

## **“Jes Go Back to de Fiel a Singin”<sup>1</sup>: The Spiritual as a Vehicle of Resistance in the Antebellum South**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the contributions of spirituals—culturally black, southern, religious songs recognized at the turn of the nineteenth century—as vehicles of emotional resistance for those enslaved in the antebellum South. Spirituals, through their charged language, religious overtones, and outlook toward life without/after slavery, attested to the humanity of the enslaved peoples who sang them. These songs allowed people to display desire, happiness, anguish, and opposition, despite their bodies and souls being commodified by dominant society. Singing thus represented the enslaved African’s claim to a certain degree of agency in the midst of bondage. Born out of suffering, spirituals emphasized the harsh realities of slavery while challenging its attempts to police matters of the mind and spirit. By consulting relevant literature, interpreting documented antebellum spirituals, and analyzing testimonies from the Federal Writers’ Project, this article will detail the ways in which songs negotiated the repression of enslaved people’s identity and emotions, making singing a political act of resistance.

Keywords: slavery, freedom, spirituals, song, resistance, antebellum South

### **Introduction**

The generations of African-descended peoples subjected to the brutalities of North American chattel slavery have historically rejected the conditions of their oppression. Enslaved communities throughout the American South employed both large-scale demonstrations and everyday disruptions to undermine an institution that thrived on the ownership, control, and abuse of the black body. In attempting to understand the function and impact of slave resistance, it is important to acknowledge that the relationship between the oppressed and his/her oppression is necessarily complex, as there are both physical and psychological processes that bind individuals to the conditions under which they exist. Slavery was “imposed and maintained by violence” (Berlin 2004, 46), and the ability to impose on the minds and hearts of enslaved people was an essential mechanism of control. Understanding this to be true begs consideration of how mental and emotional dissent can function as tools for subversion, working alongside and underlying physical acts such as uprisings, slowdowns, and escapes. This article will detail the contributions of slave spirituals—culturally black, southern, religious songs recognized at the

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Fannie Moore, 21 September 1937, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 127–37, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112/>.

turn of the nineteenth century—as vehicles of emotional resistance for those enslaved in the American South between 1700 and 1900.

Those who maintained slavery and white supremacy attempted to strip enslaved Africans of their identities, forcing them to live as property and steering them away from conceptions of their own innocence, a connection to a Christian God, and a right to freedom. Spirituals, through their charged language, religious overtones, and outlook toward life without/after slavery, attested to the humanity of the enslaved peoples who sang them. The songs allowed people to display desire, happiness, anguish, and opposition, despite dominant society’s attempts to commodify their bodies and souls. Singing thus represented the enslaved African’s claim to a certain degree of agency in the midst of bondage. Born out of suffering, spirituals emphasized the harsh realities of slavery while challenging its attempts to police matters of the mind and spirit. In a society that “forcibly repressed even the most modest acts of disobedience,” songs allowed the enslaved to construct “a social space in which discontent could be articulated, or the social hierarchy blurred” (Barker 2015, 370). It was a mechanism through which enslaved individuals “could be relatively candid in a society that rarely afforded them that privilege” (Barker 2015, 370). By consulting relevant literature, interpreting documented spirituals, and analyzing testimonies from the Federal Writers’ Project, this article will detail the ways in which these songs enabled enslaved people to negotiate the repression of their identity and emotions, making singing a political act of resistance.

### **Limitations**

It is important to consider the inherent complexities and limitations of this analysis, as there are several elements of song and singing that make analyzing them an imperfect exercise. Due to limited information, this article will not consider how the elements of song in the colonies pre-nineteenth century may have informed the makeup or messages of the spirituals.

Studying songs from the pre-American Civil War era is particularly difficult for reasons rooted in the very nature of slavery in North America. To begin, the earliest songs were sung in the enslaved peoples’ native African tongues, making it difficult for those who did not speak or understand the language to study the lyrics of the songs (Fisher 1953, 103). Moreover, slave traders consolidated Africans of dissimilar ethnolinguistic origins to discourage communication and dissent after their arrival in the colonies. This may have curbed the spread and impact of these songs, as there was initially no shared language through which the enslaved people could understand and share them.

Enslaved people’s eventual adoption of the master’s English allowed researchers to document and interpret spirituals, several of which will be presented in this piece. Even still, one cannot draw definitively accurate conclusions about intended meanings in the language used. The people’s “limited exposure and lack of familiarity” with the English language (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 382) must be considered in attempts to dissect words, phrases, and connotations. Neither researchers of the period nor those of today can be completely confident in their interpretations.

Furthermore, the dynamics of master-slave/white-black relations of the period warrant a degree of caution in interpreting songs. Collectors also had limitations in the area of literacy (Fisher 1953, 112). The combination of the language limitations of the enslaved persons and those of the antebellum collector may have led to misquotes or misunderstanding throughout the informing process, and thus may impact dialogue around the topic today. Moreover, although both collectors and informants spoke a variation of English, often collectors were uninformed

about the everyday life experiences of the enslaved and thus may not have been able to fully articulate the significance of certain words or practices. This was the case for the abolitionist authors who wrote the first and most influential collection of spirituals, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867). Although collectors made efforts to win the confidence of their informants, the default culture of distrust between the white master and African-descended enslaved person could have led to the exchange of deceptive or incomplete information (Fisher 1953, 89). Given that the singing of spirituals was naturally expressive and the lyrics subversive, it may have been especially difficult for collectors to gather accurate renditions of these songs—particularly those that directly critiqued the dominant white supremacist culture or inspired radical thoughts and actions.

Lastly, the prosperity of the slave market, instances of truancy/escape, family relocations, and progression of time caused enslaved people, along with their culture and knowledge, to span many regions. Many antebellum spirituals traveled through word of mouth and across various localities before their lyrics could be documented and their meanings decoded. Spirituals may also have been altered over time, either intentionally or accidentally, and thus the ways that researchers have come to understand them may be flawed. The issue of geographical movement also contributes to the difficulty of revealing the precise origins of songs and their time of creation, which informs interpretations of their functions and meanings—for the singers and in the greater social sphere.

Despite the inherent limitations of this work, the songs that collectors and scholars have been able to analyze over the past four centuries offer meaningful insights into the everyday lives and expressions of those who experienced chattel slavery. In fact, many of these limitations underscore this article’s argument that songs and singing emphasized the humanity and autonomy of enslaved people, in that they constructed for themselves an art form that could not easily be recorded or understood by dominant society, then or now.

### **Freedom, Agency, and Expression**

To fully engage with the argument presented here, one must understand how this article utilizes the word “freedom” in the context of bondage. Freedom, or “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint” (Oxforddictionaries.com 2020), must be considered broadly. One can be free from someone or something, tangible or otherwise. This article will sometimes refer to “freedom” in its literal sense, as the “absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or acting” (Merriam-Webster.com 2020), or as “liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another” (Merriam-Webster.com 2020). However, in understanding singing *as* freedom, one must also contextualize the definition within the constraints of enslavement, looking deeper than liberation or emancipation. Consider one’s freedom to think, freedom to express, freedom to imagine, freedom to hope, and, specific to this case, the freedom to believe in or work toward his/her own freedom (whether through the laws of the state, escape, or death). This article does not aim to re-imagine the enslaved person as free, as that would be an irresponsible projection, but rather it urges the recognition of singing as many sorts of freedoms for the un-free. Singing can be emotionally freeing or even be a gateway to literal freedom. Spirituals emphasized the people’s *consciousness* of freedom, which alone demonstrates a certain degree of agency, as it functions in direct opposition to the impositions of the master.

This perspective is grounded in what American feminist historian Stephanie Camp calls “the slave’s third body: a thing to be claimed and enjoyed, a site of pleasure and resistance...pride,

and self-expression” (2006, 67–68). The third body was a site of tension between the master and enslaved person, as one sought to destroy it and the other to maintain it. Camp contextualizes this body as a political entity and asserts that the people’s enjoyment of themselves through illicit gatherings and sensual pleasures, such as singing and dancing, was just as “politically loaded” as the master’s violence and exploitation. The politics of pleasure functioned “in opposition to slavery’s symbolic systems and economic imperatives” (Camp 2006, 68), establishing the mental and emotional release achieved through singing as a subversive act. The enslaved person’s third body, which reveled in the free expression of song, allowed him/her to re-contextualize the grief of today and anticipate a better tomorrow.

It is important to note that associating singing with “a site of pleasure” does not insist that singing was indicative of the person’s contentment in bondage, for the connection is much more complex. Previous scholars have helped to articulate this complexity, juxtaposing the pleasures of expression and resistance with the suffering and heartache suggested by the very need for that expression and resistance. Song was believed to have “raised low spirits, passed the time during tedious tasks...heightened group feeling, and afforded psychological escape from poor conditions” (Lippard and Gallagher 2014, 1150). This speaks to the positive impact of song, but does not suggest that singing reflected the enslaved person’s happiness. Authors of *Slave Songs of the United States* argue that spirituals were “the embodiment of the mental and physical anguish of a bruised race—the safety valve of their complaining and revolt against oppression” (Charters 2015, 285). Sirinides argues that “spirituals speak of suffering, but without bitterness; they speak of hope for a better life to come (1997, 3). While spirituals helped emphasize the brutalities of slavery, they offered escape from its realities.

African American abolitionist, writer, and former enslaved person Frederick Douglass also helped to articulate the complexity of slave spirituals in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Douglass writes that these songs “breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish” (1845, 19). To those who interpret slave songs as evidence of the people’s contentment in bondage, Douglass explains that the songs “represent the sorrows of [the enslaved person’s] heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears” (1845, 20). Thus, people who sang were not joyous under the constraints of bondage, but rather their singing was positive insofar as it allowed them to vocalize their pain. As tears indicate the presence of sorrow while also having the capacity to assuage the crier, slave spirituals highlighted the sorrow of the people while also functioning as a vehicle of comfort.

## Religious Origins

Spirituals spread throughout the American South from the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries as enslaved people slowly adopted Christianity (Gomez 1998, 263). Distinct from the typical European Christian worship of earlier times, worship during the “revival” era featured antislavery content and undertones of various traditional African religious practices. Michael Gomez writes that the “revivalist experience” allowed people to “respond to the preaching of the gospel in a fashion that was entirely consistent with their roots in indigenous African religion” (1998, 252). The “emotionalism” that arose in the church post-Great Awakening was described as a “very African response to the divine” (Gomez 1998, 253). Worship was marked by dancing, jerking, singing, and shouting. Enslaved people also brought the ring shout, which was used during harvest festivals and ancestor worship in West and West-Central Africa, to their ceremonies in the American South (Gomez 1998, 226). For the ring shout, they would gather in the center of their worship space and shuffle around in a circle, jerking their bodies (Allen,

Garrison, and Ware 1867, xiv). Sometimes they would move silently, but they would most often “stand at the side of the room...singing the body of the song and clapping their hands together or on the knees” (Allen, Garrison, and Ware 1867, xiv). Naturally, the songs born out of these moments contained meaningful religious messages and were filled with emotional language.

Throughout the 1790s, white Christians began to reject the antislavery ideals of the revival “and the rural African-based community was denied further access into formal and officially recognized Christendom” (Allen, Garrison, and Ware 1867, 255). Masters attempted to convince enslaved individuals that their places in heaven were dependent upon their obedience to their masters on Earth (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 384). However, James Cone writes that people “rejected white distortions of the gospel” (1991, 33) and believed that God would “vindicate the suffering of the righteous blacks and punish the unrighteous whites for their wrongdoings” (1999, 19). The disconnect between the master’s use of the Bible to justify the existence and maintenance of slavery and many enslaved people’s use of the Bible to reject the institution created tensions that inspired resistance. The uprisings of Denmark Vessey in 1822 and Nat Turner in 1831 are prominent examples of enslaved people using their own interpretations of the Bible to justify their rejection of and uprising against slavery. In response to these shifts, masters forbade enslaved individuals the right to assemble without the surveillance of whites (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 257).

These attempts to police the religious practices of the enslaved community led to the creation of an invisible black church, characterized by its placement “in the woods and thickets and other clandestine places of the southern countryside” (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 263). Those who wished to pray and sing without the surveillance of the master had to host meetings in covert locations. Enslaved worshipers also established a tradition of “turning down the pot,” where they placed pots in the center of their gatherings to prevent the masters from hearing their voices. Scholars have explored the possibility of the iron pot having a spiritual significance, being rooted in African cultural practices, but this article references the iron pot strictly for its functional significance in muffling the echoes of worship. Harriet Cheatam, born in 1843 and enslaved in Gallatin, Tennessee, and interviewed in 1941, said that people would meet in their “quarters...[and they] would take the pots, turn them down, put something under them” so that their “voices would not go out and [they] could sing and pray to [their] heart’s desire.”<sup>2</sup> Former enslaved woman Chana Littlejohn said, “when we sang we turned down de washpots an’ tubs in de doors, so dey would take up de noise so de white folks could not hear us.”<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon highlights the power of religious expression and importance of singing for this community, lending support to the idea of singing as freedom in two ways. First, enslaved people exercised a certain degree of agency simply by defying the master’s orders and singing out of their own desire. Second, they exercised freedom by clinging to sentiments that rejected the teachings of a white supremacist society. Although the official black church could easily be surveilled and marginalized, the invisible black church and “the less formal aspects of spirituality (that which can be found in music) could not” (Barker 2015, 369). Singing created “a space in which the hegemony of the White ruling class could be subverted, adapted, and resisted” (Barker 2015,

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, 1937, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 5, Indiana, 1941, p. 54, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.050/?sp=3>.

<sup>3</sup> Interview by T. Pat Matthews, 26 June 1937, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 56, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>.

363). It was part of a process through which the enslaved could reclaim their body and mind for themselves in a society that only recognized them as property.

### Style and Content of Spirituals

The slave spiritual was distinct from European-style psalms and hymns in both style and content, and many of its components were derived from traditional African music (Sirinides 1997, 4). Traditional singing of the spirituals is described as “continuums of various group performances,” where, if heard separately, “might have seemed somewhat unmusical,” but that together produced “a bewitching effect” (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 382). In the absence of musical instruments, sways, tapping, and clapping helped people to maintain the rhythm (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 382).

The singers used blue notes, glissandos, growls, and polyrhythms, which are all heavily employed in African song. The traditional call-and-response pattern found predominately in African music (Sirinides 1997, 6) features the overlapping of leader and chorus, where the chorus repeats the words of the leader and maintains the rhythm and the leader subsequently uses ad-libs to decorate the song as s/he chooses (Tracy 1999, 23). Johnson and Johnson hold that the leaders of the groups that sang spirituals had to possess “a gift of melody...a strong voice, and a good memory” to lead members of the chorus in song (1925, 54).

Prominent literature of the nineteenth century helped articulate the broader society’s perception of the unique elements of slave spirituals and singing. The authors of *Slave Songs of the United States* suggested that black people had “a peculiar quality that nothing [could] imitate; and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper” (Allen, Garrison, and Ware 1867, iv). In *Journal of a Residence of a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*, notable white, British actress and author Frances Anne Kemble writes of the people’s high and unified voices, and the “admirable time and true accent with which their responses are made.” She also refers to slave singing as having “little skillful adaptation and instrumentation,” and as “barbaric” and “semi-savage” (Kemble 1961, 218). Other writers have pointed to “the odd turns made in the throat, and the curious rhythmic effect” of the songs (Allen, Garrison, and Ware 1867, xi). Frederick Douglass called the tones “loud, long, and deep” and was fascinated by the choruses of words that many would call “unmeaning jargon,” but that were full of meaning to those who sang them (1845, 19). The ways in which both past and present-day writers describe this singing emphasizes its importance as a vehicle of resistance, as it is expressive and cannot easily be understood by those outside of the communities to which it belongs.

### Analysis of Spiritual Lyrics

Spirituals highlighted enslaved persons’ longing for freedom, both within the context of legal emancipation and spiritual transcendence. They were critiques of social conditions, a “testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains” (Barker 2015, 26). A number of songs highlight the belief that bondage is in direct conflict with the teachings of the Bible (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 396). Many highlight Jesus’s capacity for protection and a yearning for a place in heaven after death. In some spirituals, the desire to go to heaven is directly related to one’s discontent with his/her pain and suffering on Earth.

“My Body Rock Long Fever,” said to be one of the most widely sung of all African hymns, speaks of an enslaved individual with a pain-ridden, feverish body (Allen, Garrison, and Ware

1867, 32). The speaker urges his brother and sister to be true believers, presumably in the Lord and in their destiny. S/he expresses his/her “wish” to be in the “kingdom” sitting alongside the Lord, who will offer comfort. With “de help ob de Lord,” the speaker can “rise up again”—physically into heaven and symbolically past the anguish of his/her current condition.

Wai’, my brudder, better true believer,  
 Better true be long time get over crosses;  
 Wai’, my sister, better true believe,  
 An’ ‘e get up to heaven at last.

O my body’s racked wid de feveer,  
 My head rac’d wid de pain I hab,  
 I wish I was in de kingdoom,  
 A-settin’ on de side ob de Lord.

By de help ob de Lord we rise again,  
 O de Lord he comfort de sinner;  
 By de help ob de Lord we rise up again,  
 An’ we’ll get to heaven at last.

“Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” is a spiritual that was created during the slavery era, but not published until 1867 (BalladofAmerica.org). In the version of the song presented here, the speaker addresses the Lord, directly discussing his/her troubles and sorrow.

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve been through  
 Nobody knows my sorrow  
 Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen  
 Glory hallelujah!  
 Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down  
 Oh, yes, Lord  
 Sometimes I’m almost to the ground  
 Oh, yes, Lord  
 Although you see me going ’long so  
 Oh, yes, Lord  
 I have my trials here below  
 Oh, yes, Lord  
 If you get there before I do  
 Oh, yes, Lord  
 Tell all-a my friends I’m coming to Heaven!  
 Oh, yes, Lord

The speaker admits that, despite continuing forward each day or “going ’long so,” s/he faces trials that sometimes hurt his/her spirit. Nonetheless, the speaker makes clear his/her belief that heaven is his/her fate. The tone with which the speaker says “tell all-a my friends I’m coming to Heaven” is unclear. However, it seems as though heaven—and necessarily, death—is something

the speaker looks forward to as a direct response to his/her troubles on Earth. Heaven is the escape from the everyday ills of slavery.

Songs such as “Not Weary Yet” (Allen, Garrison, and Ware 1867, 12) and “Steal Away to Jesus” (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 390) treat heaven as a destination that is inextricably linked to emancipation in an even more direct way. In “Not Weary Yet,” the speaker makes the connection between life on the plantation and his/her belonging in heaven.

O me no weary yet,  
 O me no weary yet  
 I Have a witness in my heart,  
 O me no weary yet.  
 Since I been in de field to fight.  
 I have a heaven to maintain.  
 De bond of faith are on my soul.  
 Ole Satan toss a ball at me.  
 Him tink de ball would hit my soul.  
 De ball for hell and I for heaven.

The speaker proclaims that s/he is not yet weary from whatever hardships s/he may be experiencing on Earth. The lines “since I been in de field to fight/I have a heaven to maintain/de bond of faith are on my soul” suggest that s/he refuses to let life get him/her down because s/he has faith in the Lord and in his/her destiny. The song mentions Satan’s unsuccessful attempt to “toss a ball” at and harm his/her soul. The ball is “for hell” while s/he is “for heaven,” and therefore the ball is incapable of harming him/her because his/her faith in God is a protection. “I have been in the field to fight” potentially provides a dual meaning—as a literal reference to cotton fields, and a symbolic reference to the mental and emotional battleground where the enslaved individual has conquered the everyday brutalities of slavery. With this interpretation, one can see how God is regarded as a provider of both freedoms. The speaker seems to look toward heaven as something rightfully owed to him/her for his/her arduous life in bondage and due to a belief in Christ. S/he is not made unbearably weary by his/her condition yet because s/he knows that there is a place in heaven waiting for him/her.

In “Steal Away Jesus,” (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 390), the speaker claims that the Lord calls upon him/her, through the thunder and by the trumpets in his/her soul, to leave.

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!  
 Steal away, steal away home, I ain’t got long to stay here.  
 My Lord he calls me. He calls me by the thunder.  
 The trumpets sound within my soul.  
 I ain’t got long to stay here

This spiritual is believed to have a double meaning. It uses Jesus’s name to “mask an open and obvious invitation to the slaves to steal away to freedom” (Lawrence-McIntyre 1987, 390). Here, an escape to Jesus in heaven is conflated with an escape from bondage. The subsequent call to “steal away home” illustrates heaven as home and death as a return home. This importantly highlights the speaker’s belief in his/her ultimate belonging in heaven, which directly rejects the notion that enslaved people are soulless property.



“My Father How Long,” collected in Florida, is also said to have a double meaning:

My father, how long,  
My father, how long,  
My father how long,  
Poor sinner suffer here?

And it won't be long,  
And it won't be long,  
And it won't be long,  
Poor sinner suffer here.

We'll soon be free  
De Lord will call us home.

We'll walk de miry road  
Where pleasure never dies.

We'll walk de golden streets  
Of de New Jerusalem.

My brudders do sing  
De praises of de Lord.

We'll fight for liberty  
When de Lord will call us home.

The collectors of *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867) write that their informant, “the little drummer boy,” explained that the line “de Lord will call us home” is symbolic (Allen, Garrison, and Ware 1867, 93). De Lord is code for “de *Yankees*,” who the enslaved people believed would mobilize to free them (Allen, Garrison, and Ware 1867, 93). There is a juxtaposition between the suffering that is “here” and “home...where pleasure never dies.” This song very clearly conflates freedom through emancipation and freedom in heaven.

Some songs played a direct role in leading enslaved people to freedom through their covert messages and directions. Spirituals that featured directions or warnings, sometimes referred to as map songs, helped people navigate the difficult and dangerous tasks associated with escape. Harriet Tubman (1820–1913) led individuals to freedom via the Underground Railroad between 1850 and 1860. According to the biography of American writer Sarah Hopkins Bradford, Tubman sang a number of songs before and during journeys to discreetly make her presence and intentions known (Bradford 1869; see also [harriet-tubman.org](http://harriet-tubman.org)). For example, spirituals such as “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” would indicate to enslaved individuals that the time to escape was approaching ([harriet-tubman.org](http://harriet-tubman.org)).

Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home.  
 I looked over Jordan and what did I see  
 Coming for to carry me home,  
 A band of angels coming after me,  
 Coming for to carry me home.  
 If you get there before I do,  
 Coming for to carry me home,  
 Tell all my friends that I’m coming, too.  
 Coming for to carry me home.

The “sweet chariot” referred to the Underground Railroad that would soon take the people to freedom, or otherwise “carry [the enslaved person] home.” The song is rooted in religion, as it references the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized, along with angels. “Follow the Drinking Gourd” similarly helped people escape to freedom, but is said to have provided much more detailed instructions ([followthedrinkinggourd.org](http://followthedrinkinggourd.org)).

When the Sun comes back  
 And the first quail calls  
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
 For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom  
 If you follow the Drinking Gourd.  
 The riverbank makes a very good road.  
 The dead trees will show you the way.  
 Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,  
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
 The river ends between two hills  
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
 There’s another river on the other side  
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
 When the great big river meets the little river

“Follow the Drinking Gourd” offered directions and advice to those escaping to the North from Mobile, Alabama. Drinking gourds were used by enslaved people as water dippers and are code for the Big Dipper, which points to Polaris, or “The North Star.” “The dead trees will show you the way” refers to the fact that in the northern hemisphere, moss grows on the north side of the trees and can thus be used to point travelers in the right direction in the absence of the North Star.

### **Slave Narratives from The Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938**

*Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from The Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938* contains over 2,300 personal accounts of former enslaved persons in the United States. In 1941, a set of the transcripts was put onto microfilm, and in 2000, the Library of Congress digitized them and made them accessible online. This section of the article utilizes parts 1 and 2 of Volume 11 of the project, which contain interview transcripts with former enslaved individuals from North Carolina. In these interviews, several men and women spoke of their relationship to and

experiences with spirituals on the plantation, and their responses highlight the roles of spirituals in resistance.

During an interview on May 27, 1937, Clay Bobbit of Raleigh, North Carolina, stated that he and the other individuals “ain’t had no pleasures ’less [we] runs away to habe ’em. Even when [we] sings we had ter turn down a pot in front of de do’ ter ketch de noise.”<sup>4</sup> In this account, Bobbit’s use of the word “even” suggests that singing was one of the few pleasures they enjoyed. His account, like many others, refers to the aforementioned process of “turning down the pot,” where an iron pot would be turned upside down in the middle of a room to drown out the singing and keep their activities hidden from the master.

Another individual interviewed, Lizza Bakers, stated that enslaved blacks turned down the pots to kill the sounds of singing, but “once [the master] heard us, nex’ mornin’ dey took us and tore our backs to pieces.” The master would say “Are you free? What were you singing about freedom?”<sup>5</sup> Her testimony, like Bobbit’s, emphasizes that singing was not permissible in the presence of white society. Furthermore, her response attests to the centrality of “freedom” in many of the spirituals. The use of violence as punishment for singing indicates the extent to which the master felt threatened by it. Singing of freedom challenged white supremacist culture and its teachings, supporting the claim that singing was a meaningful demonstration of slave resistance.

W. L. Bost, an interviewee from Asheville, North Carolina, provided further insight into the roles of religion, education, singing, and freedom in his community. He asserted that the “white folks feared for niggers to get any religion and education, but I reckon somethin’ inside jes told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter.”<sup>6</sup> This attests to the aforementioned fact that the white population was opposed to enslaved persons practicing religion freely and developing their own relationship with God. Bost’s connection to God and his belief in a positive destiny are thus acts of subversion. While he does not specifically mention song here, his association of God with a “better place hereafter,” presumably heaven, highlights the connection between freedom and the religious expression he projects through spirituals. Bost went on in his interview to recount the times when he and others gathered in the woods behind a barn on the plantation, and how his mother “sing an’ pray to the Lord to deliver us out o’ slavery.” The song went something like:

we camp a while in the wilderness, in the wilderness, in the wilderness  
we camp a while in the wilderness, where the Lord makes me happy  
And then I’m goin home

In this song, the wilderness is painted as a place of comfort and happiness, and this happiness is related to the workings of the Lord. Without any further context, one cannot be sure of what exactly the singer means by “goin home.” It is possible that this simply refers to the travel back

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<sup>4</sup> Interview by Mary A. Hicks, 27 May 1937, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 119, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>.

<sup>5</sup> Interview by Ma Patt Matthews, 26 June 1937, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 58, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>.

<sup>6</sup> Interview by Marjorie Jones, 27 September 1937, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2, Jackson-Yellerday, 1936, p. 139, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>.

home after being out in the woods, but the song’s mention of the Lord introduces the possibility of home being heaven.

The last and perhaps most intriguing mention of song in the North Carolina Slave Narratives is from Fannie Moore of Asheville, North Carolina. Moore recounts in her interview how the master hated Moore’s mother because she fought him after he beat her children. One day, while in the field, Moore’s mother “stat’t singin’ an’ a shoutin’, an’ a whoopin’ an’ a hollowin.” When her master came and threatened to get the overseer to “cowhide [her] ole black back,” she replied, “De Lawd done told me I’s saved....I ain’t gwine grieve no more. No matter how much yo’ all done beat me an’ my chillun de Lawd will show me de way. An’ someday we nevah be slaves.” She gets whipped across the back for her response, but she does not yell. She “jes go back to de fiel a singin.”<sup>7</sup> Although an outsider cannot fully project meaning onto Moore’s internal processes, this story draws an important connection between singing and freedom. Drawing again from Camp’s theory of the third body, Moore’s mother’s enjoyment of the sensual pleasure of making sound is an act of resistance. She began to sing when she became overtaken by the realization that God would someday free her and her children from bondage. After being whipped, she did not cry, but sang instead. While more abstract than previous examples, Moore’s story makes a meaningful connection between freedom and song.

## Conclusion

The institution of slavery was dependent upon control of human beings. Generations of families and businesses taking part in slavery could only profit from the system insofar as the enslaved person was repressed physically, mentally, and emotionally. The plantocracy rejected all expressions of free movement, sound, and thought because they had the potential to destabilize the politics of containment on which white supremacy thrived. This article has attempted to articulate the ways in which slave spirituals reflected and maintained people’s consciousness of freedom, despite the notion and practice being forbidden by the master. Any song that allowed the enslaved individual to express pain, suffering, loss, longing, joy, and an outlook toward freedom helped to free the un-free. In speaking of singing spirituals as an enslaved person’s exercise of freedom or autonomy, this article does not attempt to discern how the enslaved internally processed their experiences, but rather it aims to show how the very nature of free expression was subversive in itself and undermined the institution.

Although this article has centered the stories and expressions of those who experienced African-descended chattel slavery, its foundational ideas can be useful for further research on the intersections of race, religion, surveillance, and song. Grounded in the main arguments of this work is the idea that the resistance of marginalized bodies has many different faces. Black people have a long and rich history of creating spaces of counterculture where they can express themselves freely, much like the ones enslaved people created for themselves. The selected testimonies from the Federal Writers’ Project tell singular stories of surveillance and subversion that can be applied to black American culture on a larger scale and well past the Civil War era.

As state-sanctioned slavery and racialized violence takes a different shape and mechanisms of surveillance become more modernized and expansive, it is worth considering that the tradition of “turning down the pot” is very much still metaphorically alive in marginalized communities

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<sup>7</sup> Interview by Marjorie Jones, 21 September 1937, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936, p. 127, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>.

today. This research also begs consideration of how black people in the United States, many of whom are descendants of those who turned down the pots on their masters’ plantations, utilize music and singing as a means of expression. One question to explore is whether there exists a genre of black music today that plays a role similar to that of the spiritual in communities of enslaved persons in the past. Contemporary scholarship can benefit from further discussions on black expression as a vehicle of black resistance. The argument presented in this article is one small, foundational piece of that conversation.

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