

Veiled Testimony: Negro Spirituals and the Slave Experience

JOHN WHITE

Recent writing on American slavery asserts that the slaves of the Old South possessed a distinctive culture which, to a large (but indeterminate) extent protected them from the dehumanizing effects of servitude. This expressive and dynamic folk culture drew part of its form and much of its content and function from Africa, but evolved into a syncretic Afro-American creation. Scholars such as Eugene Genovese, John Blassingame, Leslie Howard Owens and Nathan Huggins have argued for the centrality of religious beliefs and practices in the slave community. Rather belatedly, given the earlier impressive work of musicologists, folklorists and sociologists, these (and other) historians of slavery have given some consideration to the derivation, form and meanings of the religious songs of the slaves – the spirituals.¹ The purpose here is to examine some of the varying estimates of these songs as advanced over several generations. Such an exegesis should indicate the contours of a body of literature which current slavery historiography is reviving and refining. It should also suggest the value and limitations of these songs as source material for assessing black responses to slavery.

John White is Senior Lecturer in American History, Department of American Studies University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX.

¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York, 1976); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery* (New York, 1977).

The first published collection of slave spirituals appeared in 1867: William Frances Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1867). For a discussion of this collection see Dean J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 303–58.

Three LP records, produced and annotated by the folklorist Alan Lomax, contain modern performances of black spirituals recorded at various locations in the South: *Roots of the Blues* (New World Records Recorded Anthology of American Music Inc., NW 252); *Georgia Sea Island Songs* (New World Records, NW 278); *Negro Church Music: Southern Folk Heritage Series*, Vol. 6 (Atlantic LTZ-K 15214).

I

Contemporary observers were impressed – and sometimes visibly affected by – the performance and imagery of the slave spirituals. Mary Boykin Chesnut's *Diary*, a revealing source of antebellum white Southernism, contains an extract in which she describes a service attended with her husband's family at a black church on their South Carolina plantation in 1861:

[There was] a very large black congregation. . . . Jim Nelson, the driver. . . [a] full-blooded African. . . was asked to 'lead in prayer'. He became wildly excited. Though on his knees, facing us, with his eyes shut, he clapped his hands at the end of every sentence, and his voice rose to the pitch of a shrill shriek. Still, his voice was strangely clear and musical, occasionally in a plaintive minor key that went to your heart. Sometimes it rung out like a trumpet. I wept bitterly. It was all sound, however, and emotional pathos. There was literally nothing in what he said. The words had no meaning at all. It was the devotional passion of voice and manner which was so magnetic. The negroes sobbed and shouted and swayed backward and forward. . . clapping their hands and responding in shrill tones, 'Yes, my God!' 'Jesus!' 'Aeih!' 'Savior!' 'Bless de Lord, amen – &c.' It was all a little too exciting for me. I would very much have liked to shout, too. . . . Suddenly, as I sat wondering what next, they broke out into one of those soul-stirring negro camp-meeting hymns. To me this is the saddest of all earthly music – weird and depressing beyond my powers to describe.²

John Mason Brown, Kentucky-born attorney and author, who joined the Union army and rose to the rank of Colonel, contributed a vivid description and analysis of these songs to *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1868. 'We have seen', he wrote, 'negroes alternately agonized with fear and transported with a bliss almost frantic' as they sang a hymn, 'The Book of Seven Seals', which was 'replete with the imagery of the Apocalypse, picturing the golden streets of the New Jerusalem and the horrible pit of destruction'. Although some slave religious songs had been borrowed from those sung by white Protestant congregations, Brown observed that this was a highly selective borrowing: 'the favorites were always such as abounded in bold imagery or striking expressions appealing to ardent hope or vivid fear'. He was even more impressed by the songs composed by the black preachers 'for the use of their congregations', since such songs 'abounded to excess in metaphor of the most striking character'.

The Saints were styled the 'Army of the Lord', led by King Jesus, the 'Captain' and 'Conqueror'. They were exhorted to listen to the summons of silver trumpets, marshaling the faithful to victory, and were described as sweeping down all the obstruction of evil, and marching forward with measured tread, up the hill on which stands the city reserved for their habitation.

One spiritual in particular amazed Brown:

A hymn in which the Christian was likened to a traveler on a railway train. The conductor was the Lord Jesus, the brakemen were eminent servants of the Church, and the stoppages

² C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 213–14. Perhaps still reeling from the experience described, Mrs Chesnut confided to her *Diary* the following year: 'The best way to take negroes to your heart is to get as far away from them as possible' (p. 307).

were made at Gospel depots to take up waiting converts or replenish the engine with the waters of life or the fuel of holy zeal. The allegory was developed with as much accuracy and verisimilitude as though the author... had carefully studied the *Pilgrim's Progress*; yet it was imagined and composed by Oscar Buckner, an illiterate and ignorant negro slave.

There had been, under slavery, Brown concluded, a distinctively black religious music, a tradition already being distorted and caricatured by the antics of 'burnt cork' Negro minstrels, with 'scarcely a feature of person, music, dialect or action that recalls, with any dramatic accuracy, the genuine negro slave of former years'.³

II

Serious and informed analysis of the slave spirituals in the twentieth century dates from the publication of W. E. B. DuBois' seminal essay 'Of the Sorrow Songs', the closing chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). From the perspectives of a poet, historian, sociologist and Afro-American, Du Bois viewed the spirituals as 'the articulate message of the slave to the world', as songs of affirmation and sublime religious faith: 'Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things.' But the meaning of these songs was necessarily 'veiled and half-articulate'. Hidden hopes were often concealed 'beneath conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody'. Naturalistic imagery – stormy seas, thunderstorms, the 'lonesome valley', cold winters and scorching summers – conveyed both the temporal and spiritual experiences of the oppressed:

My Lord Calls me,
He calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds it in my soul.

Again, to the perceptive DuBois, the 'eloquent omissions and silences' of the spirituals hinted at the tensions and fears of slavery: 'Mother and child are sung, but seldom father... there is little of wooing and wedding... home is unknown.' Moreover, as he observed in a companion piece, 'Of the Faith of the Fathers', the spirituals had African antecedents and elements, 'adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope'.⁴ Subsequent commentators have, essentially, only adopted and amplified DuBois' insights.

James Weldon Johnson, like DuBois, a black poet, novelist and historian, writing in 1925, developed the point that the slave spirituals owed much to Africa,

³ James Mason Brown, 'Songs of the Slave', in Bernard Katz, ed., *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States* (New York, 1969), pp. 25–26 *et passim*. For the relationship of the black minstrel tradition to Negro religious music see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1972). Toll argues that during the 1870s, 'The songs that black minstrels introduced had the content of Afro-American religious music as well as the form. With the singers of slave spirituals, they sang of an immediate, concrete religion that contrasted greatly to Euro-Americans' other-worldly, abstract religion... Both black slaves and black minstrels sang of heaven as a paradise of freedom and plenty' (p. 239).

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1961), pp. 189, 186–87, 141.

as they possessed 'the fundamental characteristics of African music...a striking rhythmic quality and...a marked similarity to African songs in form and structure'. But, Johnson believed, the slave spirituals represented an advance on 'primitive' African music in that they came to be fused with 'the spirit of Christianity' by a people in dire need of a 'religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence'.

The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity – patience–forbearance–love–faith–and–hope – through a necessarily modified form of primitive African music. The Negro took complete refuge in Christianity, and the Spirituals were literally forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor.

The spirituals, Johnson suggested, sustained the slaves of the Old South; the songs of Daniel in the lion's den, the passage of the Hebrews in the fiery furnace, the release of the Children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, were songs of deliverance. They were also, and significantly, communal forms of religious expression – 'a reversion to the simple principles of primitive, communal Christianity'.⁵ This point was reiterated by Alain Locke in his essay on 'The Negro Spirituals' (1925):

The Spirituals are spiritual. Conscious artistry and popular conception alike should never rob them of this heritage...it was to an alien atmosphere that the missionary campaigning of the Negro schools and colleges took these songs. And the concert stage has but taken them an inevitable step further from their original setting. We should always remember that they are essentially congregational, not theatrical, just as they are essentially a choral not a solo form.⁶

Paul Robeson, the outstanding solo performer of the Negro spirituals on the concert stage, pronounced on their biblical derivation in a 1927 interview:

The Bible was the only form of literature the captive Negroes could get at...It was natural for their quick imaginations to find a pathetic similarity between their condition and that of the enslaved Hebrews: I believe that's why the Bible made such a tremendous appeal

⁵ James Weldon Johnson, ed., introduction to *The Books of American Negro Spirituals: Book I* (New York, 1925), quoted in Katz, pp. xxxvii–viii. See also Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama and The Negro in American Fiction* (New York, 1969), pp. 15–21. In his discussion of the 'philosophy' of the spirituals, Brown (writing in 1935), commended Johnson's work in 'stirring a twentieth century interest in the spirituals'. However, Brown rejected a totally other-worldly interpretation of the songs: 'Too many rash critics have stated that the spirituals showed the slave turning his back on this world for the joys of the next. The truth is that he took a good look at this world and told what he saw. Sometimes he was forthright in denouncing slavery, as in "No Mo' Driver's Lash for Me"' (p. 18).

⁶ Alain Locke, 'The Negro Spirituals', in *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York, 1925), pp. 201–02. More recently, the anthropologist John F. Szwed, in an analysis of the 1867 collection *Slave Songs of the United States*, concluded that 'The church songs and spirituals of the Negroes in the Southern United States closely resemble West African song style, particularly in their strong call-and-response patterns'. John F. Szwed, 'Musical Adaptation Among Afro-Americans', *Journal of American Folklore*, 72 (April–June 1969), 115. For similar statements see Epstein, pp. 73–74, 88–90, 217–18, and Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York, 1971), pp. 16–18.

to the Negroes. They saw their own history reflected in it, and they saw their own vague hopes given a sort of false glow of possibility. They felt that their freedom would also depend on some miracle happening. And...it's a curious thing that these songs were written not in Negro dialect, but in a language caught from the Bible itself.⁷

(Echoing Du Bois – and one of his declared disciples – Robeson also remarked in a later article that the spirituals ‘are to Negro culture what the work of the great poets are to English culture: they are the soul of the race made manifest’.⁸)

In 1938 the Negro sociologist Benjamin Mays (later the intellectual mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr) published *The Negro's God*, in which he attempted to uncover the theological concepts contained in the slave spirituals. Heaven, Hell, and the Divine Judgment were, Mays believed, the leading ideas within these songs, and their central characteristic was the ‘compensatory idea that God will bring his own out victoriously in the end’. They revealed a belief in an omnipotent and omnipresent God, and affirmed ‘a complete trust in God to make right in the next world what was done wrong in this world’. Thus to Mays the spirituals had provided an emotional security for the slaves, and were ‘otherworldly’ in that ‘they lead one to repudiate this world, consider it a temporary abode, and look to Heaven for a complete realization of the needs and desires that are denied expression here’. The function of the spirituals, in a temporal sense, was to keep ‘the slaves submissive, humble, and obedient’.⁹ Du Bois, Johnson, Locke, Robeson and Mays were agreed in their interpretations of the spirituals as religious expressions of the beliefs and world-view of the slaves. Other readings of these songs were to suggest their function and value as social documents, the verbal record of the allegedly inarticulate.

⁷ P. S. Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews 1918–1974* (New York, 1978), interview from *The Jewish Tribune*, 22 July 1927, ‘Paul Robeson, the Famous Baritone, Tells of the Drama in the Old Testament That Has Given Birth to Negro Songs’, pp. 73–74.

⁸ Robeson, ‘The Culture of the Negro’, *The Spectator* (London), 15 June 1934, pp. 916–17. In Foner, p. 86.

⁹ Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (Boston, 1938; New York, 1969), pp. 21–25 and *passim*. See also Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insights of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (New York, 1945).

The Boston Unitarian Minister and abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson observed of the songs sung by his First South Carolina Volunteers during the Civil War, ‘Almost all their songs were thoroughly religious in tone... The attitude is always the same... Nothing but patience for this life – nothing but triumph in the next. Sometimes, the present predominates, sometimes, the future; but the combination is always implied.’ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (New York, 1962), p. 192.

But Mays did concede that not all of the spirituals were ‘compensatory.’ ‘Even in the Spirituals the Negroes did not accept without protest the social ills which they suffered. “Go Down Moses,” “Oh, Freedom,”... are illustrative of... Spirituals that revolt against earthly conditions without seeking relief in Heaven... Certainly “Joshua Fit De Battle ob Jericho” is an assertion of the belief that fighting your battle with God’s help will bring victory. One is not to sit and wait for God alone. Man does his part and God His part. The ideas of God in these Spirituals are not compensatory and they are not other-worldly.’ *The Negro's God*, pp. 28, 30.

III

Writing in the *Journal of Negro Education* (October 1939) on 'The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual', John Lovell, Jr, rejected the 'escapist' and purely religious reading of the slave spiritual. To Lovell, a black scholar, the spiritual was 'essentially social', a graphic and revealing record of slave resistance and earthly aspirations. Three themes, Lovell suggested, run through the songs: (1) the slave's desire for temporal freedom, as revealed in Frederick Douglass' remark that the spirituals were 'tones breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery'; (2) 'the slave's desire for justice in the judgment upon his betrayers which some might call revenge'; and (3) read correctly, they formulated the slave's 'tactic of battle, the strategy by which he expected to gain an eminent future'. The spiritual, then, conveyed physical and metaphysical resistance to enslavement, as witnessed by such lines as: 'My Lord delivered Daniel . . . Why can't He deliver me?' or 'We'll Soon Be Free'. These songs were 'the slave's description of his environment', and 'the key to his revolutionary sentiments . . . his desire to fly to free territory'. Afro-American slaves, Lovell asserted, were 'not the kind of people to think unconcretely; and the idea that they put all their eggs into the basket of a heaven after death, as the result of abstract thinking, is absurd to any reader of first-hand materials in the social history of the slave'. Slave resistance was mental rather than physical, concerned with earthly rather than heavenly salvation. In offering the reader a choice between 'the sentimental spiritual' or 'the thumping, two-fisted, not-to-be-denied "Oh no man can hinder me"', Lovell left no doubt where his own preference lay. In the spirituals, understood as social documents, Satan was not 'a traditional Negro goblin; he is the people who beat and cheat the slave. Kind Jesus is not just the abstract Christ; he is whoever helps the oppressed and disfranchised . . . Babylon and Winter are slavery as it stands.'¹⁰

Like Lovell, Miles Mark Fisher in *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (1953) viewed the spirituals as expressions of a desire for earthly freedom, and not as the otherworldly projections of a resigned and passive race. Fisher discerned not only immediate and temporal meanings in such songs as 'Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus', but also regarded them as more African than white Christian in derivation, part of the African oral tradition of storytelling transposed to the New World. Thus the line 'Deep River, My Home is Over Jordan' referred to the possibility of an escape back to Africa. In Fisher's exegesis, the spirituals offer an oral record of 'how Negroes attempted to spread brotherhood by the sword, took flight to "better" territory when possible, became pacific in the United States, and laid hold upon another world as a last resort'. Again, despite the undoubted influence of plantation missionaries, 'not one spiritual in its primary form reflected interest in anything other than a full life here and now'.¹¹

¹⁰ John Lovell, Jr, 'The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual', in Katz, pp. 132-36 *et passim*. See also Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York, 1972).

¹¹ Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York, 1953), pp. 137, 183.

The Lovell-Fisher view of the slave spirituals as the thinly veiled account of an oppressed people's striving for earthly liberation was rejected by the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (*The Negro Church in America*, 1964) with the comment that 'the efforts of Negro intellectuals... encouraged by white radicals, to invest the spirituals with a revolutionary meaning or to claim that they represented disguised plans for escape from slavery', 'distorted the truth that the spirituals 'were essentially religious in sentiment and otherworldly in outlook'. For Frazier, the recurring concern of these songs was death, as in the frequently stated desire to escape from the weariness of earthly existence: 'By and by, I'm goin' to lay down this heavy load.'¹²

IV

More recent commentators have generally accepted neither the 'purely religious' nor the 'essentially secular' interpretations of the slave spirituals. Instead, they have argued for a complex and ambivalent character to the songs, at once sacred and secular, otherworldly and this-worldly, passive and protesting. The musicologist Harold Courlander noted in *Folk Music U.S.A.* (1966) that the transplanted African held clear views of the role of music in life. 'Confronted with new religious patterns, the New World African found in the Bible prolific materials adaptable to the traditional dramatic statement', remoulding and recasting Biblical events to serve his spiritual and material needs. The spirituals drew without regard for Biblical chronology or even accuracy on the whole Bible story, conflating the New Testament with the Old, and the Old with the New. 'Job, Jesus, Judas and Joshua may be found in the same song, along with the... train that carries the sanctified.'¹³ But, as Courlander also demonstrates, it is possible to put the spirituals together in a certain sequence so as 'to produce an oral counterpart of the Bible'. For example, the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in

¹² E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, 1964), pp. 12-13. Cf. Le Roi Jones: 'The religious imagery of the Negro's Christianity is full of references to the suffering and hopes of the oppressed Jews in Biblical times. Many of the Negro spirituals reflect this identification. ... 'Crossing the river Jordan' meant not only death but also the entrance into the very real heaven and a release from an earthly bondage. ... But at the same time... this freedom was one that could only be reached through death.' *Blues People: Negro Music In White America* (New York, 1963), p. 40. See also David R. Roediger, 'And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death and Heaven in the Slave Community 1700-1865', *Massachusetts Review*, 22 (Spring 1981), pp. 163-83. Roediger comments that 'In a balanced accounting of slave attitudes towards death and heaven, although the compensatory hope for otherworldly breakthrough constitutes one important theme, it does not begin to exhaust the complexity of the slave's outlook. Since heaven was defined as the very negation of slavery, even otherworldly sentiments had a keen edge of indictment. Those spirituals which reverberated loudest with the glories of heaven also excoriated whether openly or by implication the horrors which the slave encountered in an alien world. A single line of a slave spiritual could combine anguish and deliverance: "Got hard trial in my way, Heaven shall be my home"' (p. 181).

¹³ Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (Jazz Book Club edition: London, 1966), p. 38.

the Garden, discovering their nakedness, is paralleled in the spirituals by the lines:

Oh Eve, where is Adam?
Oh, Eve, Adam is in the garden
Pinin' leaves.

The Genesis account of Noah and the Flood is echoed in such lines as:

Noah, Noah, build this ark
Build this ark without hammer or nails.

The saga of Samson becomes in the spiritual 'If I Had My Way':

He said and if I had my way
I'd tear this buildin' down.

Regarding the vexed question of 'hidden' meaning in the spirituals, Courlander makes the common-sense observation that:

It is a safe assumption that all Negro religious songs were understood by the slaves in the light of their own immediate condition of servitude. In singing about the Israelites' flight to freedom, it must certainly have crossed their minds that there was a remarkable parallel to be seen. Songs about Moses and Joshua must have had a much more personal and immediate meaning to the Afro-American than to his white master.¹⁴

In fact, Courlander suggests, the appeal of Christianity to Afro-American slaves may well have resided to a significant degree in such obvious Biblical analogies.

Claiming the spirituals as 'the product of the fusion of Christian piety and the slave experience of persons of African descent', Le Roy Moore, Jr (1971) stresses the centrality of religion in African life. However:

the black man's thought forms were not analytical and abstract but mytho-poetic... Blacks did not construct doctrines, they told stories. And the principal vehicle for this was the song, the spiritual... In effect... Christian scripture was with the spirituals transformed into a new oral tradition in which the choice and arrangement of words was undoubtedly dictated more by a logic of rhythm and sound than of verbal meaning.

For Moore, the slave spirituals were neither 'escapist/compensatory' in an otherworldly sense, nor 'coded' protest songs. They were both, offering 'a mystical escape, a mystical flight, not away somewhere but into the self, into the soul, to God in the soul'. They were, physiologically and psychically, expressions of *soul*, in the Afro-American sense of 'at-homeness with one's self'.¹⁵

Interpretations of the spirituals, as Frazier noted, have often reflected the ideological temper of the times. This is particularly evident in James H. Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), the reflections of a radical black theologian concerned with 'the power of song in the struggle for black survival' in America. The spirituals were (or are) political statements: 'The divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 42.

¹⁵ Le Roy Moore, Jr, 'The Spiritual: Soul of Black Religion', *American Quarterly*, 23 (1971), 658-76.

spirituals... black freedom songs which emphasize black liberation as consistent with divine liberation.¹⁶

Cone supports Fisher's earlier contention that the slave spirituals are correctly to be viewed as primary source materials relating to slave consciousness, but maintains that 'heaven' in the songs was both the heavenly kingdom and free land on earth. Again, in the spirituals, the slaves transcended their immediate condition and celebrated the certain divine liberation of the oppressed. 'In the spirituals, the image of heaven served functionally to liberate the black mind from the existing values of white society, enabling slaves to think their own thoughts, and do their own things... to live as if the future had already come.'¹⁷ To the slave, God's righteousness was revealed in the Biblical accounts of the liberation of the oppressed from bondage. And 'the theological assumption' of slave religion as voiced in the songs 'was that slavery contradicts God and He will therefore liberate his people'.¹⁸ Above all, and Du Bois' typification to the contrary, the spirituals were at once optimistic and future-oriented:

To believe that there was hope in the midst of oppression meant that the slaves' vision of the future was not limited to their present state of slavery. They looked beyond the condition of servitude and perceived that the real meaning of their existence was still to come. The absurd present was not eternal.¹⁹

The slave spirituals, Cone stresses, 'emphasized the inability of the present to contain the divine reality of the future'. In this sense, they *were* 'otherworldly' in that they emphasized 'the utter distinction between the present and the future'. This future state was conceived of with 'apocalyptic imagination', as expressed in such verses as:

No more hard trial in de kingdom; no more tribulation, no more parting,
no more quarrelling, back-biting in de kingdom,
No more sunshine fer to bu'n you; no more rain fer to wet you.
Every day will be Sunday in heaven.²⁰

Lawrence W. Levine's impressive *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) also argues for the metaphysical release afforded by the spirituals, which were 'quantitatively and qualitatively the most significant musical creation of the slaves', and the product of 'an improvisational communal consciousness' which owed much to Africa. In their religious songs:

the slaves created a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live. They extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond.²¹

¹⁶ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York, 1972), p. 34.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 95. For similar statements see Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Examination of the Black Experience in Religion* (New York, 1973), pp. 16-17, and Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' on: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Conn., 1979), pp. xxiii, 122-25, 234.

¹⁸ Cone, pp. 72-73.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 96.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 99.

²¹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), pp. 32-33.

Again, the God of the spirituals was neither remote nor abstract, but 'as intimate, personal and immediate as the gods of Africa had been'.²² ('Mass' Jesus is my bosom friend.') And, in contrast to Stanley Elkins's view of the 'closed' nature of the slave plantation:

In the world of the spirituals, it was not the master...but God and Jesus and the entire pantheon of Old Testament figures who set the standards, established precedents, and defined the values...who...constituted the 'significant others'. The world described by the slave songs was a black world in which no reference was ever made to any white contemporaries.²³

Levine, like Cone, sees the spirituals marked more by confidence than by despair – 'confidence that contemporary power relationships were not immutable'. Their most persistent image was that of blacks as a chosen people: 'We are de people ob de Lord'; 'I really do believe I'm a child of God'. They were not only sung in churches, but were used as field songs, rowing songs and work songs. And within these songs there was always a 'latent and symbolic element of protest', that was often overt and specific. Levine also quotes Douglass to effect, citing his comment that "'I am bound for the land of Canaan'" meant something more than our hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan.' (Levine also notes that 'it is not necessary to invest the spirituals with a secular function at the price of divesting them of their religious content as Miles Mark Fisher has done', since the slaves themselves made no such clear-cut and artificial distinction.)²⁴ The spirituals offered to the slave a sort of emotional safety-valve, and permitted him to 'express deeply held feelings which he ordinarily was not allowed to verbalize'. The very ambiguity of Biblical language enabled the slave to express his protest and desire for freedom with impunity.

While recognizing obvious similarities in content, martial imagery and textual characteristics between black and white spirituals during slavery, Levine also points up some important differences:

White spirituals seem to have been informed by a more persistent otherworldliness...a more marked rejection of the temporal present, and a tendency to concentrate on Jesus, which were never as typical of black spirituals, while they lacked much of the vivid Biblical imagery, the compelling sense of identification with the children of Israel, and the tendency to dwell incessantly upon and to relive the stories of the Old Testament that characterised the religious songs of the slaves.²⁵

Although Christ figures frequently in the slave songs, it was 'not...the Jesus of the New Testament...but a Jesus transformed into an Old Testament warrior' – a further indication of 'the slaves' selectivity in choosing those parts of the Bible' which spoke to their particular needs and aspirations.²⁶

Albert J. Raboteau's study of slave religion, *The Invisible Institution* (1978) also dismissed the older this/other worldly interpretation of the spirituals. Following both African and Biblical tradition, Afro-American slaves 'believed that the

²² Ibid. p. 35.

²³ Ibid. p. 37.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 52.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 23. For a similar interpretation see also Sterling Stuckey, 'Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery', *Massachusetts Review*, 9 (1968), 417–37.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 43.

supernatural constantly impinged on the natural, that divine creation constantly took place within the lives of men, in the past, present and future'.²⁷ Levine and Raboteau both stress the important point that the spirituals were constantly changing; at no time did slaves create a 'final' version of a religious song.

In the creation as well as the performance of the spirituals, spontaneity, variety, and communal interchange were essential characteristics... The flexible, improvisational structure of the spirituals gave them a capacity to fit an individual slave's specific experience into the consciousness of the group... Singing the spirituals was both an intensely personal and vividly communal experience.²⁸

Raboteau also concludes that the spirituals were not simply 'coded protest' songs, but rather had a more profound and complex relationship to the slave experience. They were 'capable of communicating on more than one level of meaning'.²⁹

V

The slave spirituals have been subject to varying interpretation, but there is general agreement on their salient characteristics. The primary source for the words of the spirituals was the scriptures, especially the Old Testament, because of the obvious parallels which the slaves could draw between their own situation and that of the Jews in bondage in Egypt. Some spirituals appear to reflect the feelings of despair and frustration felt by slaves – expressions of a seemingly total helplessness: 'Nobody Knows the Troubles I've Seen', 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child'. Yet many spirituals also expressed hope for a better future, if not on earth, then in heaven. Again, some spirituals speak of freedom: 'We Shall Overcome'; 'Let My People Go'. Transportation, in the form of trains and chariots, also features in the songs. Although the slave spirituals contain only a few direct references to Africa, as Marian Berghahn suggests (1977), 'a number of texts permit the conclusion that Africa was at times included in the list of deliberate linguistic ambiguities'.³⁰ And many spirituals, as Frazier observed, speak of rest and contentment in the afterlife: 'No More Auction Block for Me'. James Miller McKim, one of the earliest collectors of slave songs, asserted in 1862 that the spirituals 'tell the whole story of these peoples' life and character. There is no need, after hearing them, to inquire into the history of the slave's treatment.'³¹

The spirituals, then, form a valuable part of 'slave testimony', but like all source materials are capable of supporting a great variety of generalizations or ideological positions. They are not, however, necessarily the most significant part of that testimony. In recent writings there has been a tendency to sentimentalize slavery and to attribute an excessive religiosity to the slaves of the Old South – exemplified

²⁷ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978), p. 250.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 246.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 249. Wilfrid Mellers observes that 'The spiritual may be a song of yearning and is usually a song of protest and oppression; but it is never a song of nostalgia or escape.' *Music in a New Found Land: Themes and Developments in the History of American Music* (London, 1964), p. 265.

³⁰ Marion Berghahn, *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (London, 1977), p. 57.

³¹ James Miller McKim, 'Negro Songs', in Katz, p. 2.

in Genovese's spiritually titled *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, which curiously devotes little space to an analysis of these songs. Levine claims too much for the spirituals in his assertion that 'it is to the spirituals that the historian must look to comprehend the antebellum slaves' world view, for it was in the spirituals that the slaves found a medium which...afforded them the possibility of both adapting to and transcending their situation'.³² Yet folk and didactic tales, secular songs and music, jokes and word games were also (as Levine demonstrates) vital parts of slave and black culture. As Michael Flusche has cautioned (1975), the exaggerated emphasis on the centrality of religion in modern slavery historiography

has given an ahistorical bias to studies of slavery by neglecting the work and play songs. Judging by material collected from freedmen after slavery was abolished, there is ample evidence that a sense of humour – grim and satirical – would have had for the slaves at least the cultural and survival value of the spirituals.³³

One can add James Cone's comment that both during and after slavery, not all Afro-Americans 'could accept the divine promises of the Bible as a satisfactory answer to the contradictions of the black experience. They refused to adopt a God-centered perspective as the solution to the problem of black suffering.'³⁴ Instead, they sang or listened to the Blues – 'secular spirituals' – which developed out of slave field and work songs, and which also reflected the functional character of West African music.³⁵

The slave spirituals, like other 'black sources', offer ambiguous, ambivalent and incomplete testimony concerning the slave experience. In his recent interdisciplinary study of black messianism, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (1982), Wilson J. Moses observes that 'Black Christianity, with its mingled elements of submission and potential violence, was no less complex than its white counterpart. It allowed its adherents to rationalize a broad spectrum of human behaviours.' Afro-American slave religion simultaneously provided rationalizations for a submissiveness that allowed the sufferer to embrace the divinity of the martyred Saviour ('They crucified my lord, And he never said a mumblin' word') and the apocalyptic vision and retributive actions of a Nat Turner. Thus 'Christianity provided a framework within which black Christians could reconcile peacefully the warring ideals of resistance and accom-

³² Levine, p. 19.

³³ Michael Flusche, 'Joel Chandler Harris and the Folklore of Slavery', *Journal of American Studies*, 9 (1975), 353–54.

³⁴ Cone, p. 108.

³⁵ For the evolution of the blues see Cone and three studies by Paul Oliver: *The Meaning of the Blues* (New York, 1963), *The Story of the Blues* (New York, 1969) and *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (London, 1970).

The jazz historian James Lincoln Collier notes in this connection: 'It has usually been suggested that the blues evolved from the spirituals, because both were "sad". As a matter of fact, spirituals were often joyous, and the blues, if not generally joyous, are sometimes comic and often filled with sexual innuendo. Clearly, the blues evolved not from the spiritual but from the common musical practice that undergirt the work song, the prison song, the street cry, as well as the spiritual.' Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (London, 1978), p. 35.

modation that they so forcefully experienced.³⁶ Similarly, the spirituals were at once the poetic and allusive statements of Afro-American culture at a particular stage of its development, and the veiled testimony which DuBois believed was 'the rhythmic cry of the slave... the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment'.³⁷ Assessments of the 'peculiar institution' should be careful not to confuse cause and effect. The spirituals, however interpreted, speak as much to the cruelties inflicted on as to the resistance displayed by American slaves. That they also gave the world a vivid and compelling amalgam of words, images and music is one of the more bitter ironies of Afro-American history.

³⁶ Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park and London, 1982), pp. 54-55.

³⁷ DuBois, pp. 182-83 ('Of the Sorrow Songs').