” and “riggings of silver and gold threads,” while that *à la Junon* went into small-scale production as “a hat on which is represented a vessel with all its apparatus and tackle, having its cannons in formation.”⁵² The latter's construction cannot have been dissimilar to Johnson's *Nelson*, prompting the reflection that, despite the vast gulf between the London street and the French court, the two cases have much in common. Both are instances of intricate workmanship designed as a form of loyal, patriotic engagement with national affairs, worn by outsiders (remembering Marie Antoinette's origins as an Austrian princess, scion of France's ancient enemy) bidding for a place in that nation from positions that were subaltern,

⁵⁰ Makdisi, *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁵¹ See, for example, ‘Coëffure à la Belle Poule’ (Paris, c.1778), Bibliothèque Nationale de France Hennis 9728, available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8410152d/>, accessed 13 September 2019.

⁵² *Journal politique* and *Journal des modes de Paris*, both quoted in Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 161, 162.

disenfranchised, marginal – both of them being aliens, one black, one a woman. It was, of course, these same disadvantages that saw the strategies of both misunderstood or dismissed as “novelty” and play. The coiffure *à la Belle Poule*, meanwhile, boasts a still more illuminating connection to Johnson’s performance, as they share an unlikely acquaintance: the Cornish tenor Charles Incedon.

Although the *Belle Poule* dismasted and evaded her larger opponent *HMS Arethusa*, Admiral Keppel’s dispatch framed the engagement as a British success, leading to its simultaneous celebration on both sides of the Channel. Eighteen years later in 1796, Prince Hoare penned “The Arethusa,” arranged by William Shield to the 1730s tune “The Princess Royal,” and sung by Incedon in the part of Cheerly in the farcical afterpiece *Lock and Key*.⁵³ The song proved a tremendous hit, its shilling score advertised “as Sung with great applause by Mr. Incedon,” with cheaper editions sung by ballad-singers in great demand on the London streets.⁵⁴ Incedon was simultaneously reviving another famous sea-song: “The Storm,” described by his biographer as “a dramatic work, said to have astonished the great French tragedian Talma.”⁵⁵ In the twenty years before Smith’s etching of Johnson, his signature song was invariably marketed, in the sheet music editions aimed at a middling, musically literate audience, as “sung by Incedon” (Figure 4).⁵⁶ Nowhere in this narrative was there a place for the song’s actual writer, George Alexander Stevens, who had first introduced it in his solo show *Lecture on Heads* in the 1770s—though audiences may also have been familiar with the song’s

⁵³ “New Lights upon Old Tunes. ‘The Arethusa,’” *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 35 (1894): 666–8.

⁵⁴ British Library Mus H.1653.b (28); William Brown, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of William Brown* (York, 1829), 13.

⁵⁵ John Rosselli, “Incedon, Charles (*bap.* 1763, *d.* 1826),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14377>. Accessed 4 May 2016.

⁵⁶ This edition *c.*1795. Stevens’ version dates from around 1770, the year of the earliest extant score (British Library Mus H.1994.a (202)). This is in agreement with Gerald Kahan, *George Alexander Stevens and the Lecture on Heads* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, new edn, 2008), 35.

tune, previously associated with the nautical titles “The Sailor’s Complaint” and “[Admiral] Hosier’s Ghosts,” from a setting by Handel called “Come and Listen to My Ditty.”⁵⁷ Handel, like Johnson, was another musical outsider associated with patriotic Englishness, and singing a tune once set by Handel can only have served our ex-sailor well—yet it is Incedon, the celebrated tenor, who had most in common with Johnson, thanks to his own impeccable nautical credentials.

[Insert Figure 4]

Like Johnson, Incedon had been a sailor, serving before the mast; and, like Johnson, Incedon performed the song in solo entertainments, dressed in character. Two character portraits depict this scene, and while the later of these, a lithograph after Joseph Ayton,⁵⁸ is the more striking depiction of Incedon as sailor on stage, foot-lit before a backdrop of stormy waves striking the white cliffs of England’s southern coast, it is Figure 5, drawn by Incedon’s friend and fellow actor John Emery, that leads us back to Johnson’s own performances.

[Insert Figure 5]

The latter character portrait shows Incedon more appropriately dressed for rough weather—yet his supplicatory pose indicates that this “Jack Tar” is not figured as enduring the storm of which he sings, but rather the unforgiving climate of the London streets. Emery

⁵⁷ See tunearch.org/wiki/Annotation:Hosier%27s_Ghosts, accessed 13 September 2019. The Handel setting is the sixth of his 24 *English Songs*: HWV 228⁶. A recording may be heard at <https://youtu.be/BjNGHaFduwU>, accessed 13 September 2019. My thanks to Berta Joncus for her immense kindness in alerting me to the Handel setting and the tune’s wider history.

⁵⁸ ‘C. Incedon as he appeared singing the storm’ (London, 1826). National Portrait Gallery D36441.

sketches Incedon cap-in-hand, in a gesture evocative, not of the song's latter verses, but of its first: "Messmates, hear a brother sailor." As Stein notes of the Johnson sketch, "In his hand the beggar carries another hat, which he hopes to fill with money"—and it is this, Johnson's *second* hat, that links him most obviously with Incedon's stage act.⁵⁹

While mendicant sailors had long been a feature of London's streets, their numbers swelled after the General Peace of 1814, when many naval vessels formerly employed on convoy or blockade duty were decommissioned. The situation was worst for those sailors who, similarly to Johnson, had been incapacitated in the course of their duties, many of whom were refused a pension and forced onto the streets. The situation became endemic, exhausting the sympathies of even the playwright Douglas Jerrold, whose 1829 melodrama *Black-Ey'd Susan* argued so passionately on behalf of the ordinary sailor.⁶⁰ Jerrold grew weary of the beggar who "attacks our sympathies with one arm and a wooden leg," or roved in groups, "executing, as they pick their way, 'Ben Bowline,' or at times plunging with one accord into the 'Bay of Biscay'"—two famous nautical songs of the day.⁶¹ The journalist William Harvey, with a cynicism typical among his contemporaries, documented just such a scene as taking place in 1812, a short walk west of Johnson's haunt of Tower Hill:

Let us mount the hill, and take our chance for something fresh at Newgate and
Giltspur-street Compter. A pair of masquerading sailors hold those posts, and are

⁵⁹ Stein, *Black British Literature*, 102.

⁶⁰ Based on the song of the same name, that had been a national favourite for a century, Jerrold's melodrama became canonical. Its primary scholar (and, in 1970, director) is Louis James – see especially his 'Taking Melodrama Seriously: Theatre, and Nineteenth-Century Studies', *History Workshop* 3 (1977): 151–8; and 'Was Jerrold's Black Ey'd Susan more popular than Wordsworth's Lucy?', in David Bradby, Louis James, and Bernard Sharratt (eds), *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 3–16.

⁶¹ Jerrold, "The Ballad Singer," in *Heads of the People*, 2 vols. (London, 1840), 2:289–97, 295.

violently rendering in harsh accents—which are neither speaking [n]or singing—
“The Bay of Biscay,” and “The Storm”—then immensely relished by the London
operatives[.]⁶²

Around 1820, Thomas Rowlandson included a scene along these lines in his
Characteristic Sketches of the Lower Orders, reproduced as Figure 6.

[Insert Figure 6]

While the sailor on the left is depicted as shamming—note the conspicuously bare left foot with the shod right tucked up behind out of sight of his target—there is no denying the wooden leg of the central figure, nor that their open mouths indicate that they are probably singing, in an attitude identical to both Incedon’s persona and Johnson’s actual practice. This figure pulls a cart on which stands—what else?—a model ship, perhaps a 74-gun man of war, fully rigged and as tall as his shoulder. This underscores the point that, while Johnson’s animated headgear may have been indebted to Jonkonnu, the combination of model vessel and beggar’s hat drew on iconography common to white British sailors, intended to evoke positive patriotic associations among London audiences. It is likely that Rowlandson was drawing from life, as an almost identical, more sympathetic depiction appears in a book of moralizing lessons for children by the poet Jane Taylor.⁶³ This is accompanied by a poem from the perspective of the “poor sailors, lame and blind” that stresses the global context: besides two references to storms, Taylor conjures up voyages “Far, to east or western shore,” a shipwreck on “a desert coast,” and travels

⁶² “Aleph” (William Harvey), *London Scenes and London People* (London, 1863), 351.

⁶³ “Sailors and Ship,” in Taylor, *A Peep into London, for Good Children* (London, 1809), Plate 20. The poem subsequently discussed is on 16–17.

“Round and round the world” that perfectly prefigure Johnson’s own narrative, “Come to beggary at last.”

These images remind us that Johnson was marked out by more than his skin: he too was crippled, requiring two crutches, and like so many other ballad-singers he made an asset of this disability by appealing to his audience’s charity, those crutches as potent a symbol of both his merit and his authenticity as dress, hat, or song. Yet his self-fashioning was a complex and conscious act, and I do not wish to see him simply as a beggar, but rather—a decade before Ira Aldridge’s London debut as Oronooko—as a successful black performer whom we should take seriously; a sophisticated, theatrical singer on the London street. He even received a highly favorable, belated notice, in the 1825 article “London Ballad Singers.” Allowing for the condescending tone and the customary disparagement of vocal technique, the account is invaluable, and worth quoting in full.

But who is there, old or young, among the busy population of Tower-Hill, that does not bear in mind, and will not lend a kind word towards commemorating, that ornament of the profession, Joe Johnson! Joe was wont to wear, on days of business, a model (and an elaborate miniature it was) of the brig Nelson on his hat. She was full-rigged, had all her masts set, and looked for all the world as if she scudded before a gale of wind. The district just mentioned used to be called, and will be reported in traditions, no doubt in technical phraseology, “Black Joe’s Pitch.” The man was lame, or, as he himself used to say, was damaged in his cock-pit—but in bust, in mien, and with his swarthy, bony face, half concealed by black, frizzy curls, and crowned by a ship in full sail; he had the bearing of an

Atlas. He was conversant with the best of Dibdin's songs—and in the “British Seaman's Praise,” and the “Wooden Walls of Old England,” he approved himself the Incledon of the highways. But these, in point of excellence, stood in relation to Joe's “Storm,” as the best of his contemporaries was to Joe in his other songs. Incledon had voice and science—Joe's deficiencies in these particulars were compensated by rude strength (the song is peculiarly susceptible of vocal force) and by pantomime. This ballad-singer not only described, he demonstrated—he lowered the top-gallants, then the stay-sails, and as soon as the time came for the breeze to freshen, Joe was seen to set the braces with a nimbleness and success that would have extorted praise in the great world of a man of war. Successively you were stunned with the boatswain's bawl and the cheer of the crew. Next of all he looked like a man possessed with a raging demon, as he darted from place to place in mimic fury, cutting down masts, casting guns overboard, and gathering all hands to the pump. Here was an improvement on that difficult grace of poetry, making the words an “echo to the sense.” Joe acted the song—he passed you through all the perils of the tempest, snatched you from the imminent wreck, without uttering a note. Never shall we forget the shout of satisfaction with which he consigned every bitter remembrance to oblivion, as he fervently cried, “She rights, she rights, boys! wear off shore.”⁶⁴

Most interesting, perhaps, are the aside “as he himself used to say” which accords Johnson a certain dignity and autonomy of expression; the emphasis upon the skillful creation and manipulation of the model *Nelson*; and of course the repeated comparison to Incledon. We

⁶⁴ “London Ballad Singers,” 42.

may detect a degree of irony here: but why not take it seriously? The dismissal of Johnson's voice in preference to focus on his body may in fact reflect astute choices on Johnson's part. For all that the tune (Figure 4) could be said to admit of a solemn, hymnal beauty—particularly in the final cadence, which begins remarkably by leaping a minor seventh—it is slow and short, and was unlikely to sustain a street audience's interest through eight subsequent repetitions without some theatrical embellishment of the narrative. Indeed, the 1825 account—closing with “wear off shore”—suggests that Johnson chose to omit the song's ninth and final verse (see Figure 2), an artistically satisfying decision that focuses both attention and affect upon the struggle at sea, rather than dissipating the emotions involved with a detached final moral. Finally, the term “pantomime” appears to be used with precision, the assertion that “Joe acted the song” further indicating that this was elaborately choreographed theatre: theatre that combined multiple circum-Atlantic devices, from Afro-Caribbean Jonkonnu, to Anglo-French militaria, to 1770s nautical balladry, in order to enrich its mixed medium of pantomime.

We might productively recall the gestures depicted in Figures 2, 5, and the lithograph after Ayton: while the second is Incedon performing mendicancy, the last shows that actor clasping his hands in an attitude eloquent of (to borrow the gestural language of Leman Thomas Rede) both anxiety and anguish; and Figure 2, the print from the Harrild broadside, shows the sailor in a textbook gesture of fear.⁶⁵ To judge by the 1825 account, Johnson was either ignorant of or eschewed these stock rhetorical attitudes, favoring an enactment of professional maneuvers that captivated the writer. Like Incedon, Johnson's authority as a performer of this song derived, not from the stage, but from personal experience: he could execute the song's actions as Stevens, its writer, or Charles Dibdin, the contemporary benchmark of nautical performance, landsmen both, never could. His was a language of theatrical gesture taken directly from “the great world

⁶⁵ Rede, *The Road to the Stage* (London, 1836), 78–81, 83.

of a man of war.” The result was an eloquence of performance that reconciled, at least in the moment, both his own otherness and the circum-Atlantic world of the sailor to the local context of the London street or satellite town.

This transcendental feat was still, in essence, merely theatrical: it could neither cure Johnson of his lameness nor make him eligible for the pension that would rescue him from the streets. It was a particularly cruel irony that, due to their design and the strain placed upon them, the asymmetrical crutches Johnson mastered in order to move so dexterously would within a few years exact an inexorable price, exacerbating rather than ameliorating his injuries. Yet I would rather spotlight Johnson’s limited success than make him into an unwilling tragedian. For his audience, attracted and prepared by both his headgear and his crutches, it was Johnson’s body—ostensibly, by Wilson’s reading, a symbol only of difference—that, by virtue of its enacting a series of exact, seamanlike gestures, confirmed both his ownership of the song and his active, participatory place within the British nation. By his performances of “The Storm”—a song narrated, let us not forget, by a “brother sailor” to the imagined listener—Johnson not only made himself a living; he made himself a home.

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