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Slave Spiritual Lyrics: A Glimpse of the Subjectivities within 19th Century Slave Culture

The public's memory of 19th century America will forever be stained by the nation's enslavement of the African people, and the subsequent exploitation of them as workers on southern plantations. To make submissive their labor pool, slaveholders subjected their slaves to physical and psychological domination, and imposed upon them a space of control, force, terror and suffering.¹ In doing so, slaveholders necessarily suppressed their slaves' African customs and identities, attempting to replace traditional values with Anglo-Saxon ones. Consequently, southern slaves were forced to seek a new identity, fashioned from their state of captivity, Caucasian values, and elements of their African heritage. Such subjectivities are unique to the period's cultures and context, but were nonetheless oppressed by members of the master class in their attempts to exercise full control. That being the case, the slave culture born in response to such oppression was not well documented in its time. However, facets of that culture can still be seen through the outlets in which it was celebrated: namely, slave dances and spirituals, or religious folk songs. This study focuses on such spirituals, specifically "Follow the Drinking Gourd," "Motherless Child" and "Go Down, Moses," whose lyrics will be adopted as a lens to further define and analyze slave culture. By combining a literary close-reading of the three

¹ Camp, Stephanie M.H.. "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved women and body politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861." *The Old South New Studies of Society and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 142-169. Print.

spirituals to identify the various subjectivities behind each piece, with a historical approach that will explain those subjectivities' cultural and contextual significance, it thereby becomes possible to piece together a more holistic perspective of the rich, slave culture as it was intended to be perceived. Applying that methodology then, it becomes clear that slave culture did not consist of one definitive perception, but rather, it incorporated to different extents the influences of Anglo-Saxon religious teachings, traditional African heritage, and the master class' attempts to both oppress and transform the slave community. The culture born as a consequence of these subjectivities therefore embodied a mix of both African and Anglo-Saxon culture, as well as aspects of sorrow and resistance.

One of the more prevalent subjectivities inherent in slave culture, as exhibited by slave spirituals, is the religion of the oppressing power. Indeed, slaveholders stressed Christian teachings on their plantations, though it appears that the education they implemented catered first and foremost to the institution of slavery. Historian Charshee Charlotte Lawrence-McIntyre, in her article "The Double Meanings of the Spirituals," is convinced that slave masters employed religion as a means of convincing slaves to buy into the status quo, by suggesting God's approval of society as well as of obedience and docility towards one's superiors.² For that reason, argues Marvin V. Curtis in "The Lyric of the African-American Spiritual: The Meaning behind the Words," the teachings neglected Christian values of brotherhood and equality, and instead

² Lawrence-McIntyre, Charshee Charlotte. "The Double Meanings of the Spirituals." *Journal of Black Studies* 17.4 (1987), 379-401. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784158>>.

painted liberty as a sin sent from the devil.³ Consequently, the education system on Southern plantations worked primarily as a propaganda tool in the favor of the slaveholders.

However, there is debate among scholars surrounding the true efficacy of this systematic indoctrination. Many slave spirituals incorporated aspects of the Christian God and the biblical Old and New Testaments, even as they reflected African elements. Despite the songs' references to biblical characters though, it should be noted that the vast majority of spirituals focus only on specific aspects of the Christian faith. According to Lauri Ramey's "The Theology of the Lyric Tradition in African American Spirituals," slaves adopted the notion of Jesus as savior and one capable of overcoming mortal suffering, but they rejected the image of Christ as the helpless, innocent babe, because the latter failed to present the triumphant deliverer the population desired.⁴ In saying so, Ramey generalizes plantation slaves' perspectives and assumes that they are integrated into one cohesive community built upon a common viewpoint of their white masters. On the contrary, Ronald E. Hall's "Rooming in the Master's House: Psychological Domination and the Black Conservative" operates on a different, more accurate presumption: that there existed multiple factions within the slave community (and thus, multiple slave subcultures), some of which accepted the slaveholders' indoctrinating techniques more readily than others.⁵ Specifically, Hall distinguishes between the "field negroes" and the "house

³ Curtis, Marvin V.. "The Lyric of the African-American Spiritual: The Meaning behind the Words." *The Choral Journal* 37.1 (1996), 15-19. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23550831>>

⁴ Ramey, Lauri. "The Theology of the Lyric Tradition in African American Spirituals." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70.2 (2002), 347-363. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1466466>>.

⁵ Hall, Ronald E.. "Rooming in the Master's House: Psychological Domination and the Black Conservative." *Journal of Black Studies* 38.4 (2008), 565-578. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034422>>.

negroes,” the latter often consisting of mulattos or mixed-race slaves stationed in plantation homes.⁵ Hall goes on to argue that the slaveholders’ belief in genetic superiority naturally favored such “house negroes,” leading to a higher quality of life, their psychological domination and subsequent support for the master class, and a resulting solidification of boundaries between their “inferior” counterparts.⁵ If Hall is correct, Ramey’s characterization of the slaves as being selective of the master class’ doctrine seems only applicable to the more radical slave circles, although it nevertheless implies a varying extent in which slaveholders succeeded in imposing their values.

Delving into the most submissive of such circles first, the “house negroes,” it is not surprising to find a lack of spirituals supporting their pro-Anglo-Saxon viewpoints. Given their own deep-seated complicity to find favor in the eyes of their oppressive masters and their alienation from their fellow kin in the fields, it only seems logical to discover that “house negroes” full hearted acceptance of the master religion and teachings is not prevalent in the songs circulated by the rest of the slave population.

Fortunately, that is not the case for the more independent factions of the community. While slaveholders strived to suppress the concepts of justice and equality by masking their own authority as a divine being’s, these groups rejected the master class’ attempts to pacify the slave population through institutionalized instruction. Rather, they applied a selectivity much like Ramey describes, where only the Christian ideas that proved beneficial to their lifestyles were adopted.² Using slave spirituals as a guide, it seems such beneficial doctrines can be sorted into three broad categories: those that promised comfort and deliverance from bondage, those that restored slaves’ sense of humanity, and those that granted them an emotional security.

Characteristic of many spirituals is the adoption of the Christian God as a symbol and promise for justice. John White, in his article “Veiled Testimony: Negro Spirituals and the Slave Experience,” believes that the Old Testament stories of God liberating an oppressed Israel spawned a notion that He would do the same for the slave population.⁶ Slaves may thus have been willing to adopt their masters’ religious deity, if it offered them the slightest hope of freedom. This claim seems plausible, seeing as how it is supported textually by multiple spirituals, including “Motherless Child.”⁷ Arthur Jones’ “Wade in the Water: the Wisdom of the Spirituals” identifies in that song a historical allusion to the heart-wrenching separation of mothers from their children in the process of auctioning them off to potential buyers.⁸ This allows the spiritual to maintain a depressed, lamenting tone whose only solace is the last line of each stanza, “Den I git down on my knees and pray, pray!” The structure of the piece therefore also holds significance, as it continuously reinforces at the close of each stanza the Christian belief in casting one’s burdens onto Lord Christ, which necessitates the assumption that Christ is capable of delivering one from such trials or bondage. A similar example of the acceptance of Anglo-Saxon religion is the spiritual “Go Down, Moses.”⁸ The song employs a biblical allusion to Israel’s exodus from Egypt to conjure images of divine deliverance. In spirituals, the figure of Moses is generally believed to symbolize liberation, Egypt a drive for freedom, and Pharaoh an oppression eventually overcome.³ Given such archetypes, the spiritual can then be said to be a piece of confidence in the Christian God, or in the righteousness and justice most slaves believed

⁶ White, John. “Veiled Testimony: Negro Spirituals and the Slave Experience.” *Journal of American Studies* 17.2 (1983), 251-263. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27554312>>.

⁷ Barton, William E.. *Old Plantation Hymns*. New York: Lamson, Wolfe and Company, 1899. Print.

⁸ Jones, Arthur. *Wade in the Water: the Wisdom of the Spirituals*. New York: Orbis Books, 1993. Print.

He embodied. The line “I’ll smite your first-born dead,” however, adds an element of fear that elevates God to a higher level of power; while “Motherless Child” portrays Christ as a caretaker, “Go Down, Moses” bestows upon God’s image the title of protector.

Additionally, slaves undertook aspects of the Christian religion that offered a restoration of their humanity. Since slaveholders dehumanized their slaves and reduced them to the status of property, slaves sought to salvage their humanity by comparing themselves to Israel, the nation whom the Christian God cherished as his ‘chosen people.’² Furthermore, they prioritized the uplifting of God’s authority over the authority of their masters, as an attempt to negate their worldly proprietary status.² This fight to regain humanitarian status is clear in “Go Down, Moses,” in which slaves refer to themselves simply yet profoundly as “people” and the national identity of Israel is emphasized. Rather than saying “When Israelites were in Egypt,” the lyrics read, “When Israel was in Egypt land,” thereby placing priority on and personifying Israel’s nationality while reducing that of the oppressing nation to mere land. Consequently, the spiritual reestablishes the status of Israelites from slaves to people, and thus does the same for the plantation slaves who saw the biblical people as a reflection of their own state of being. Likewise in “Motherless Child,” the status of slaves is also changed as a result of the image of Christ and the “child”, an archetypal, biblical portrayal of God’s extension of mercy to the youngest and least qualified. Thus the image acts as a symbol of the inclusion of the lowest in rank within the human race.

Aside from a newfound status though, it is arguable that some aspects of slaveholder teachings also offered slaves an emotional security, or comfort amidst their suffering. Religion seemed to fill the role of a consoler’s, and became an outlet in which many could place their

hope as well as bury their fears. Consider the Christian vision of heaven depicted in many spirituals, a paradise that existed in the slaves' minds as a safe home guaranteeing full autonomy.

⁴ This viewpoint is prevalent in "Motherless Child," through the gradual transitions from the "motherless child" and "my baby" in the first two stanzas to the "home" and the "home-e-less child" in the last two. As the pleas to "git down on my knees and pray" become repetitive, the images and connotations of home increase as well. The spiritual thereby bridges Christianity and the home, implying that the two offer the same solace, and reflecting the slaves' equating of the two. Equally important is the song's value of family, seen in the gradual diminishment and yielding of the mother, child and baby figures to the home's strong connotations of belonging and community. This association, though not pertinent to the slaves' religious education, does bring to light a second subjectivity of slave culture: African heritage.

Despite some of the more impressionable slave groups, a large majority of the slave population maintained at least some ties to their African origins. Many slaves underwent a state of liminality or twofold consciousness as a result of the conflicting identities of the master class and their ancestral kin.⁴ Consequently slave spirituals contained as many references to slaveholder teachings as they did time-honored African values. As mentioned above and in Arthur Jones' article "The Foundational Influence of Spirituals in African-American Culture, A Psychological Perspective," one of the most prominent of these values was that of the family.⁹ In the African tradition, worship music is connected strongly with the presence of one's ancestors.³ According to Ronald Radano's article "Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave

⁹ Jones, Arthur C.. "The Foundational Influence of Spirituals in African-American Culture: A Psychological Perspective." *Black Music Research Journal* 24.2 (2004), 251-260. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4145493>>.

Spirituals,” spiritual music thus served to enrich an underlying community born out of the cultural importance of tribal bonds.¹⁰ Although Radano does not account for the aforementioned divisions within the slave community, which could jeopardize the validity of his claim of a unified slave population, there is textual support for at least an existing cultural worth in the idea of community. Consider “Go Down, Moses.” The song’s lyrics convey two opposing forces: the oppression of Pharaoh and the protection of Lord Christ. Yet, while these two themes appear to alternate with each stanza, there is a consistent repetition of the line “Let my people go,” which conveys a sense of belonging and community in itself (*my people*). The phrase appears almost every other line, thereby creating a ‘linking’ effect by connecting images of both oppression and deliverance, and conveying the slaves’ steadfastness in their communal identity despite the surrounding circumstances.

Aside from African values though, slave spirituals also embodied cultural symbols. One of such symbols is the circle, described by Sterling Stuckey in “Slavery and the Circle of Culture” to be related to traditional African burial ceremonies and ritualistic, circular dances.¹¹ Stuckey goes on to portray the circle as an icon of African culture, arguing it is also representative of the population’s value for the cycle of life.¹¹ Like the cultural value of community, this notion of cyclical processes also appears to be incorporated lightly into slave culture. This can be seen through the structure of the spirituals “Motherless Child” and “Follow

¹⁰ Radano, Ronald. “Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals.” *Critical Inquiry* 22.3 (1996), 506-544. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344020>>.

¹¹ Stuckey, Sterling. “Slavery and the Circle of Culture.” *Society and Culture in the Slave South*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 100-128. Print.

the Drinking Gourd.”¹² In both songs, the content of each stanza continuously returns to the same key phrases. “Motherless Child,” through the repetition of the line “sometimes I feel like a motherless child,” fosters a sense of sorrow that is always later alleviated by the speaker’s surrender to God at the close of each stanza. However, the beginning of the next stanza returns the listener to the same mournful tones the song began with, thus depicting the slave’s suffering as a continuous cycle. Similarly, “Follow the Drinking Gourd” conveys a cycle in a slave’s pursuit for freedom using for a guide the North Star or ‘drinking gourd.’¹¹ By juxtaposing the imagery of a long journey (“The river bank makes a very good road, the dead trees show you the way”) with the excessive, almost hindering repetition of the spiritual’s title, the song delays any true progress for its speaker. Indeed it seems every other line of the song conveys a further step in the speaker’s journey towards freedom, and each time the following phrase “Follow the Drinking Gourd” returns him to the initial stages of that passage. Although this repetition is expected to some extent in any song, this phrase occurs extensively (almost twice in every four lined stanza) and bears with its excessiveness senses of immobility and retreat. Consequently, the constant contrast between progress and retreat constructs the image of a cycle, thereby indicative of African elements within slave culture but also symbolic of the unending loop of liminality experienced at the time.

It is precisely this liminality which is executed by the forceful withdrawing of slaves from their homeland and their simultaneous rejection and oppression by Anglo-Saxon society

¹² Kelley, J. B.. “Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd””. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41.2 (2008): 262-280. Web. <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2008.00502.x/full>>.

that constitutes the third subjectivity of their culture. In a sense, it seems plausible that this lack of identity was what prompted the formation of such a culture in the first place.

Perhaps operating under that assumption, many historians believe an aspect of sorrow is embedded within slave culture. John Graziano's "The Use of Dialect in African-American Spirituals, Popular Songs, and Folk Songs," for instance, argues the senses of humility, shame and poverty slaves felt were fully expressed in their music.¹³ Indeed, spirituals seem to embody a tone of distress reflective of slaves' physical sufferings.² The songwriters of "Go Down, Moses" no doubt alluded to the captivity of Israel as a metaphor for their own enslavement. Likewise, "Motherless Child" brings to light sorrowfully the destruction of family units for the survival of a dehumanizing institution. Yet, despite these examples, the question arises: was grief the only major product of the slaveholders' oppression? LeRoy Jr. Moore, in his article "The Spiritual: Soul of Black Religion," goes as far as to suggest that it was, by asserting that slave culture embodied no new intellectual concepts but rather revolved only on emotions.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, historical accounts from contemporary outsiders to the slave community seem to agree with Moore. William Barton, in recording the lyrics of "Motherless Child," remarked that it summarized the "sorrows of slavery."⁷ Mary Boykin Chesnut, as a young girl in the antebellum South, wrote how the song sounded simply like "the saddest of all earthly music."⁶ Since both Barton and Chesnut are convinced slave spirituals were mere expressions of misery, it would

¹³ Graziano, John. "The Use of Dialect in African-American Spirituals, Popular Songs, and Folk Songs." *Black Music Research Journal* 24.2 (2004), 261-286. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4145494>>.

¹⁴ Moore, LeRoy Jr. "The Spiritual: Soul of Black Religion." *Church History* 40.1 (1971), 79-81. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3163108>>.

appear from these primary sources that slaveholder oppression produced solely a response of grief within the slave community.

However, other evidence contradicts Moore's claims, suggesting that sorrow was not the only cultural product of the master class' tyranny. For example, the fugitive slave Frederick Douglass, in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, believes the distress of the spirituals may have served a dual purpose as a "testimony against slavery," thereby suggesting an underlying tone of defiance.¹⁵ Thus there is a gap between the perspectives of those within slave circles such as Douglass and of those outside it such as Chesnut and Barton, suggesting that slave culture and the resistance it fostered were exclusive in nature.

In effect, this exclusivity can even be interpreted as a form of resistance in itself. By rejecting slaveholders from their own culture, slaves made a subtle protest to their masters' attempts at indoctrination. Among those attempts was the contemporary portrayal of slaves in American society, which often juxtaposed light representing intelligence with the illiterate slave, shrouded in darkness, to convey an evolutionary quality to slaves' acceptance of slaveholder ideology.¹⁰ The incorporation of hidden themes and knowledge within slave spirituals, therefore, can be said to be a political reaction to that portrayal. By essentially reversing the depicted roles, plantation slaves marked the master class as an unintelligent, depraved one and thereby grounded themselves in a newfound form of individuality. They were no longer a collective pool of labor, but a collection of intelligent, civilized individuals.

¹⁵ Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1982. Print.

This is supported extensively with textual evidence in slave spirituals, which also employ a moral exclusivity to achieve the same effect. Consider the admonishing tone of “Go Down, Moses,” which is made clear through the speaker’s directions to “tell old Pharaoh/to let my people go.” However, the reference to Pharaoh, who is representative of white oppression, as ‘old’ is more than simply a sign of disrespect towards the master class. Recall the importance and value of community and ancestry in the African tradition; the fact that the elder Pharaoh is referred to in such a rude manner is strong evidence that slaveholders were not considered part of the slave community. Additionally, “Go Down, Moses” appeals to God through the addressing of Moses, as does “Motherless Child” in the image of prayer and surrender, as if in order to borrow a moral credibility by which to condemn slaveholders. In doing so though, slaves must have necessarily assumed God was on their side, and thus that they were more righteous and set aside from the master class much like how Israel was favored over its oppressors. However, it is interesting to find that while the slave community thereby condemns all slaveholders collectively, the phrases used to convey their relationship with God and with each other rely mostly on personal pronouns. As mentioned before, “Go Down, Moses” emphasizes the community as “my people,” and “Motherless Child” addresses as individual issues both internal turmoil in phrases like “I feel” and appeals to God in phrases like “I git down on my knees”. Consequently, there is again a sense of individual accomplishment gleaned from this exclusivity, with both forces working together to resist any association with the master class.

In fact, this exclusivity gave way to more aggressive attempts at resistance, through hidden calls for rebellion and escape. One interpretation of “Go Down, Moses,” for example, is that ‘Moses’ referred covertly to Harriet Tubman, a ‘conductor’ for the Underground Railroad

and an advocate for slaves' liberation.⁸ Similarly, "Follow the Drinking Gourd" is often attributed as being a coded set of directions guiding slaves to freedom, with the drinking gourd referring to the North star and the vague rivers and trees being actual geographic landmarks.¹² Needless to say, the use of spirituals to incite rebellion is indicative of a more independent if not radical portion of the slave community. Therefore, it can be said slaveholder oppression produced various degrees of resistance, ranging from mere exclusivity, individuality and complete defiance.

Clearly, the rich slave culture fashioned from Anglo-Saxon religion, African tradition and slaveholder oppression entails much more than the set of beliefs and responses uncovered in this study. Granted, with more time and resources, the rediscovery of this culture through slave spirituals can hopefully be expanded past the songs' lyrical components, into the rhetoric behind their musical composition. Ideally, other pertinent cultural works should also be explored, but perhaps these areas are best left to be picked up another time. For now, there is one thing this paper can conclude with utmost certainty: the culture of southern slaves in the 19th century moved beyond the traditional notion of "culture." It was an identity, a made state of being whose facets did not, as the sources above presume, appeal specifically to certain groups within the slave community. Rather, each aspect and each spiritual studied embodied the values and subjectivities of all the individuals who contributed to its creation. Slave culture is in that sense wholly and forever theirs.

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