The Legacy of Freedom in the African-American Spiritual

By Heather Ross

"I looks like gwine to heaven," said the woman; "an't thar where white folks is gwine? S'pose they'd have me thar? I'd rather go to torment, and get away from Mas'r and Missis." So speaks Prue in chapter 18 of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Unlike Prue, many other enslaved people considered heaven a place of hope and ultimate freedom, unhindered by the confines of slavery and the continual servitude to white masters, as the exploited Prue imagined. In their spirituals, the Africans illustrate the concept that freedom is possible; accordingly, these songs present a strong belief in a future hope, rooted in the expectation provided by Christ's resurrection (Matthews).

The confines of slavery generally failed to remove the enslaved people's undying longing for a day of deliverance. Regardless of time and place, the shackled have corporately dreamed, wished, and imagined this tantalizing fancy. In his famous essay on freedom, former POW James Stockdale writes:

> To those of us who have served time in Communist jails, freedom has a delicious, tangible meaning. It has become something we can figuratively reach out and touch. . . . my love of freedom is not just a reaction to cruelty; my appreciation of its preciousness stems from a first-hand understanding of its rarity.

The case was no different for thousands of African-American slaves, who, while freedom remained unrealized by them for centuries, their own expression—to say what could not be said by singing it—provided for them a unique and often unsuspecting forum for communication of ideals and practical directions with others that shared their

same plight. That desire for experiential freedom, for which so many enslaved people longed, became tangible as they vocalized their ideals in song, contributing to others' journey somewhere, from some plantation not too distant, whose feet were plodding the path toward that most treasured goal.

Certain spirituals, such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," couched messages of freedom within their texts as the Africans either imagined or developed specific means of escape (Gates and McKay 9). In singing of freedom, the enslaved fostered a sense of community shared by their group members, often in the form of call and response, as in "Go Down, Moses" (Matthews). According to the research of Sterling A. Brown, numerous plantation owners disallowed the singing of this particular spiritual as a result of its flagrant message of deliverance (Gates and McKay 12) as can be ascertained by frequent repetition of the phrase, "Let my people go!"

When groups of slaves gathered, certain spirituals held particular significance. The singing of "Wade in the Water" might signal that a plantation owner somewhere had discovered one or more of his slaves missing. Singing this specific melody would cue slaves on nearby plantations to pass the message that a journey through the water would assist the escapee in fleeing from the bloodhounds that had been sent for him. At other times, "Deep River" was sung when an escape meeting was planned (Pershey 25). Some spirituals, as "Oh Freedom," were outlawed due to their suggestive message concerning possible revolt or rebellion (Matthews). Yet others, including "Steal Away to Jesus," were used to prompt slaves toward eventual freedom as they journeyed on the underground railroad (Gates and McKay 14).

Though merely a fancy for most, this freedom expressed through the spirituals lives on, leaving an enduring legacy in musical genres as diverse as the classical master Dvorak's *New World Symphony* to popular music and blues, which have sometimes been termed "secular spirituals" (Pershey 27). A century following the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement would revive songs birthed in the throes of slavery to portray yet another struggle for that foundational message of human rights—all men are created equal. In that context, "Oh Freedom," once sung by slaves in the fields, served yet another generation of African-Americans as it provided a palpable mode of protest in the 1960s (Freeman, 2; Gates and McKay 44).

While many of the enslaved who sang of such hopeful fancies never experienced freedom themselves, the ideal of freedom actually shaped the legacy they left to future generations upon this American soil. None today can forget the slaves' plight when their ears encounter those noble expressions, textured with historical richness, in the spiritual.

Works Cited

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