Volume IV
Issue X
October
IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities
ISSN INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INTERNATIONAL CENTRE 2321-7065
Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Looking Back is Moving Forward:
The Legacy of Negro Spirituals in the Civil Rights Movement

Aisha Matthews
MA Candidate
Southern New Hampshire University
United States

Abstract: The following article explores the historical and cultural evolution of Negro Spirituals as they were revised for use in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Examining the Spirituals, "Wade in the Water" and "Oh, Freedom," this essay seeks to prove that while the legacy of slavery imbued in the Negro Spiritual did serve the purpose of reminding America of its unjust past, these songs took on new meaning in the Civil Rights Era and were put to use as a medium for communication, a salve for spiritual degradation, and above all else, a stepping stone off of which the movement intended to leap into a brighter future of equality for all. This essay challenges the claim that Negro Spirituals were too entrenched in the historical atrocities of the past to offer a revitalized message for the purposes of the CRM.

Keywords: Negro Spirituals; Civil Rights Movement; slavery; freedom singing

The freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement served numerous purposes. According to Kerran L. Sanger in his essay, "Functions of Freedom Singing in the Civil Rights Movement: The Activitsts' Implicit Rhetorical Theory," the primary functions of such songs were, namely, communication, expression of emotions, connection to spirituality, and transformative introspective power (Sanger 193). Each of these properties contributed something different to the overall success of the Civil Rights Movement, but it is clear from the testimonies of various activists that freedom singing was integral to the progression of the movement and both the individual and collective transformations that took place as a result of its actions. While some of these songs were spontaneous creations and others added new lyrics to familiar popular tunes, a great many freedom songs evolved from the Negro Spiritual tradition, dating back to slavery in the American South. Given the subject matter of the Civil Rights Movement (equality for African-Americans), it is unsurprising that songs of slavery offered a particularly relevant and powerful basis for new material. While the memory of the atrocities produced by slavery are painful at best, the freedom songs that emanated from Negro Spirituals attempted to capture the spirit of oppression and the history of black culture while simultaneously offering a new message of peaceful (and successful) resistance. An exploration of the Negro Spiritual "Wade in the Water," and the (barely) post-antebellum favorite, "Oh Freedom," will examine the historical evolution of songs originating in slavery to songs popularized in the civil rights era, and ultimately prove that while such songs carry with them the memory of a painful past, they ultimately express the depth of oppression in African-American history and recontextualize old narratives for more current purposes.

The Negro Spiritual originated on the boats of captivity, in the fields of the plantations, and in shabby little churches all across the American South as an outpouring of suffering, solidarity, and hope for a better future emanated from the thousands of black slaves on American soil. The Kwanzaa Guide Online argues that spirituals offered a multi-dimensional release from the inhumanity of daily living conditions and afforded slaves a sense of humanity and dignity that was taken from them daily in their state of captivity:

> …the songs were not just sung in ritual worship but throughout the day [which] meant that they served as powerful shields against the values of the white

> slaveholders and their killing definitions of black humanity. In addition to reinforcing their self-worth and humanity as children of God, the spirituals offered African Americans much-needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery's restrictions and cruelties. (Kwanzaa Guide Online)

The desire to find a mental escape from oppression when a physical one is not possible perhaps explains the often-haunting nature of such songs, and also the powerful emotional responses that they produce. "Wade in the Water" was a Negro Spiritual that served various purposes, simultaneously mental, physical, and spiritual. The lyrics of the chorus and the first verse express a powerful dualism that encapsulates these varying aspects of existence. As featured in Guy and Candie Carawan's *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs*, the song goes, "Wade in the water, wade in the water, children, wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water. / Well Jordan River is chilly and cold./God's gonna trouble the water,/ Well it chills my body but not my soul,/ God's gonna trouble the water" (Carawan 118). The opening refrain almost causes confusion, insofar it is telling the listener to wade in the water that God is about to trouble. But as explained by C. Michael Hawn in his article, "History of Hymns: Wade in the Water," he explains:

> The refrain of "Wade in the Water" is based upon the narrative of John 5:2-9. It is the story of the pool by the Sheep Gate—*Bethzatha* in Hebrew. A portion of this passage follows: 'Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.'"(John 5:2-4, KJV) (Hawn)

With this context in mind, the song takes on new meaning – namely that the water holds the power to heal all physical (and potentially spiritual) ailments. The strong distinction made between the chill of the water on the body, and the warmth provided by the sanctity of the soul speaks to the aforementioned dualism, in which slaves imagined a spiritual world (religious or not) separate from material reality.

Another purported function of "Wade in the Water" was its usefulness as a coded message to assist slaves along the Underground Railroad. Pathways to Freedom, a website chronicling the "Secrets, Signs & Symbols" of the process of escape from slavery argues, "Harriet Tubman used the song *"Wade in the Water"* to tell escaping slaves to get off the trail and into the water to make sure the dogs slave catchers used couldn't sniff out their trail. People walking through water did not leave a scent trail that dogs could follow" (Pathways to Freedom). This very practical implementation of the popular Negro Spiritual emphasizes the importance of song as a means of communication in a very physical (and high stakes) context. The spiritual was certainly not just entertainment or distraction. Hawn suspects that this song in particular was so powerful because it echoes the storied past of African Americans and water. He notes, "Water was a primary aspect of slave experience. Africans began their captivity—the "middle passage"—by traveling across the ocean to a new land in slave ships. The Ohio River was the dividing line between slavery and freedom on the Underground Railroad" (Hawn). Considering the significance of water in the slave experience, and later in the Civil Rights Movement with its challenges facing powerful and dangerous water hoses, this song had much to offer later generations. During the Civil Rights Movement, "Wade in the Water" remained relevant as the broken and bloodied bodies of many protesters certainly needed healing. Perhaps the specific relevance (particularly in the case of Harriet Tubman) of the song had become outdated by the 1960s, but the search for freedom from physical and spiritual pain resonated across time. Without very many variations (notably the "Well it looks like children Martin Luther King led" verse, provided in Carawan), the song found new meaning amongst civil rights activists, and while it reminded the nation of its unpleasant past, it still provided solace and comfort to those who needed it in the darkest of times.

Whereas "Wade in the Water" is a documented Negro Spiritual, the origins of "Oh Freedom" are less clear. The American Studies Department at the University of Virginia speculates, "…it is suspected that "Oh Freedom" was written after January 1st, 1863; in fact it was probably written as a reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation and was sung as a public reaction to the news of freedom" (Sibler , 274; qtd. on University of Virginia). Given the lyrics of the song, the University offers a plausible theory. As a post-war/post-slavery anthem, "Oh Freedom" offers more of a celebration than a lament (at least in theory). The song goes, "Oh

Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh freedom over me,/ And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free" (Carawan 66). The most obvious interpretation of the song is that it rejoices at freedom at last, and throws off the shackles of slavery. The line, "…before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave" was certainly a statement of conscious resistance, proclaiming that there is no going back to the way things were before. The intensity of such imagery (they will die before they will ever become slaves again) offers hope, but also a twinge of conflict, a much more active form of resistance than generally displayed by African-Americans during slavery. The Department of American Studies at the University of Virginia argues, "This song's call for freedom operates on two levels; freedom from slavery and freedom in heaven. Throughout the course of the song the refrain moves from 'Oh Freedom' to 'No more moaning', and 'No more weeping'. Here the focus is on the freedom the narrator will feel from his/her former enslavement" (Department of American Studies at the University of Virginia). In the same way that "Wade in the Water," offered both physical and spiritual respite from the conditions of slavery, "Oh Freedom," in a more empowered sense, spoke about both freedom from earthly captivity and the freedom of release from the earth. It would seem that this is the place from which complexity emanates within the song, the notion that the freedom of one's body was guaranteed by the Emancipation Proclamation, but the soul would only be free once it left the earth to be with God.

One of the reasons that "Oh Freedom" remained popular throughout the Civil Rights Movement was its versatility. It can be performed joyfully, sorrowfully, excitedly, or anxiously. Despite its positive message (the celebration of freedom), it also expresses collective grief (as witnessed by the alternate verses in the Carawan edition, such as, "No more burning churches," and "No more Jim Crow"). Perhaps because slavery was so universally horrible, the message of "Oh Freedom" as a Spiritual was widely interpreted as a primarily celebratory exclamation. But the nuance of the more modern version expresses some of the complexity of the song, as it can both celebrate existing freedom and demand freedom that has been withheld. The Negro Spiritual Scholarship Foundation contends, "Clearly, what gives Negro Spiritual songs their power is the way in which they invite the human voice to add contour, rhythm, texture, melody, tempo, variation, and emotional depth to words. The African-American experience resonates within and all through them" (NSSF). The delivery of this song was the determining factor of its

intentions and reception, whether they were happy or sad. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, songs that provided such versatility and gravitas were useful for a myriad of purposes. Because this song was written after the abolition of slavery, it was also likely much more easily integrated into the Civil Rights repertoire than many other Negro Spirituals.

The topic of historical injustice between whites and blacks in America is a charged topic with many advocates in each camp, some believing that looking to the past prevents the nation from moving forward, and some believing that it is imperative to understand the past to change the future. Regardless of personal opinion, the fact that so many songs, and even many lyrics of the original Negro Spirituals remained relevant in the Civil Rights Movement, should speak to the similarities between the horror of slavery and the injustice of segregation. Acknowledging the similarities between previous events and current ones does not have the effect of solely looking backwards, but provides opportunities for healing on the part of the oppressed, growth on the part of the oppressors, and peace for all who seek a just and equal America. In his essay, "The Evolution of the American Protest Song," Jerome L. Rodnitzky explains, "Spirituals lamented the present, affirmed faith in the future…" (Rodnitzky 36). While the Civil Rights Movement existed at a different time, in different circumstances than did slavery, the legacy of Negro Spirituals continued to fulfill that promise, offering solace, release, and the opportunity for a better tomorrow.

Works Cited

Carawan, Guy and Candie Carawan. *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs*. Montgomery, AL: New South. 2007. Print.

"Commentary: 'Oh Freedom.'" *Civil War Music:The Singin'est War*. Department of American Studies at the University of Virginia. Web. 21 June 2016. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug03/bannen/civil_war_music/>.

"Freedom Songs and the Civil Rights Movement." *Kwanzaa Guide*. 2010. Web. 21 June 2016. <http://kwanzaaguide.com/2010/04/freedom-songs-and-the-civil-rights-movement-2/>.

Hawn, Michael C. "History of Hymns: 'Wade in the Water.'" *Discipleship Ministries: The United Methodist Church*. Web. 21 June 2016. <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-wade-in-the-water>.

"Music." *Pathways to Freedom | Secrets: Signs and Symbols*. Maryland Public Television. Web. 21 June 2016. <http://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/music1.cfm>.

Rodnitzky, Jerome L. "The Evolution of the American Protest Song." *Journal of Popular Culture* 3.1 (1969): 35. *ProQuest.* Web. 17 Oct. 2016

Sanger, Kerran L. "Functions Of Freedom Singing In The Civil Rights Movement: The Activists' Implicit Rhetorical Theory." *Howard Journal Of Communications* 8.2 (1997): 179-195. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 17 Oct. 2016.

"Why 'Negro Spiritual' …." *Negro Spiritual Scholarship Foundation RSS2*. Web. 21 June 2016. <http://www.negrospiritual.org/why-negro-spiritual>.