



Article

Civil War Song in Black and White: Print and the Representation of the Spirituals

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Abstract: This article explores how White writers wrote about African American spirituals during and after the Civil War. While these writers tended to view Black speech as deficient, they were willing to regard Black musical expression as simply different, paving the way for its eventual nationalization as “American music”. Noting that White writers were not in the habit of admitting the inadequacies of their preferred modes of representation, the article concludes that the print representation of the spirituals contributed to a transformation of what was meant by the word “American”.

Keywords: spirituals; African American; American music; music and nationalism

1. Introduction

James Weldon Johnson dedicated his first *Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) to “those through whose efforts these songs have been collected, preserved, and given to the world...” In his preface to the collection, Johnson explains why he holds his dedicatees in such high regard.

[I]t was wholly within the possibilities for these songs to be virtually lost. The people who created them were not capable of recording them, and the conditions out of which this music sprang and by which it was nourished have almost passed away. Without the direct effort on the part of those to whom I offer this slight tribute, the Spirituals would probably have fallen into disuse and finally disappeared. This probability is increased by the fact that they passed through a period following Emancipation when the front ranks of the colored people themselves would have been willing and even glad to let them die. The first efforts towards the preservation of this music were made by the pioneer collectors who worked within the decade following the Civil War. (Johnson 1925, p. 46)

Suggesting some of the “phenomenal complexities” Ronald Radano has identified as essential to the story of Black music in North America, Johnson’s dedication makes clear that those who first recorded the spirituals were more than incidental observers of the music (Radano 2003, p. 10). They were instead, alongside the “black and unknown bards” he celebrates in a prefatory poem, co-creators of one of the more significant developments in postbellum US culture. “Pioneers” who journeyed into alien spaces and discovered in unfamiliar sounds what one termed a sense of “strange fulfilment”, they became transcribers of songs without whose efforts the spirituals might have penetrated US culture differently and at a later date (Higginson 1867, p. 685).¹ Johnson’s aligning himself more closely with the transcribers, all of them White, than with “the front ranks of the colored people” suggests further how the spirituals occasioned new and complex forms of cultural affiliation, new ways of imagining class, racial, regional, and even national community as Black southern folk music came to seem to some (and eventually to many) definitive of American music.

More concretely, Johnson’s dedication highlights the fact that the mass reproduction of the spirituals was a consequence of the Civil War. This was not the likeliest of war outcomes. Those who would become transcribers of slave songs had ventured into their



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midst for other reasons entirely. One was a radical abolitionist turned Union officer who knew how to write poetry but not at all how to record music. Another taught piano but had made her way to wartime Virginia as a secretary in the Port Royal Relief Association. A third was taking time between his undergraduate and graduate studies at Harvard to do service in the United States Sanitary Commission. None was an ethnologist much less an ethnomusicologist, a field that would not begin to coalesce until decades after the Civil War. What they had in common were their antislavery politics and their commitment, once they had been exposed to what one of them called “this new and curious music of which it is a temptation to write”, to write the music down: to begin to fix in language, musical notation, and eventually print what had once only circulated in sound (L. McKim 1862, p. 255).

Others would follow. By the time Johnson was writing in 1925, he could name multiple additional collectors of the spirituals, most of them African American, whose research and rearrangements had contributed to make the songs part of American daily life. “Today the Spirituals have a vogue”, he writes. “Today the public buys the Spirituals, takes them home and plays and sings them”. He could cite this development, in turn, as having helped to bring about “a change of attitude...with regard to the Negro. The country may not yet be conscious of it, for it is only in the beginning. It is, nevertheless, momentous. America is beginning to see the Negro in a new light, or, rather, to see something new in the Negro” (Johnson 1925, pp. 48–50). The “beginning” to which Johnson refers may be thought of as a long one, however; indeed, it may be thought of in terms of such long-developing transformations as those sung about in such spirituals as “Keep A-Inchin’ Along”: “Keep a-inchin’ along like a po’ inch worm, Massa/Jesus is comin’ bye and bye”.² For legible in the earliest American writings about spirituals are ideas that both challenged and confirmed what was thought to be true of “negroes”. If, as John Stauffer has argued, “[t]he transformation of culture by the war was reflected in the very language that Americans used to define themselves”, exploring the language writers used to denote the spirituals may reveal an additional dimension to the cultural shifts underway during the war years (Stauffer 2013, p. xv).

2. Rational Expressions, Barbarous Noise: Henry G. Spaulding and James M. McKim

There are many features of the negro shout which amuse us from their strangeness; so, also, that strike the observer as wholly absurd. Yet, viewed as a religious exercise...I cannot help regarding it, in spite of many of its characteristics, as both a natural and a rational expression of devotional feeling. (Spaulding 1863, p. xv)

So wrote Henry George Spaulding, the recent graduate of Harvard, in an essay published in the *Continental Monthly* in August 1863. His words are characteristically ambivalent. Describing shouts—ritual performances in which participants sang songs sometimes based on spirituals, created percussive accompaniments with their bodies, and moved in circles—Spaulding perceives elements that strike him as comic and inferior, including the songs themselves (“barbaric madrigals”, he calls them. He later proposes substituting “appropriate hymns” “for these crude productions”). Yet, he also “cannot help” acknowledging the ritual’s integrity, and however much he may have wanted to excise the spirituals from it, he wanted to see the songs preserved. His article contains transcriptions of several songs that would be reproduced in later collections, including “Hold Your Light”, “The Lonesome Valley”, and “Lord, Remember Me”. Conceding that “[t]he most striking of their barbaric airs...would be impossible to write out”, Spaulding nevertheless worked to record what he could (Spaulding 1863, pp. 197–200).

Calling a shout “a rational expression of devotional feeling” accords it a dignity and may represent an attempt to cross a barrier of subjectivity. Spaulding seems to be saying that from the perspective of the formerly enslaved, a shout is a reasonable form of worship; were I in their place, he almost concedes, I would be doing the same. (Spaulding even tried to replicate a shout himself: After noting that the ritual can go on “for hours”, he admits: “In trying to imitate them, I was completely tired out in a very short time”) (Spaulding

1863, p. 197).³ Calling a shout “rational” further attributes to its participants qualities that White writers had long denied them, most notably Thomas Jefferson, who, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), had called them “in reason much inferior” “to the whites” before identifying music as the only art in which they exhibited a modicum of natural ability: “In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears fortune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved” (Jefferson [1787] 1982, p. 140).

Calling a shout “natural”, however, comes close to repeating Jefferson. It echoes more directly James Miller McKim, an abolitionist minister who had visited South Carolina’s Sea Islands in June 1862 as an agent for the Philadelphia Port Royal Relief Committee. In August, an excerpt from a public address of his appeared in *Dwight’s Journal of Music* under the title of “Negro Music”. In only its second sentence, McKim would reiterate what writers since Jefferson had been saying about African Americans and art: “They are a musical people”. Like Spaulding, he likens what he heard to primitive, “barbarous” noise. Also like Spaulding, however, McKim describes how the more he became acquainted with the spirituals, the more he admired them: “It is almost impossible to give an idea of the effect of this or any of their songs by a mere recital or description. They are all exceedingly simple, both in sentiment and in music...[Y]et as they sing it, in alternating recitatives and choruses, with varying inflections and dramatic effect, this simple and otherwise monotonous melody will, to a musical ear and a heart susceptible to impression, have all the charm of variety”. Much more so than Spaulding, meanwhile, McKim was willing to see in the spirituals commentaries on the awful conditions of slavery. Saying that they “tell the whole story of these people’s life and character”, he reproduces a conversation he had had with one formerly enslaved man (“one of the most intelligent I had met”) whom he had asked how a spiritual comes about:

“Dey make em, sah”. “How do they make them?” After a pause, evidently casting about for an explanation, he said, “I’ll tell you; it’s dis way. My master call me up and order me a short peck of corn and a hundred lash. My friends see it and is very sorry for me. When dey come to de praise meeting dat night dey sing about it. Some’s very good singers and know how; and dey work it in, work it in, you know; till dey get it right; and dat’s de way”. (J. M. McKim 1862, pp. 148–49)⁴

3. Triumphant Anthems, Flowers of Poetry: Lucy McKim and Thomas W. Higginson

Better known than James McKim’s article in *Dwight’s* was one written by his daughter, Lucy, and published in the same journal 3 months later. She had traveled with her father to South Carolina as his secretary. A piano teacher by training, she was also among the first to attempt to render the songs she heard in musical notation; her piano and voice arrangements of “Poor Rosy, Poor Gal”, and “Roll, Jordan, Roll” would appear within months of her trip. McKim echoes her father on numerous points, noting the challenges inherent in transcription and insisting that the power and beauty of the songs were indications of “the character and life of the race”. Notably absent from Lucy McKim’s report are such words as “barbarous”. Notably present is “originality”: “their striking originality would catch the ear of any musician”. As if in response to her father, she observes that “repetition” is not the same thing as “monotony”, since repetition “is to accommodate the leader, who, if he be a good one, is always an improvisator”. She further notes that performers will vary the tempo of a particular song based on the type of labor they are performing; “Poor Rosy” could range from “an even *andante*” to a tempo that “[f]l[ies]” to one that “peals up slowly and mournfully from the distant quarters”. Most significant, she likens “Roll, Jordan, Roll” to “a triumphal anthem”, recalling that “[t]hat same hymn was sung by thousands of negroes on the Fourth of July last, when they marched in procession under the Stars and Stripes, cheering them for the first time as the ‘flag of our country’” (L. McKim 1862, pp. 264–65).

Perhaps the most widely read Civil-War-era account of the spirituals was written by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Unitarian minister and radical abolitionist who, in November 1862, assumed command of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first regiment composed entirely of formerly enslaved men to serve in the Union Army. Higginson began drilling his new soldiers only 2 weeks after the appearance of Lucy McKim's report in *Dwight's*. Five years later, he would write a piece for the *Atlantic*, titled "Negro Spirituals" (1867), which, at the moment it was published, represented the most extensive collection of spirituals ever to appear in print.⁵ Higginson had less musical training than those who had written about spirituals earlier, and his article would contain no musical notations. Instead, he would describe how each song sounded to him, calling one, for example, "resounding and convivial in its music" and another "very graceful and lyrical, and with more variety of rhythm than usual" (Higginson 1867, pp. 686, 689). Some of Higginson's descriptions locate the spirituals within the realm of the exotic: one is called "the simplest primitive type", another "one of the wildest and most striking of the whole series", and a third suggestive of "the Orientalism of the new tent-life" (Higginson 1867, pp. 685–86, 689). Yet, many are described in ways that made them seem less alien: "quite sweet and touching", for example, or "operatic and rollicking" (Higginson 1867, 689–90).

Perhaps because he was unable to transcribe melodies, Higginson was more attentive the most to the words of each spiritual, observing the variations that could exist within a single spiritual and speculating about how a particular word or line might have found its way into a song. He used dialect, inevitably underscoring racial difference, yet did so more sparingly than others, noting at one point that he sought to avoid "extreme misspelling, which merely confuses the eye, without taking us any closer to the peculiarity of sound". Above all, he treated the spirituals as poems, explaining at the outset of "Negro Spirituals" that the songs reminded him of Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803) and referring to them repeatedly as examples of verse: "such a flower of poetry", "a kindred world of unwritten songs...essentially poetic", etc. (Higginson 1867, pp. 685, 689). The typographical arrangement of the spirituals on the page—the thoughtful use of indentation and punctuation, the careful alignment of parallel lines, and the assignment of each song a title and number—contributes to what might be thought of as their poetic gestalt. In addition, while Higginson's reproductions necessarily deformed the spirituals, representing them as things they were not, his work must also be regarded as an effort to make them familiar—to preserve them ("history cannot afford to lose this portion of its record", he concludes his article) by presenting them as examples of a new and noteworthy verse form (Higginson 1867, p. 694).

4. Rich Songs, Impoverished Speech: William F. Allen

The 37 songs represented in "Negro Spirituals" greatly increased the number of slave songs in print. That number would be multiplied again a few weeks later by the appearance of *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), a compilation of 136 spirituals and secular songs collected by several figures and edited by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison.⁶ (During the 5 years since the appearance of her report in *Dwight's*, McKim had married Wendell Garrison, son of William Lloyd Garrison). *Slave Songs* included most of the spirituals already in print alongside many more that had never been published, among them "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" and "Don't Be Weary, Traveler". The majority had been encountered in or near coastal South Carolina, but others were identified as having originated elsewhere, from Maryland and Delaware to Florida and Louisiana. The volume featured transcriptions of the melody and words (in dialect) of each song. When more than one version of a spiritual had been encountered, variants were noted.

The collection was thus marked by breadth and depth. As Allen notes in a lengthy introduction, "[O]f the first forty-three of the collection most were sung upon a single plantation, and...it is very certain that the stores of this plantation were by no means exhausted. Of course there was constant intercourse between neighboring plantations; also

between different States, by the sale of slaves from one to another" (Allen 1867, p. xi). *Slave Songs* was unprecedented not only in its length but also in its attentiveness to the variability, mobility, and complexity of the spirituals. McKim had emphasized the improvisatory nature of spiritual performance, while Higginson had noted that their "range seemed almost endless" (Higginson 1867, p. 685). Yet, Allen was the first to attempt a description of vocal polyphony and to derive from it an understanding of how a spiritual might travel from one group of singers to another:

There is no singing in parts, as we understand it, and yet no two appear to be singing the same thing—the leading singer starts the words of each verse, often improvising, and the others, who 'base' him, as it is called, strike in with the refrain, or even join in the solo, when the words are familiar. When the 'base' begins, the leader often stops, leaving the rest of his words to be guessed at, or it may be they are taken up by one of the other singers. And the 'basers' themselves seem to follow their own whims, beginning when they please and leaving off when they please, striking an octave above or below (in case they have pitched the tune too low or too high), or hitting some other note that chords, so as to produce the effect of a marvellous complication and variety, and yet with the most perfect time, and rarely with any discord. (Allen 1867, pp. v–vi)

The British war correspondent William Howard Russell had once described a spiritual as "a monotonous sort of chant something about the 'River Jawdam'..." (Russell 1863, p. 126). Higginson, Spaulding, James Miller McKim, and especially Lucy McKim had encouraged a closer kind of listening, assuring their readers that, if they allowed themselves to become acclimated to the music, they would hear much more; they might even discover what Allen calls in another passage "the peculiar richness and originality of the music" (Allen 1867, p. xv). While Allen cannot quite accept the terms "base" and "basers" into his own lexicon—he cannot refrain from placing them in quotation marks, in effect resisting the possibility that African Americans might be theoreticians of their own music—he otherwise writes both technically and appreciatively of the music he has come to know. He does so knowing that *Slave Songs'* notations of only melody will give no hints of each song's "marvellous complication and variety" and that his own descriptions of polyphony will fall short: "I despair of conveying any notion of the effect of a number singing together, especially in a complicated shout, like 'I can't stay behind, my Lord'...or 'Turn, sinner, turn O!'" (Allen 1867, p. v).

In short, Allen communicates a kind of humility before his subject matter. His introduction conveys appreciation. It includes what had become by 1867 an already seemingly obligatory note about the need to preserve the songs before they were lost: "these relics of a state of society which has passed away should be preserved while it is still possible" (Allen 1867, p. iii). Yet, it implies that the music deserves preservation for reasons besides, above all for its being "original in the best sense of the word". When he notes "irregularities in the time", he calls them "apparent irregularities", the adjective creating room for Allen to be mistaken, for the "irregularities" to be in fact essential to the music (Allen 1867, pp. vi–vii). When he tries furthermore to account for syncopation and swing, he cites his co-editor Ware, who had observed approvingly in a letter to Allen that "[o]ne noticeable thing about their boat-songs was that they seemed often to be sung just a trifle behind time;...indeed, I think Jerry often hung on his oar a little just there before dipping it again" (Allen 1867, pp. xvi–xvii).

Allen's allowance for musical "irregularity"—his respect, one wants to say, for the music's difference—seems all the more noteworthy when one considers his comments on Gullah, the creole vernacular ("almost...a dialect of their own") he encountered at Port Royal. Allen was a classics scholar and philologist; among his later publications would be books on Latin grammar and editions of Ovid and Tacitus. In a lengthy excursus in the introduction to *Slave Songs* on the "negro talk" he was hearing, he writes not appreciatively but rather disparagingly. In fact, he is as attentive to what he perceives to be their deficiencies in

speech as he is their achievements in song, observing at one point that Gullah might be “easily suppose[ed]” to be “a foreign language”:

The strange words and pronunciations, and frequent abbreviations, disguise the familiar features of one’s native tongue, while the rhythmical modulations, so characteristic of certain European languages, give it an utterly un-English sound...With these people the process of ‘phonetic decay’ appears to have gone as far, perhaps, as is possible, and with it an extreme simplification of etymology and syntax...Corruptions are more abundant...There is probably no speech that has less inflection, or indeed less power of expressing grammatical relation in any way...An officer of a colored regiment standing by me...confessed that it was mere gibberish to him. (Allen 1867, pp. xxiv–xxxi)

No longer creative, improvisational, or in any way “musical”, the freedmen whose speech Allen describes are made to seem lacking. “Rhythmical modulations” now present a problem. “[S]trange words” give rise to a sense that their speakers do not belong. Dialect is said in a separate passage to be a sign of “debasement”—and this despite the fact that the transcriptions of the spirituals that compose the bulk of *Slave Songs of the United States* carefully preserve it (Allen 1867, p. ix). Even more paradoxical, Allen looks forward to the possibility that schooling might correct Black students’ defects in speech, yet he expressly fears that additional contact with Whites will compromise the genuineness of their songs.

When he hears “irregular” music, Allen either admires it or concedes the possibility that, were he more attuned to it, he might find it agreeable. He works hard to perceive its beauty and admires its complexity. In addition, when he does not quite comprehend it or fails to find the words to express it, he allows that the deficiency may be his. When he hears nonstandard speech, by contrast, he asserts that the problem is theirs. He is fully confident that the systematic discourse of linguistics succeeds in representing its object. He never once doubts his capacity to record what he hears, so long as what he is hearing is speech. If ever he was mystified by a spoken word or phrase, he asked the speakers to correct themselves: “After six months’ residence among them, there were scholars in my school, among the most constant in attendance, whom I could not understand at all, unless they happened to speak very slowly” (Allen 1867, p. xxiv). The conformism he feared when it came to their singing he thus demanded when it came to their “talk”.

Similarly, Allen values the hybridity of their songs, which he calls at one point “imbued with the mode and spirit of European music—often, nevertheless, retaining a distinct tinge of their native Africa” (Allen 1867, p. viii). When “Africa” tinges their speech, however, it represents a flaw. Any difficulties they may have had in pronouncing English sounds or mastering the language’s particular, often peculiar rules of verb conjugation and noun pluralization, he attributes to their backwardness. Thus, he can begin his introduction with words derived from Jefferson and others: “The musical capacity of the negro race has been recognized for...many years...” (Allen 1867, p. i). Yet, by the end of the introduction and its curiously long discussion of speech patterns (which spans more than 13 of its 36 pages), Allen has implied that music is their only ability. Compared to his fellow transcribers of song, he has little to say about their capacities as free laborers, students, and soldiers. He is instead drawn to sound and whether it seems attractively (when sung) or unattractively (when spoken) distinctive. *Slave Songs of the United States* makes material, he suggests at one point, “the natural and original production of a race of remarkable musical capacity and very teachable, which has been long...associated with the more cultivated race...” (Allen 1867, p. viii). The writer most interested in the complexity of the spirituals—“this rich vein of music that exist[s] in these half-barbarous people”—was therefore in some ways the most insistent upon the relative simplicity of the singers (Allen 1867, p. ii).

5. Conclusions: “Behold, There Was Folk-Music”

The lexical record of the spirituals’ war-era emergence in American culture is thus marked by ambivalence. On the one hand is an ever-increasing respect for the music and the unfamiliar properties that distinguished it: pentatonic scales, syncopated rhythms,

improvisation, call-and-response singing, and so forth. On the other is a reluctance to see anything new in the “negro”—to hearken back to discourses that for decades had positioned African Americans as inferior and unfit for participation in modern society. Higginson was among the most eager to see beyond stereotypes; his mission, after all, had been to command a regiment of former slaves and hence to prove to the world their capacities as soldiers. When they engaged in “the rhythmical barbaric dance the negroes call a ‘shout,’” however, he heard and saw signs of reversion: “melodies and strange antics from this mysterious race of grown-up children...” (Higginson 1867, p. 685; Higginson 1864, p. 526). James Miller McKim actually had contact with Higginson’s soldiers. A detachment rowed him from Hilton Head to Beaufort, South Carolina in 1862, and he commented on the positive effect military service had had on them: “The fact that these people are thought worthy to be enlisted as soldiers, adds to their self-respect”. “[T]heir songs, like their talk, are couched in a barbarous, Africanized sort of English”, he remarked, however (J. M. McKim 1862, p. 149). Even more so than Allen, who would condemn their speech but contend that “the chief part of the negro music is *civilized* in its character”, McKim beheld barbarism whenever they made noise of any sort (Allen 1867, p. vi).

The record is ambivalent, and it is inconsistent with itself. Spaulding had many complimentary things to say about freedmen and freedwomen. He foresaw better futures for them—and for the entire nation—so long as those formerly enslaved had opportunities in such fields as education—“they cannot fail to elevate themselves thereby”—and military service—“the freedmen who are able to bear arms will prove themselves...jealous defenders of their own and their country’s liberties” (Spaulding 1863, pp. 201, 203). Yet, he proposed to replace the spirituals with hymns, the better to civilize the singers. Conversely, Allen ends his introduction with a sequence of stories meant to illustrate the forms of illiteracy he encountered at Port Royal. In one, two freedmen at a furniture auction bid numbers randomly rather than sequentially. In another, a schoolboy who promises he can read instead improvises stories based on a book’s pictures. The effect was supposed to be comic, not encouraging—not the visions of self-sufficiency suggested by Spaulding nor the image of promise contained in Lucy McKim’s gloss on the spirituals: “The wild, sad strains tell, as the sufferers themselves never could, of crushed hopes, keen sorrow, and a dull, daily misery...On the other hand, the words breathe a trusting faith in rest in the future...” (L. McKim 1862, p. 264). Yet, no nineteenth-century US figure was more assiduous than Allen in the effort to see the spirituals preserved.

Jon Cruz has argued that such figures as Allen, Spaulding, Higginson, and the McKims—“white moral and cultural entrepreneurs”, he calls them—discovered in the spirituals “their *preferred* cultural expression by blacks” (Cruz 1999, p. 4). He elaborates:

Though rooted in a profound social critique, the cultural discovery of black music and the search for cultural authenticity soon began to pivot upon a particular cultural aestheticization of black practices that, in turn, highlighted black religious music over black political and literary voices. As black culture became aestheticized, a separation emerged between black political claims for a greater social and political inclusion within American civil society and a more acceptable spiritual (and eventually cultural) place for blacks in the hearts and minds of northerners who were championing the new mode of benevolent cultural reception. (Cruz 1999, p. 6)

Radano has argued similarly that the project of recording the spirituals (“a mad gold rush of appropriative desire”) was motivated more by a yearning for “white self-completion” than an interest in otherness. The result was a decontextualization of the songs, a fetishization of their supposed “purity that distinguished song from the tragedy of enslavement” (Radano 2003, pp. 181–82). Allen’s introduction again provides a case in point. Although the longest and most detailed of the documents discussed here, it also has the least to say about slavery, certainly about slavery’s atrocities. The only problems Allen foresaw in Whites’ singing spirituals were technical, and he sought to address these in a section titled “Directions for Singing”: “As regards *tempo*, most of the tunes are in 2–4 time, and in most of these

♪ = 100..." (Allen 1867, p. xliv). The matter of what the songs were about barely registers in the introduction. The irony of someone such as himself singing (in dialect, no less) "Nobody knows de trouble I've had/Nobody knows but Jesus" registers not at all.

The ambivalences cannot be minimized. Yet, nor should it be underestimated how transformative upon notions of American culture the transcription of the spirituals would turn out to be. Writing in 1925, James Weldon Johnson could call the spirituals "America's only folk music and, up to this time, the finest distinctive artistic contribution she has to offer the world" (Johnson 1925, p. 13).⁷ In so saying, he was paraphrasing W.E.B. Du Bois, who had written in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that the spirituals represented "not simply...the sole American music, but...the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas" (Du Bois 1903, p. 251). In addition, in so saying, Du Bois was borrowing from Antonín Dvořák, who in 1895 had imagined "negro melodies" the sources of a "truly national music": "the so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water..." (Dvořák 1895, p. 432). The spirituals had been circulating in print and parlor as well as on stage for almost 30 years by the time Dvořák would see in them signs of a national rather than strictly racial genius. They would circulate another 30 before Johnson would claim them as "America's only folk music". The idea was not exactly old by 1925, but nor was it new; it had in a sense been developing since at least 1867, when Higginson had beheld in them a form of heritage analogous to Scott's "historical and romantic ballads" and Allen, Ware, and McKim had titled their compilation *Slave Songs of the United States*. Just after he reformulates them as "the sole American music", in fact, Du Bois—like Johnson after him—gives credit to the spirituals' transcribers: "Thomas Wentworth Higginson hastened to tell of these songs, and Miss McKim and others urged upon the world their rare beauty" (Du Bois 1903, p. 252).

How did this happen? How did what James Miller McKim term "negro songs" and Higginson "negro spirituals" become "slave songs of the United States" and eventually "American negro spirituals", Johnson's terminology simultaneously racializing and nationalizing the music? One answer is that the songs became better known. In addition to the work of such second-generation collectors as Harry T. Burleigh and John Wesley Work, African Americans both, as well as musicologist Henry Edward Krehbiel, there were the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who, in Du Bois's words, "sang the slave songs so deeply into the world's heart that it can never wholly forget them again" (Du Bois 1903, p. 252). All worked to transmit the spirituals more widely than they had been during the 1860s.⁸

Yet, the broadcasting of the spirituals does not quite explain their nationalization. How the spirituals became American—how it became possible for someone such as Du Bois to fathom them "the sole American music"—required a transformation also of what was understood to be meant by "America". It necessitated a recalibration of language, a revision of what such words as "American", "negro", and even "music" implied.⁹ In addition, while the early transcribers of the spirituals did not say, in so many words, that they had discovered "American music", they did do something similarly important and unprecedented: they admitted that they possessed no language to describe what they were hearing, that they could admire but not account for, in their own terminology, an African American art form. They conceded even that their systems of musical notation, which could reproduce the most complicated strains of European concert music, were not up to the task of recording Black song. Hence the statement with which Lucy McKim begins her article: "It is difficult to express the entire character of these negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs" (L. McKim 1862, p. 264). Hence also Allen's assertion that "[t]he best that we can do...with paper and types, or even with voices, will convey but a faint shadow of the original", an observation that curiously expresses a sonic incompleteness via a visual metaphor, a "shadow". Radano has observed that the early transcribers "seemed endlessly fascinated by the impossibility of their task". He also argues that what defied or exceeded transcription was reified as racial difference: "As a formation of Western discourse, these sounds-beyond-texts were...positioned within racialist frames". Radano allows that this semiotic "beyond" would eventually—and ironically—provide African Americans a way

of laying claim to a powerful historical consciousness, “a realm of awareness that had been denied to them as slaves” (Radano 2003, pp. 186–88). Yet, it is also possible that the necessity of having to gesture in its direction, toward some “shadowy” space where the reverberations of Black song might better be heard and felt, entailed consequences for White writers and readers, too.

It was not customary, after all, for White writers in the nineteenth century, when writing about Black folk life in the South, to express diffidence. They were not in the habit of confronting thereby the limits of their own culture or conveying doubts about modes of representation that, for decades, had served as signs of superiority and implied a kind of mastery of a subject matter, even among abolitionists. They had tended to write more in the manner of Jefferson, describing, dismissing, or deferring discussion of a subject but doing so with perfect confidence (“In music they are more generally gifted than the whites . . . Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved”). The sudden confrontation with the spirituals during the 1860s occasioned a different kind of writing. Spaulding was able still to dismiss what he could not “write out” as evidence of the songs’ vestigial “barbari[sm]”. The others, though, were less sure that the problem resided in the music; they were not sure, in fact, that there was a problem at all. They wrote instead with a sense that they had something to learn, and from *them*: a “race” whose “musical genius” Allen could say “has been recognized for...many years” but remained unappreciated until now (Allen 1867, p. i).

Neither Allen nor his peers wrote explicitly that they hoped the songs they were preserving would be absorbed into and eventually radically reconfigure “American music”. Their efforts did make it possible for Du Bois, Johnson, and others to make the claim decades later. They led moreover to such reclamation projects as the one Alain Locke effected in 1925. In the lead essay in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Locke identified the emergence of the spirituals as a transformative event in the history of black consciousness:

Recall how suddenly the Negro spirituals revealed themselves; suppressed for generations under the stereotypes of Wesleyan hymn harmony, secretive, half-ashamed, until the courage of being natural brought them out—and behold, there was folk-music. Similarly the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority...[W]e are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. (Locke 1925, p. 4)

Last, the discovery of the spirituals in print led decades later to the sounding of new modes of national belonging, sometimes with musical inflection. Writing in 1924, the year before Locke’s *The New Negro* and Johnson’s first *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, Langston Hughes adopted the voice of a Black folk subject sent “to eat in the kitchen/When company comes”, yet the speaker of Hughes’ poem refuses to be excluded from the national imaginary: “I, too, sing America” (Hughes 1994, p. 46). What the Civil War-era transcribers of the spirituals thought they were recording was the music of others. What it turned out they had discovered were sounds that would eventually transform American concepts of the self.

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Notes

- 1 The Fisk Jubilee Singers would become popularizers of spirituals during the decade after their initial transcription, beginning with the Singers' first tour in 1871–1872. Their repertoire would include some of the spirituals recorded during the 1860s, and spirituals would eventually become the form of music for which the group was best known. This was not immediately the case, however. One member observed that the group initially preferred “to sing the more difficult music” and “seemed almost to regard” spirituals “as signs of their former disgrace”, confirming what Johnson would write decades later. White audiences' enthusiasm toward the spirituals led the Singers to showcase them, and according to one member of the group, by 1872 “a program of nineteen numbers, only two or three of which were slave songs, was inverted”. See Anderson, “*Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus*” (Anderson 2010, pp. 39, 41). See also chapter 10 of Andrew Ward (2000)'s *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, which discusses the Singers' adoption of the spirituals; and Sandra Jean Graham (2018)'s *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry*, which glosses the texts discussed in this article before turning its attention to the Singers and their impact on U.S. culture.
- 2 An arrangement of the spiritual was included in *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*. The words of all of the spirituals in the volume are rendered in dialect, an editorial decision that Johnson likens to Paul Laurence Dunbar's use of dialect in his poetry (Johnson 1925, p. 44).
- 3 Though it does not comment extensively on music, John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* does explore intersubjectivity and how particular white abolitionists had to “learn to view the world as if they were black” in order to become proponents of radical change (Stauffer 2002, p. 1).
- 4 Another northerner who joined the Port Royal Experiment in 1862 was Charlotte Forten (1864), an African American teacher who published records of some of her experiences in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1864. Forten's commentary on the music she heard was not quite as extensive as that of other writers, yet she did make note of a “sweet, strange, and solemn” song sung by boatmen upon her arrival, and she set down the words of versions of “Go Down in de Lonesome Valley”, “Roll, Jordan, Roll”, “Blow, Gabriel”, and other songs, making her among the original transcribers of the music.
- 5 “Leaves from an Officer's Journal” and “Negro Spirituals” would be collected along with several of Higginson's other Civil War-era writings and published as *Army Life in a Black Regiment* in 1869.
- 6 As Samuel Charters discusses in *Songs of Sorrow: Lucy McKim Garrison and Slave Songs of the United States*, the initial print run of *Slave Songs* may or may not have sold out. In a review in *The Freedman's Record*, Charlotte Forten (1864), indicated it had; she further said she had been informed that a second edition was on its way. But the collection's publisher, A. Simpson & Co., was known for medical publications, not music books, and the company's merger with another publishing house seems to have scuttled follow-up editions and limited the volume's cultural impact (Charters 2015, pp. 221–22). Several of its songs would nevertheless circulate, and a 1929 facsimile reprint would enhance the reputation of *Slave Songs* considerably.
- 7 Johnson had made a similar statement in his introduction to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, published three years earlier: “In the ‘spirituals,’ or slave songs, the Negro has given America not only its only folksongs, but a mass of noble music”. While the introduction largely discounts the idea of slave songs as verse (“it must be admitted that the lines themselves are often very trite”), it does recognize “flash[es] of real, primitive poetry”. Meanwhile the collection includes such poems as Paul Laurence Dunbar's “A Death Song” and Waverley Turner Carmichael's “Keep Me, Jesus, Keep Me”, both of which are evocative of the spiritual form and affirm Johnson's conviction that “Negro folksongs are a vast mine of material” for future poetic exploration (Johnson 1922, pp. xv, xvii–xviii).
- 8 Additional important collections include the multiple versions of *Cabin and Plantation Songs as Sung by Hampton Students* first collected and published by Thomas Fenner (1877) in 1874 and expanded in later editions. Nathaniel Dett (1927)'s *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro, as Sung at Hampton Institute* (1909) grew out of Fenner's collection; subsequent versions of it added to the store of available spirituals. Also important were the different versions of *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; With Their Songs* compiled and published by Gustavus D. Pike, J.B.T. Marsh (1897), and (later) Frederick J. Loudin between 1875 and the early twentieth century.
- 9 Here I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer who directed me toward Albert Murray's *The Omni-Americans* (1970) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s foreword to the fiftieth anniversary edition of the book. Murray wrote primarily about the blues, but as Gates notes in his foreword, Murray's concept of the music rested on simultaneity: “Murray argued that ‘American’ and ‘black American’ culture were mutually constitutive. There was no so-called American culture without the Negro American formal element and content in its marvelous blend, and no black American culture without its white American influences and forms” (Gates [1970] 2020, p. xiv).

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