

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLOMOUCI

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Eliška Týrová

**The Hidden Messages in Negro Spirituals, and the
Underground Railroad**

Bakalářská práce

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc.

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma "The Hidden Messages in Negro Spirituals, and the Underground Railroad" vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne.....

Podpis

|

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1. The Negro Spirituals

1.1. The Religious Background

In order to understand the true meaning behind the spiritual texts, we should consider the cultural and religious background of the enslaved Africans. Even though the Northern, and Central part of Africa has been influenced by Christianity in the past, namely between the first and the twelfth century, it was eventually overruled by the Islamic religion, which dominated part of the continent until the fifteenth century, when Vasco de Gamma came to Africa.¹

The overall religious beliefs in Africa vary, however, there seem to be some unifying factors that appear across different regions. One of the most prominent is the idea of one God-creator, who exists somewhere beyond this earthly realm and only manifests himself on Earth through other deity-like entities, which roam among the mortals.² Those entities have been associated with various natural elements and phenomena, such as water, flora, or thunder. It was also often believed, that the passed ancestors of the tribespeople, who have done great deeds when still alive, entered this other realm upon their passing, and continued co-existing with the tribe members. Since these spirits were once humans, they were still assumed by the Africans to have the same gender they had when they lived, which is something we can notice in Christian saints as well.³

Those spirits then gained the power to influence the living, in both a positive and negative way. The Africans would provide material gifts and tokens to their deceased ancestors, as well as to other entities, to win over their sympathies and good fortune, and turn away their wrath and harm. As the spirits were still given material gifts, we can clearly see that the Africans did not draw a definite line between the secular and the sacred, but rather saw both as one whole. Moreover, as most of the peoples did not have any written culture, these religious beliefs were practiced and shared through oral tradition, such as folktales, songs, or sacred chants, which made the acts of worship easier to incorporate into their everyday lives. For this reason, the worship songs, which

¹ Akinyela, Makungu M. "Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanize Christianity, and a Black Ethos." *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. (2003): 257.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

were sung during everyday tasks, could be marked as the connecting element between the sacred and the secular.⁴

1.2. The Africanization of Christianity

For the first one hundred years of the slaves being brought to America, until the eighteenth century, there was little to no effort from the side of the slaveholders to convert the Africans to Christianity, as the slave-owners probably cared very little about their “spiritual salvation.”⁵ Thanks to this, the vast majority of the original religious beliefs were preserved among the Blacks, and although the slaves were brought together from several different locations in Africa, the Blacks often shared similar religious ideas. As the slaves introduced each other to their original ideologies, the clash of those diversities in their beliefs caused some of them to fuse and create a new form of religion. Akinyela also assumes, that only by this time, Christianity was slowly introduced to the slaves through listening to and observing their white masters.⁶

Later on, the Christian influence on the African slaves enforced the creation and further development of the common religious beliefs of the Blacks. This new form of religion represents for the African Americans a sense of unity, as it brought together many peoples from all-across Africa, whose beliefs and rich traditions were not always the same.⁷

The proper introduction of the Blacks to Christianity only began after the year 1800, when a religious revival of Christianity, also known as “The Great Awakening,” took place. By this time the slave-masters decided to introduce the Blacks to Christianity, in order to make them more obedient. Following the Haitian revolution, which was mostly religious-oriented, it was probably deemed necessary to teach the slaves the “right” kind of Christianity⁸, that would not encourage the slaves to rebel against their masters. To ensure that, the masters had European missionaries preaching to the slaves this kind of Christianity, with emphasis on the parts of the Bible that contained the rights of the masters to their slaves.⁹

⁴ Ibid. 257-258.

⁵ Akinyela, “Battling the Serpent,” 258

⁶ Akinyela, “Battling the Serpent,” 258-260.

⁷ Ibid. 260.

⁸ Ibid. 262.

⁹ Ibid.

The missionary would often decide for a very animated way of preaching, full of hand gestures, which was very familiar to the Africans. And since they were very much used to this kind of sharing, it did not take much effort for them to memorize long sections from the Old Testament. So, once the stories were told to the slaves, they almost immediately became a part of their oral tradition. After some time in slavery, the memories of Africa became somehow blurred in the slaves' minds, especially to the new generations already born in America, that they started perceiving the biblical stories as their own life experience.¹⁰

What also appealed to them was the character of Jesus, who was God's son born to a mortal woman, and mortal himself, as the idea of deities manifesting in a human form was very much familiar to them from their original African religions. The slaves possibly liked the idea of somebody watching over them in the hard times, and being by their side

The concept of the Holy Trinity was also not new to the slaves either, as they believed in God presenting himself in more than one way. In other cases, some of the multiple deities would become so similar to one another, that they would sort of merge into one entity.¹¹ For example, a snake-like water spirit recognized by the Lamba-speaking peoples of the Copperbelt and Shaba Provinces, which would be called "funkwe" by some people, while some used the term "nsanguni," and others called it "Solomoni."¹² Originally, each of these entities would have distinct features and abilities, but with time, the terms became mutually interchangeable while the differences became less and less significant.¹³ In the same way, some Christians might view the Holy Spirit and God as one entity or see Jesus as a manifestation of God on Earth. Moreover, since the Africans did not strictly determine time, space, and spirit, the references to God and Jesus in the texts would not be as metaphorical as one would think: I am going to elaborate on this below. An example of such lyrics would be "A-settin' down with Jesus:"

¹⁰ Akinyela, "Battling the Serpent," 263-265.

¹¹ Ibid. 264.

¹² Seigel Brian. "Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies (SERSAS)." Water Spirits and Mermaids: The Copperbelt Case. Last modified: 8 April, 2000. Accessed February 10, 2020. <https://www.ecu.edu/African/sersas/Siegel400.htm#REF1>

¹³ Ibid.

*A-settin' down with Jesus
Eatin' honey and drinkin' wine
Marchin' round de throne
Wid Peter, James and Jonh.¹⁴*

The verse can be interpreted in two different ways. Either the text talks about reuniting with somebody in the afterlife, based on the phrase “A-settin’ down with Jesus,” while on the other hand it could carry a figurative meaning of living on Earth but with faith in Jesus and God. Possibly, the line can have a double meaning, which as mentioned before, would not be very unlikely.

Later on, once the Blacks became more familiar with the Bible, some of them began preaching to the others themselves. However, they understood the word of God differently, from their own perspective and often highlighted their own experience as the enslaved people. Those Black preachers were viewed as particularly dangerous by the slave owners, even more so if they could read because it was harder to control which parts of the Bible became accessible to the slaves. Moreover, it gave the slaves much more freedom by interpreting the meaning of the Bible.¹⁵

1.3. The Sacral Meaning of Spirituals

The Negro Spirituals are songs that were originally sung by the African American slaves. The word “spiritual” suggests that the meaning of the songs was primarily religious, which was not entirely the case. Thanks to the religious influence and beliefs the first slaves have brought from Africa, the lines between secular and sacred become often blurred. Perhaps that is also the reason why the songs could not be heard only in churches or during various religious occasions, but also during work or rest time as well.¹⁶ The historian Lawrence Levine also points out that the meaning of “sacred” entailed also the inclusion of the divine into everyday life, describing the African

¹⁴ Gabbin, Joanne, V. Sterling, A. Brown: *Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*. Westport: Greenwood, 1985.: 91.

¹⁵ Akinyela, Makungu M. “Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanize Christianity, and a Black Ethos.” *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. (2003): 255-280.

¹⁶ Henry L. Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, ed., *The Norton Anthology of African American literature.*, 2nd ed. New York, 2004. pp: 5-6.

perception of “Man, nature, and God as a unity, distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred as a whole.”¹⁷

It is probable that this combining of the earthly and the divine also represented for the slaves some sort of escape from the cruel reality and the slaveholders, who would often try to suppress the slaves’ spirit. That is also the reason why the lyrics of those songs often expressed the longing for freedom¹⁸:

*Two wings to veil my face.
Two wings to veil my feet.
Two wings to fly away,
and the world can't do me no harm.*

*Meet me Jesus, meet me,
I want You to meet me in the middle of the air.
If these wings should fail me,
I want You to meet me with another pair.*

Two wings

*Fly away,
I'll fly away.*

*And the world can't do me no harm.*¹⁹

The first two lines above could be referring to the faith of the slave himself, the wings meaning the belief in God and Heaven, while “to veil my face” might signify “to ignore” or “to protect oneself” from the hardship of the slave. Similarly, “for to fly away” might represent the mental escape from one’s unfavorable situation. The last line of the first stanza “and the world can’t do me no harm” could once again refer to God’s protection from evil. Overall, the lines might say something like my faith in God protects me, the faith in God is my escape.

In the second stanza, the slave is directly asking Jesus to “meet me Jesus, meet me,” which could refer to the slave dying and going to heaven. This narrative is further supported in the following line “I want you to meet me in the middle of the air,” which possibly refers to the deceased slave’s spirit ascending to heaven. The following lines

¹⁷ Levine, Lawrence W., *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.) pp: 32.

¹⁸ Gates and McKay, ed., *The Norton Anthology of African American literature.*, pp: 5.

¹⁹ Lyrics.com, STANDS4 LLC, 2020. "Two Wings Lyrics." Accessed August 11, 2020.
<https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/2468893/The+Christianaires>.

“If these wings should fail me, I want you to meet me with another pair.” Here, the word “wings” could mean the slaves faith itself, meaning that they are asking, if they were to lose their faith, for Jesus to restore it within them.

This topic also often includes a theme very typical for the Spirituals. A vision of being with Jesus, who would offer his people a place to belong and a place to rest. Here again arises the factor of combining of the earthly and the divine, as the desire for freedom in the God’s Kingdom might mean either the freedom in a form of death and entering the afterlife, or the freedom on Earth where the slave would live on with God and Jesus watching over them. Deriving from what has been stated previously, I daresay there is no definite way to determine which of the meanings is the right one or correct as the slaves did not strictly differentiate between the two.

Similarly, in the same manner could be analyzed also the reference to “heaven,” which could simply mean any place where one can be reunited with their loved ones, such as in the song “A-settin’ down with Jesus,” which I have mentioned previously.

Another example of such lyrics would be:

*I’m gonna tell God all my troubles
When I get home...
I’m gonna tell him the road was rocky
When I get home²⁰*

This verse seems to be talking about the hardships of a slave, and yet again it certainly contains some spiritual meaning, such as the line “I’m gonna tell God... When I get home,” which could signify when the slave dies and goes to Heaven. But “I’m gonna tell him the road was rocky” could also mean a literal escape of the slave from their master, or “the road” could be a metaphorical term for life itself, meaning that the life was difficult.

1.4. The Secular Meaning of Spirituals

On a different note, Frederick Douglass, as well as others, highlights the parts in Spirituals that could refer directly to escaping to the Free States and Canada. One of the

²⁰ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 6.

very well-known songs is “Swing low, sweet chariot,” which was expressing a wish, or perhaps even a plan to escape:²¹

Swing low, sweet chariot

Coming for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot

Coming for to carry me home

I looked up over Jordan and what did I see

Coming for to carry me home

I saw a band of angels coming after me

*Coming for to carry me home*²²

The line “Swing low sweet chariot” possibly refers to the members of the Underground Railroad, who would come South, and at night to take the slaves away from their masters. The line “coming for to carry me home” would then refer to the slaves being freed, going North to live their free lives.

In the second stanza, we have the reference to the biblical river Jordan, which the Israelites crossed when leaving Pharaoh’s land. The river Jordan here may also refer to the Ohio river, which roughly divides the Southern states from the Norther ones, hence, the slave looked northwards “over Jordan”, where he or she saw the members of the Underground Railroad to save them, which would explain the line “a band of angels coming after me.”

Songs of such nature were however often sung only when the slave was sure that their master is far away so that he does not overhear them singing. An example would be the song “O Freedom”²³:

Oh freedom

Oh freedom

²¹ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 5-6.

²² Lyrics.com, STANDS4 LLC, 2020. "Swing Low Sweet Chariot Lyrics." Accessed August 11, 2020. <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/27112127/Eric+Clapton>.

²³ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 15.

Oh freedom over me

Re: And before I'd be a slave

I'd be buried in my grave

And go home to my lord and be free.

No more weeping

No more weeping

No more weeping over me²⁴

Here the first stanza simply repeats the phrase “O freedom,” which gives an impression of prayer, calling out to God, to bring “freedom over me,” that is, to the slave.

The refrain talks directly about death, but in the meaning that the slave would rather possibly die on their way to freedom than live in slavery, but there is still the possibility that the person could succeed and flee.

The last stanza once again simply repeats the same phrase “No more weeping,” which means the end of suffering for the slave, or perhaps, the final line “no more weeping over me,” could be the escaping slave telling his dear ones he or she is leaving behind not to worry about them.

The secular aspect of the Spirituals is a vast topic of its own, which is why I will come back to it, and further explain it in the second chapter of my thesis, but I felt the need to at least mention it here since we are dealing with analysis of the lyrics here.

1.5. The Story of Moses

Even though until now most of the lyrics I have analyzed refer to Jesus, he was not as often mentioned in the Spirituals, as the slaves were more interested in the stories of the Old Testament, God, and His Prophets. Figures such as Daniel, Job, Samson, Ezekiel, and especially Moses were much more frequent to appear in the Spirituals.²⁵

The character of Moses was particularly popular among the slaves, and upon reading his story in the Old Testament, one can understand why. According to the Bible, at the time Moses was born in Egypt, the Pharaoh, fearing of the enslaved Israelites revolting and

²⁴ Lyrics.com, STANDS4 LLC, 2020. "Oh, Freedom Lyrics." Accessed August 11, 2020.

<https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/2072730/Pete+Seeger>.

²⁵ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 5-6.

overpowering him, ordered all the newborn baby boys to be drowned in the Nile. Since Moses' mother wanted to protect her child, she put him in a basket and sent him down the Nile river. He is found in the river by Pharaoh's daughter, who chooses to take him into the palace and take care of him. Growing up in the Pharaoh's palace, Moses sees the turmoil his people must endure in slavery.²⁶ One day, Moses witnesses one of the Egyptians beating a Hebrew and he kills the Egyptian, which makes Pharaoh angry, and Moses is forced to flee.²⁷ Moses escapes far away from Egypt and becomes a shepherd.
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Some time later, when Moses pastures his sheep, he notices a burning bush and finds out that there is a voice emerging from the fire. The voice is God himself speaking to him, and informs him, that he was chosen to lead the Jewish nation from the bondage of the Pharaoh of Egypt. Moses then comes back to Egypt, where meanwhile the old Pharaoh had died and was replaced by his successor. So, he asks this new ruler to let his people go, but Pharaoh refuses. This angers God, who sends down the so-called "Plagues of Egypt," ten disasters, from turning the Nile's water to blood, to death of all the firstborn children in Egypt. Finally, Pharaoh agrees to let Moses' people go and grants them freedom. However, when the people leave, Pharaoh sends his army after them, ordering to kill them. Once the Israelites with Moses get to the Red Sea, Moses asks God for help, knowing that the army is following them. God grants Moses the power to part the Red Sea using his staff, which allows his people to cross safely. Once the army follows them, the sea closes again and drowns the Pharaoh's army.²⁹

1.5.1. Go Down, Moses

Having heard the story, it is obvious why the story of Moses and the Israelites appealed so much to the slaves. White (1983) quotes Paul Robeson, a performer of Negro Spirituals, and his interview in 1927: "The Bible was the only form of literature the

²⁶ Bradford, Roark. *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun.*, (United States of America, Harper & Row, 1928), 93-131.

²⁷ Ex 2:11-15

²⁸ Bradford. *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun.*, 93-131.

²⁹ Ibid.

Negro could get at... It was natural for their quick imaginations to find similarity between their condition and that of the enslaved Hebrews.”³⁰

The Norton Anthology of African American Literature lists lyrics of quite a few Spiritual songs which speak of Moses. One that is certainly worth mentioning would be “Go Down, Moses:”

Re: Go down, Moses,

Way down in Egyptland

Tell old Pharaoh

Let my people go

When Israel was in Egyptland

Let my people go

Oppressed so hard they could not stand

*Let my people go*³¹

This first part of the song is referring to the part of the story before the Ten Plagues of Egypt are sent down on the Pharaoh’s land, when Moses goes to the Pharaoh and asks him to free the Israelites. The lines that caught my interest were “Go down... Way down in the Egyptland.” Here, it is possible that the slaves were referring directly down to the south of the United States, where the slave situation was by far the worst. Perhaps “Go down, Moses,” was some sort of prayer to God to be freed like the slaves in the northern states or Canada were. The song then continues:

“Thus saith the Lord,” bold Moses said,

“Let my people go;

³⁰ White, John. “Veiled Testimony: Negro Spirituals and the Slave Experience.” *Journal of American Studies*, 17, no. 2 (1983): 251-263. Accessed September 24, 2019.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27554312>

³¹ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 14.

If not I'll smite your first-born dead

Let my people go

"No more shall they in bondage toil,

Let my people go

Let them come out of the Egypt soil,

*Let my people go."*³²

These two stanzas then directly refer to the part where the Ten Plagues of Egypt hit the land, and all the first-born children were killed. The line might not be meant literally from the mouths of the slaves, but might express their belief, that the white men shall be punished by God for enslaving "God's people," as the orthodox Negroes felt to be as much the children of the Lord, as the white Christians.

The second stanza then speaks of the brighter future for the enslaved people, when they leave Egypt to find their Promised Land. The line "coming out of the Egypt soil," was most likely referring to coming out of bondage and live in the free states. The last two paragraphs continue with the Biblical story:

Lord told Moses what to do

Let my people go

To lead the Children of Israel through

*Let my people go."*³³

This first line, "Lord told Moses what to do," is speaking of the part of the story where Moses is advised to part the Red Sea by hitting the ground with his staff. "To lead the children of the Israel through" refers to the path made in the parted sea for them to cross over, which in this case might be a metaphor to the safe passage from the South to the North states. The song ends with the refrain again, which emphasizes the wish of the slave to be freed from bondage.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

1.5.2. Wade in the Water

Another spiritual song, which mentions Moses, is “Wade in the Water:”

Wade in the water, children.

Wade in the water, children.

Wade in the water, children.

God’s a-gonna trouble the water.

See that host all dressed in white

God’s a-gonna trouble the water.

The leader looks like the Israelite

God’s a-gonna trouble the water.³⁴

“God’s gonna trouble the water,” in this case refers to the parting of the sea to provide a safe passing for the Moses’ people, that is, “trouble” means “to stir” or “to disrupt.” In the second stanza “the host,” is the crowd of the Hebrews, being led by “the Israelite,” i.e. Moses. The song then continues with the same “Wade in the water” refrain, followed by the second stanza:

See that host all dressed in red,

God’s a-gonna trouble the water;

Must be the children that Moses led,

God’s a-gonna trouble the water.

This second verse again refers to the “host” or group of the Israelites led by Moses. The expressions “dressed in white” and “dressed in red,” could refer to the journey of the slave. At first, the African Americans were “dressed in white,” innocent, taken from

³⁴ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 8.

their homeland and enslaved. Then they lost their innocence, and the red color they now wore symbolized their power and fire-like resilience, or even the blood of their brethren.

DuBois pointed out the way in which the Spirituals are packed full of emotion, expressing the Black experience in chains, and even though the language is very simple and very crude, the mood of these songs is almost overwhelming, which is caused by the combination of rhythmic patterns as well as vivid imagery of the texts themselves which are typically full of symbols and metaphors, especially the biblical ones, as shown in the examples above. Additionally, even though the Spirituals are considered a branch of Christian music, the African religion, sometimes almost lined with Paganism, has still found its way into the songs and has been preserved even after the introduction of Christianity. That being said, the main and dominant theme of Spirituals as far as religion goes, is still that of Christianity, which, having read the lyrics, is quite evident. Even though some of the lines do not feel stereotypically Christian, one can still argue that it is due to the different interpretations of the Bible in the eyes of the slave.³⁵

1.6. Form of the Spirituals

When it comes to the form, a feature very typical for the Negro Spirituals and their origin, was the “call and response” pattern of singing.³⁷ This specific pattern was brought from Africa by the very first slaves and is characterized by a leading singer who sings the main part, while the remaining people fill in the chorus.³⁸

This type of songs was most often sung during the work in the fields, and one of the main purposes of these songs were to keep the same working pace, which matched the songs themselves, and allowed the slaves to keep the same pace of their work. Besides that, some of the white supervisors, generally referred to as the overseers sometimes forced the slaves to sing continuously during their work, as sometimes they worked in crops so high, that it was hard for the overseers to make sure about all of the slaves’ presence. Not only did the singing prove the slaves’ presence, but it also gave away their approximate location, which helped distinguish whether the slave was moving on

³⁵ Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. (New York: Antheneum, 1925), 201.

³⁷ James W. Johnson and J. Rosmaond Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1925), 23-25.

³⁸ Lawrence-McIntyre, Charshee Charlotte. "The Double Meanings of the Spirituals." *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no. 4 (1987): 379-401. www.jstor.org/stable/2784158.

with their work.³⁹ Frederick Douglass gives us an example of one of the call- and- response songs in his memoir “My Bondage and My Freedom”:

I am going away to the great house farm,

O yea! O yea! O yea!

My old master is a good old master,

O yea! O yea! O yea!

The previous stanza surprisingly praises the slaves’ owner, which Douglass describes as an attempt of the slave to win the master’s sympathies.⁴⁰ Compared to “O freedom,” this kind of lyrics was obviously meant for the owner or the overseers of the slaves to hear and understand. Therefore, this could be a perfect song for the slaves to sing during their work, surrounded by white men who expected them to sing, but would surely punish them for even a slight hint of disobedience and revolt.

Another form of singing was the so-called “lining out.”⁴¹ This way of singing was originally brought to America from the British Isles, but since it was quite similar to the “call and response”⁴² pattern, it was adapted by the Negroes as well. “Lining out” also utilized the altering between the leading singer, or preacher, to “give” the words to the congregation, before the group sings them. However, since the group only heard the words, and not the melody, the melody with which each individual sang, vastly varied. This was an aspect the slaves paid little attention to since the main goal was to sing in unison, not to match any exact melody.

Besides lining out, there was one more way of singing, which also included something one could consider a “dance.” The “ring shout”⁴³ is probably one of the few manners of singing which also included body movements, as the Protestant church prohibited the religious songs from including dancing or drumming. For this reason, it is also one of

³⁹ Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom.*, Project Gutenberg, 2008. Accessed Oct 28, 2019. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/202/202-h/202-h.htm>. 76-77.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Stearns, Marshall W., *The Story of Jazz*, New York: The New American Library, 1970. 94.

⁴² Johnson and Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 23-25.

⁴³ Ibid. 94.

the few preserved manners of singing originated in Africa, which included dancing. The dancers would always move in a circle in a counter-clockwise direction, dancing with feet, hands, hips, and bellies, often for over an hour without resting. As the song proceeded, the rhythm would keep accelerating, until the dance would reach some sort of hypnotic appearance with the mass of bodies moving, accompanied by the beat.⁴⁴ The “ring shout” would often be performed at the “praise meetings,” where one of the elders taking the role of priests would quote passages from the Bible from memory. The dancing and singing would take part after the priest’s speech had been finished, but never when the Blacks felt sad or miserable.⁴⁵

These religious meetings would often take place on Sundays, and in specific houses or places that the slaves deemed suitable especially for that purpose. Usually, over half of the whole plantation would take part in these religious meetings. Before the ring shout took place, one of the elders would “line out” passages from the Bible that they were able to memorize, which were then to be repeated by the whole congregation.

Besides the spiritual, the slaves would sometimes sing songs about their secular experience in slavery. J. M. McKim noted in his study of the Spirituals and their origin, in 1862:

I asked one of these Blacks – one of the most intelligent of them... where they got these songs. ‘Dey make ‘em, sah.’ ‘How do they make them?’ After a pause, evidently casting about for an explanation, he said: ‘I’ll tell you, 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 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 they get it right; and dat’s de way.’⁴⁶

Based on this piece of text, it is evident that the songs would often be created spontaneously through improvisation. The singer would often repeat some phrase, searching for the right formulation of their experience, until they found it.

⁴⁴ John A. Lomax and Allan Lomax, *Folk Song U.S.A.* (New York, Duell, Solan & Pearce, 1947), p. 335.

⁴⁵ Stearns, Marshall W., *The Story of Jazz*. 95.

⁴⁶ From an address delivered by J. Miller McKim in Philadelphia in 1892, as quoted by W.F. Allen, C.P. Ware, and L.M. Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1867), p. 18.

Once the originally African music came in contact with the European music, the melody of the Spirituals begins to lengthen. The blending of the ring shout, and Spirituals, as well as the influence of European music, gave origin to the Jubilees. This is a type of song, that is rhythmic and cheerful, and is usually supposed to announce some sort of good news.⁴⁷

However, as the melody is becoming longer, the pace of the songs slower, the “call and response” pattern must be modified, or in some cases even eliminated altogether. Examples of such songs would be “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” or “Nobody Knows de Trouble I’ve Seen,” where one of these songs has already been mentioned, and I will be dealing with the second one shortly. Since the Spirituals are usually expressing sorrow and sadness, the otherwise cheerful “call and response” rhythm would spoil the overall mood of the songs.⁴⁸

1.7. The Other Aspects of the Negro Spirituals

One of the main purposes of music in Black culture is coping with emotional scars and mental distress. DuBois mentions in the first chapter of *Souls of Black Folk*, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” a poem written by Arthur Symons, “The Crying of Water.” The author paints a correlation between water (a river or a sea,) and the tears of a Black slave. The text of the poem describes the body of water as if it were a living being that is crying. This expression of “crying water” is obviously a mournful parallel between the water and the tears of a slave.

DuBois then continues to mention a well-known spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”:

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen

Nobody knows but Jesus

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen

Glory hallelujah!

⁴⁷ Stearns, Marshall W., *The Story of Jazz*. 99.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

This text contains a very sudden shift from sorrowful to joyous in the last line, which from the mouths of the enslaved Negroes might express the determination to keep moving on and not give up.⁴⁹

Alain Locke comments in his chapter “The Negro Spirituals” on the perception of Spirituals, which is similar to any other folklore music, which is initially criticized, and only with time it gains its popularity and acknowledgment. In this case, the Spirituals were no exception, as they have, according to Locke, only recently obtained their fair share of popularity.⁵⁰

Despite the simple language, the rhythm of the music has been masterfully handled by the Blacks, such as the line “The Blood came-a twinklin’ down” from the song “The Crucifixion” or “De trumpet soun’s it in-a my soul,” where the singers added an extra syllable in order for the lyrics to fit the rhythm. These examples show the natural talent of the African Americans when it comes to music.

Locke however also claims that it is also a suggestion of the slaves’ illiteracy, as from a grammatical point of view, the lines are incorrect.⁵¹ I would say this does not really have to do with the literacy of the slave, and the added syllable was simply used by the slaves to keep the same rhythm of the song. The most common rhythmic pattern would be either a steady 2/4 or 4/4 meter.⁵²

From the point of view of themes, DuBois divides Black folk songs into four categories: the prayer songs, or the pure Spirituals, the evangelical “shouts,” which have a more unrestrained nature and are sometimes also called “camp-meeting songs,” the folk ballads, which share many similar proprieties with the Spirituals that they have not been considered a separate group until recently, and lastly the labor or work songs which were purely secular. Locke further mentions that these types of songs are often mistaken for one another, highlighting that the distinguishing feature is not the amount of religious content, but rather the type of folk use.⁵³

⁴⁹ See Henry Louis Gates, jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 82-83.

⁵⁰ Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. (Canada, McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1925), 199.

⁵¹ Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. 204-205.

⁵² Jones, Randy and William Tinker. *The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual*. (Iowa: Grinnell College, 2007), 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 205.

Locke stresses the importance of the balance between several features of the spirituals. He points out, that once the melodic aspect is highlighted, the spiritual seems to obtain a more of a characteristic of a sentimental ballad. On the other hand, too much stress on rhythm secularizes the piece into syncopated dance elements. Only a perfectly balanced piece of melody, rhythm and harmony can create the true spiritual song. Locke gives an example of the song “God’s Goin’ to Set Dis world on Fire,” where he highlights the subtle rhythmic pattern, the phrase linkage, as well as the dramatic recitative nature of the song.⁵⁴

1.8. The More Recent Black Music Genres Based on Spirituals

The development of new musical characteristics begins during and after the Civil War, where the newly freedmen started migrating up North and West of the United States. The original spiritual songs would however start to disappear since most of the slaves saw the pieces as a sort of uncomfortable reminder of their uneasy past in bondage. The field-songs also became unfit for the new city-based life of the Negroes. Over the years, the Spirituals have inspired several other musical genres, such as jazz, blues, and last but not least, gospel. This was either topic-wise, such as gospel, which is still mainly about religion, or mood-wise, such as blues, which still works with the sentiments of sadness.⁵⁵

The original spiritual genre almost disappeared until the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a choir of the Fisk University, was founded by George L. White, a former soldier who fought in the Civil War. After the war, White taught Sunday-school for Black children, which was formed in 1866 at the Freedman’s Bureau⁵⁶. The Freedman’s Bureau was a facility formed in 1865 to support ex-slaves and poor white citizens in the aftermath of the Civil War; it provided the war victims with basic housing, food and medical help.⁵⁷

White sang with the children in the Sunday-school classes, and they taught him many African American folklore songs. White has been so moved by the deep lyrics, that he has decided to tour with the children to show people the, until now, forgotten music.

⁵⁴ Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. (Canada, McClland & Sewart Ltd., 1925), 206-207.

⁵⁵ Johnson. *Thirty Spirituals: Arranged for Voice and Piano*. (New York: G. Schirmer; dist., Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1949), 5.

⁵⁶ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 182.

⁵⁷ History.com Editors. “Freedmen's Bureau.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 1 June 2010, www.history.com/topics/Black-history/freedmens-bureau.

After their success in the Congregational Council at Oberlin, the Fisk Jubilee Singers became known world-wide. They then performed overseas in European countries such as Scotland, Ireland, or Switzerland. During the first seven years of performing, they have earned around one hundred and fifty thousand American dollars for the Fisk University.⁵⁸

Mainly from the 1870's up until the 20th century the originally purely Black music started combining with the structure of the white hymn. The music was newly inspired by the New Testament, which was overall more optimistic, as it portrayed topics such as Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection for the salvation of humanity.⁵⁹

Additionally, the composers of the new gospel genre would have their music copyrighted and published in collections, which ensured that the original author was not forgotten.⁶⁰ This was not the case with the Spirituals, because most of those who composed the songs did not know how to read or write, and the songs were orally shared from person to person, where each singer would include a piece of their own, which made it difficult to determine which of the versions was the very original one. For this reason, we also cannot determine the exact number of the songs that were ever composed, but we do know that those that got on paper are estimated at around six thousand in total.⁶¹

Up until this point in time, the racial segregation in the United States was still very prominent. This only changed by the beginning of the 1920s, after the First World War, when the Blacks started to move from south to north in great numbers, into the larger cities. The end of the war was also followed by great social changes, as well as popularization of the Jazz genre, among Blacks and whites alike. By this time, there was established a whole new Black artistic movement in Harlem, a part of the New York City, which was later called "the Harlem Renaissance."

This movement however did not only revolve around Black music, but literature, and journalism as well. But, besides the artistic aspect of the Harlem Renaissance, there

⁵⁸ See DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 182-185.

⁵⁹ "The Gospel Truth," Randye Johnes and William Tinker. Accessed May, 21, 2020. <http://www.artoftheNegrospiritual.com/research/GospelTruthNegroSpiritual.pdf>

⁶⁰ J. Jefferson Cleveland. *Songs of Zion. Supplemental Worship 12.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 172

⁶¹ William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, Lucy McKim Garrison, comp., *Slave Songs of the United States*(New York, A. Simpson, 1867; reprint, Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1995), 4-5.

was also the political one, the Blacks still fought for recognition and an equal place beside the white citizens of the USA. For this reason, the Harlem Renaissance is not referred to as a “genre,” but as a “movement,” since it was about much more than just art.⁶² Overall, the Harlem Renaissance has without a doubt helped to bring the Black culture in America into the foreground, as well as causing it to further develop thanks to the concentration of young Negro artists in one place where they could influence and build off of each other.

The spiritual music was then also again popularized in the Civil Rights Era between the 1950s and the 1960s, as they represented a sort of undying resilience of the African Americans as well as their difficult past.⁶³

⁶² Příbylová, Irena. “Česká stopa: Afroamerické spirituály v koncertní síni.” In *Od folkloru k world music: HUDBA A SPIRITUALITA*, edited by Irena Příbylová and Lucie Uhlíková, 160-161. Náměšť nad Oslavou: Městské kulturní středisko, 2019.

[http://image.folkoveprazdniny.cz/2019/kolokvium2019/From Folklore to World Music 2019.pdf](http://image.folkoveprazdniny.cz/2019/kolokvium2019/From_Folklore_to_World_Music_2019.pdf)

(accessed March 25, 2020)

⁶³ Johnson. *Thirty Spirituals*, 5.

2. The Underground Railroad

2.1. What Was the Underground Railroad

Now that I have covered the basics of the Spirituals' origin and their characteristics, I would like to introduce a very interesting topic which closely correlates with the musical genre. It is apparent from the lyrics of the Spirituals that I have analyzed in the first part of my thesis, that the slaves were far from reconciled to their life in slavery, so it is not surprising that more than a handful of those slaves have tried to escape from bondage. Thanks to these efforts, at some point a whole secret organization was established, that tried to help the fleeing Negroes on their way to freedom. This organization was originally nameless, only later was it nicknamed the "Underground Railroad."

The Underground Railroad was a metaphorical expression used in connection to the escaping slaves, and people who helped them flee to Canada, which was a state where slavery was abolished. The word "underground" stood for the secret or hidden activity of its members, while the word "railroad" was simply chosen because the most popular way of transportation at the time, was via trains.⁶⁴ The organization formed in 1810s, and by the end of 1860s it has helped around 100,000 with their escape to Canada.⁶⁵

In the 1850's alone, it is believed that around fifteen to twenty thousand slaves have managed to escape thanks to the organization's help. The District of Columbia alone has noted that the number of the slaves owned in the area was reduced from 4694 to 640 only during this decade.⁶⁶ Generally, most of those who escaped from slavery with the help of the Underground Railroad, came from the upper south states, such as Kentucky, Virginia, or Maryland, and there were not many who escaped from the deep south states.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ "Interesting facts about the Underground Railroad" Harriet Tubman Historical Society, Accessed March, 20, 2020, <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/interesting-facts-about-the-underground-railroad/>

⁶⁵ "What Was the Underground Railroad?" Harriet Tubman Historical Society, Accessed March, 18, 2019, <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/underground-railroad/>

⁶⁶ Buckmaster, Henrietta. "The Underground Railroad." *The North American Review* 246, no. 1 (1938): 143. Accessed March 31, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/25115012.

⁶⁷ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, "What Was the Underground Railroad?"

The routes that the Underground Railroad used were mostly undefined, running zigzag northwards to confuse potential slave hunters.⁶⁸ Even the members of the organization itself usually only knew the part of the Railroad's routes, that was in the near proximity of their place of operation. This was supposed to ensure that if somebody got caught helping the slaves, they would not be able to give away more than a very restricted part of the route. The houses owned by those that helped hide the slaves were then scattered all over the territory, through which those routes led. As of today, we do not know the exact number of those houses, but it is safe to say, that there were hundreds, maybe even thousands.⁶⁹

2.2. Important personalities of the Underground Railroad

One of the most important figures, and also founders of the Underground Railroad would be Araminta Ross, who was born into slavery but managed to escape in 1849. Previous to that, at a young age, she had suffered a head injury which resulted in her having regular hallucinations, vivid dreams, and even sleeping spells. Being a deeply religious person, she perceived the hallucinations as a sign from God, which motivated her to help other slaves escape to Canada.⁷⁰ She also changed her name to Harriet Tubman to be harder to find by the slave hunters.⁷¹

Tubman would mostly travel at night because it was easier to remain unseen, following the North Star to stay on the right trail. The very first person who has helped her was a white Quaker woman, who offered her shelter and gave her useful instructions on what to do next. This woman was also part of the Underground Railroad, and its first member with whom Tubman came into contact.⁷²

Following her own escape, she came back to America to help her family members in pursuit of freedom. The family members were then followed by friends, and their

⁶⁸ Buckmaster, "The Underground Railroad:" 143.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ "Facts," Harriet Tubman Historical Society, Accessed March, 18, 2019, <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/facts/>

⁷¹ "How did Harriet Tubman escape?," Harriet Tubman Historical Society, Accessed March, 24, 2020, <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/escape/>

⁷² Ibid.

families, and in total Tubman helped around 300 people, not even one of her travels being discovered.⁷³

William Still was another one of the most famous members of the Underground Railroad. He was also one of those Blacks who had the luck and successfully escaped from slavery, and became an Agent working for the organization.⁷⁴

He took on a very risky task of collecting and storing the refugees' personal information, in hopes to help the many broken families to reunite. This put not only him but all those he had information about in danger if the information had gotten into the wrong hands.⁷⁵ This activity was somehow an exception to the way the organization usually operated, as there were generally not many written records about the activity of the organization.⁷⁶

Still also provided shelter for the fugitive slaves in his own house in Philadelphia. Not even the Fugitive Slave Act, that passed in 1850 discouraged Still from his work. The Act which stated that all the states in the United States, had to return the fugitive slaves found on their territory back to their owners, no matter how long it had been since the slave has escaped. This Act endangered not only the former slaves but also the people who knew about them since the law also forbid concealing of the information under the threat of \$1,000 fine or even 6 months in prison.⁷⁷

In 1850, Still also became chairman of the society's revived Vigilance Committee, which supported the fugitive African slaves. Thanks to this new position he has acquired, he was able to raise money to help fund the Underground Railroad's conductors' trips down south, included those conducted by Harriet Tubman herself.⁷⁸

Overall, Still was one of the major personalities of the Underground Railroad, whose role was essential for the organization's successful operation. Moreover, his book "the Underground Railroad," which documents his life work and experience while helping the slaves, is to date one of the most important documents about this period in history.⁷⁹

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Turner, "William Still's National Significance"

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Buckmaster. "The Underground Railroad.": 143.

⁷⁷ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, "What Was the Underground Railroad?"

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Turner, "William Still's National Significance"

Last, but not least, I would like to mention one more important member of the Underground Railroad, Levi Coffin who was, unlike the previous two members that I have mentioned, a free white man. Coffin was also nicknamed “The President of the Underground Railroad,” because his Station house was one of the most frequented ever, housing perhaps thousands of people over the period of his activity. For this reason, his house was often nicknamed “Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad.”⁸⁰

When Coffin has moved to Newport⁸¹ in Indiana, and he found out that his house was conveniently placed on one of the routes of the Underground Railroad, he and his wife Catherine have decided to offer their house to the fugitive slaves as a hiding place.⁸²

The Stations would then be scattered all over the eastern half of the United States as we know them today, the houses conveniently placed so far apart, that one could usually be reached from the other overnight on foot, which greatly lowered the chance the slaves would be caught.⁸³

As mentioned before, the ultimate goal of the slaves was to get to Canada. The slave-hunters who crossed the border while pursuing the Negroes, whether intentionally or not, would be shot down. The Canadian government tried to help the arriving slaves as much as possible, willing to accept them fully as part of the nation and community. Coffin himself would often go to Canada to visit the Negroes, to make sure they were getting by, and would even offer advice and assistance in their rehabilitation.⁸⁴

As the arrival of the Civil War drew closer, the bloody encounters between the pro- and anti-slavery parties along the border states increased, and the reinforcement of the Slavery laws became more difficult and less successful. In 1861, when the war was already fully raging and was spreading further down south, many of the slave holders were forced to leave their properties as well as most slaves behind, fleeing only with a handful of the strongest Negroes they owned.⁸⁵

The survivors were then transported north-ward, and provided with medical care, if necessary, as well as clothing, housing, and education. Some of the Cincinnati

⁸⁰ Buckmaster, "The Underground Railroad:" 144-145.

⁸¹ Now "Fountain City"

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Buckmaster, "The Underground Railroad:" 142-143.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 147.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 149.

Underground Agents would even take some of the slaves into their own homes to help them get on their feet. Finally, the Underground Railroad ceased to exist as a secret organization, and it came out into the open, publicly helping the now-former slaves, as the “Aid Commission.”⁸⁶

The Underground Railroad kept operating until January 1st, 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which liberated all of the slaves in the Southern Confederate states. After the end of the American Civil War, the 13th amendment to the Constitution was approved in 1865, abolishing slavery in the United States, which also marked the end of the Underground Railroad, as its activity was no longer needed.⁸⁷

There has also recently been published a novel simply titled “The Underground Railroad,” written by Colson Whitehead. This novel follows the story of a young Negro girl Cora who was born into slavery and at a young age abandoned by her mother, who has decided to escape on her own. Cora is one day approached by another slave Caesar, who asks her to accompany him on his way to freedom. The book then tells the story of their escape, providing the reader with a thrilling as well as chilling insight into the life that once was a reality for many Negro men, women, and children.

Despite taking inspiration in true historical events, Whitehead takes a rather fantastical approach towards his work, as he describes the Underground Railroad as an actual railroad that has been built underground, that is used by the organization. It is mentioned in the story that it was supposed to be built by the slaves themselves, but this part of the story is not very realistic, as it would be impossible to build something like that at the time with the equipment the people had, all the while going unnoticed by anybody.

But it was perhaps this approach combined with the crude and unedited reality of the slaves’ lives that resulted in an enormous success of Whitehead’s novel. In 2017, the author has received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his work, and it has become a bestseller.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 149.

⁸⁷ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, “What Was the Underground Railroad?”

2.3. The Secret Language of the Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad established and used a whole new secret language. The language was not however limited only to hiding secret messages in the lyrics of the Spirituals. Some expressions were used by the members in their everyday life to ensure their activity would remain secret. For example, the role of Tubman was otherwise known as “the Conductor,”⁸⁸ which was a person who would directly transport the slaves from the plantations, and between the safe houses of those who were willing to help hide the slaves on their way to freedom.⁸⁹

These Conductors were then operating in such a manner that would be the safest for both the slaves and the conductors. There would usually be one conductor who would spend some time around the area where the slaves wanted to escape from, communicate the details of the escape, and then pick up the slaves from the farm or wherever they were kept. Then these Conductors would immediately meet up with another Conductor that would continue-on with the refugees. The first conductor who had been spending time around the area, would then stay there and made sure that he was seen by the slave-owners or other white men in charge of the Blacks, which would rule them out as suspects that had anything to do with the escape.⁹⁰

Most Conductors would pose as for example teachers, geologists, map makers, or even musicians – basically, any profession that would justify their presence as outsiders in the deep south, and not raise any suspicion among the locals. Rial Cheadle, one of the conductors, would even act like an imbecile while traveling South to transport slaves. This way, anytime someone went missing, he would never look suspicious of helping the slaves escape.⁹¹

The houses that then provided temporary shelter to the slaves were then called “Stations,⁹²” and the owners of the houses who would take the fugitives in, were referred to as “the Station Masters.⁹³” These houses were usually specially modified in

⁸⁸ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, “Underground Railroad Secret Codes”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Buckmaster. "The Underground Railroad." 145.

⁹¹ Ibid. 144.

⁹² Harriet Tubman Historical Society, “Underground Railroad Secret Codes”

⁹³ Ibid.

order to hide the slaves without the risk of them being found by the slave hunters, or anyone else. These modifications included spaces such as hidden cellars, basements, cupboards, or even escape routes which mostly allowed the slaves and Conductors to enter and leave the house without being noticed.⁹⁴

The act of moving slaves from Station to Station was then referred to as “forwarding,⁹⁵” while the slaves themselves were called “Bundles of Wood.⁹⁶” A person who would then not directly work with the slaves, but would donate essentials such as money, clothes, or food, was called “the Stockholder.⁹⁷” A very important part of the Underground Railroad were the so-called “Agents.⁹⁸” The Agents’ role was to plan the slaves’ escape routes, and to make contacts, such as finding new Stockholders, or people who would be willing to become the Station Masters, and therefore offer their house as a hideout. One of the most famous Agents of the Underground Railroad was the afore-mentioned William Still.

2.4 Song Lyrics

Since most of the people Tubman helped, as well as herself, were illiterate, she came up with the idea of encoding secret messages into several Spiritual songs, which would help the slaves with their escape. Some songs would give the escapees directions on how to flee, (these songs are sometimes referred to as “the Signal Songs,”⁹⁹) while other instructed them on where to meet with Tubman, (also known as “Map Songs,”¹⁰⁰) who would then lead the fugitive slaves to freedom herself. An example of a map song is “Wade in the Water:”

*Wade in the Water. God’s gonna trouble the water.
Who are those children all dressed in Red?
God’s gonna trouble the water.*

⁹⁴ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, “Interesting facts about the Underground Railroad”

⁹⁵ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, “Underground Railroad Secret Codes”

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ “Songs of the Underground Railroad” Harriet Tubman Historical Society, Accessed March, 18, 2019, <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/songs-of-the-underground-railroad/>

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

*Must be the ones that Moses led.
God's gonna trouble the water.¹⁰¹*

As we can see, the line “wade in the water” probably advised the escaping slaves to pass through a body of water, most likely a river, in order to cover their tracks and avoid being seen. It is also possible that entering water would prevent them from being sniffed out by slave hunters’ dogs.

Another example of a map song, that I would like to mention, as the coded meaning here is pretty distinct, is “Follow the Drinking Gourd”:

*I 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.¹⁰²*

According to the Harriet Tubman Historical Society, “When the sun comes back,” means the arrival of spring, and the line “and the first quail calls” then further specifies the time, which would be the month of April, when the quails’ calling can be usually heard. They further say that the “Drinking Gourd” is a nickname for the Big Dipper, a constellation which points towards the Pole Star, and therefore towards the north.¹⁰³ I would say this analysis is rather well done. I personally first interpreted the first line “When the sun comes back,” as the arrival of a new day, but having learned about the way the slaves usually escaped, at night to stay hidden better, this way of interpreting the line is not likely.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid

A line that I would like to stress is “For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom,” which was not analyzed by the Harriet Tubman Historical Society, and I think is rather interesting. For me, “the old man” could either mean a member of the Underground Railroad, who has been possibly helping the slaves escape for a long time, therefore he is seen as a wise guide who would get the slaves to safety, or this man could be God himself, who is looking after his children.

Either way, this would suggest, that the first stanza advises the slaves to wait until spring, and in more particular April, when it gets warmer so that the Blacks would not have to worry about lower temperatures at night. Then, they are instructed that they will be able to identify the right time by hearing “the quails’ calls,” and that the stars will help them to go in the right direction.

Again, the first line of the second stanza “The riverbank makes a very good road,” is not mentioned by the Harriet Tubman Historical Society, but it is quite obvious that it is meant to tell the slaves to travel alongside a river, perhaps the Mississippi river which flows from North and leads to the Gulf of Mexico in the south. It is also possible that the message here is the same as in “Wade in the Water,” that is, if the slaves walk alongside the riverbank in the water, it will help them to hide from the dogs.

“The dead trees will show you the way” is then again analyzed by the Harriet Tubman Historical Society, who propose that “the dead trees” is meant to refer to the moss which grows on the trees, usually on the north side. This is perhaps an indication of what to do, if the stars are covered by clouds.¹⁰⁴

Apart from the members of the Underground Railroad, the signal songs could also be sung by the escaping slaves themselves. Some songs were supposed to let the slaves around, as well as the members of the organization, know that the slave was ready to run away the following night. One of these songs is “Swing low, sweet chariot”:

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

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

*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.¹⁰⁵*

The Harriet Tubman Historical Society once again provide us with an interpretation of some of the lyrics. According to them, the expression “Sweet chariot,” directly refers to the Underground railroad itself, while “swing low” is a command or maybe a wish for the members of the organization to come south, to help those still in bondage. Finally, the line “Coming for to carry me home,” most likely means for the slaves to be brought to Canada, where they could live freely.¹⁰⁶

There is also a part that I would like to mention, but the source which I used here does not mention it in the analysis of the song. The Harriet Tubman Historical Society also provide us with a short glossary of terms often used by the Underground Railroad members. According to this glossary, the river Jordan is a name used to speak about the Ohio River,¹⁰⁷ which runs along the northern borders of the states of Kentucky and West Virginia. The Ohio River, or “Jordan” could then be the imaginary border between slavery and freedom for the slaves, as the Northern States would become anti-slavery much sooner than the Southern States. Finally, I think the line “A band of angels coming after me” could be yet another metaphor referring to the members of the organization, who are called “angels” simply because they have come to save those that needed it, perhaps as if they were sent by God himself.

As seen in the previous two stanzas, the lyrics would use biblical metaphors and references, which was also the reason why Tubman earned the nickname “Moses,” which would also appear in the lyrics. Soon, Tubman’s songs began to be called “the Songs of the Underground Railroad.”¹⁰⁸ Tubman’s nickname gives us another

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ “Underground Railroad Secret Codes” Harriet Tubman Historical Society, Accessed March, 19, 2020, <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/underground-railroad-secret-codes/>

¹⁰⁸ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, “Songs of the Underground Railroad”

perspective on some of the lyrics that I have already studied in the first part of my thesis, such as “Go Down, Moses”:

Go down, Moses,

Way down in Egyptland

Tell old Pharaoh

*To let my people go*¹⁰⁹

Having learned about the organization and Tubman herself, the lyrics could suddenly gain quite a different message. Perhaps “go down, Moses“ might be the call of the salves to Tubman herself, to come back to the south to help them. I dare assume, that the song might be a direct message, to whoever from the Underground Railroad might be in the earshot, that the slave was ready to try and escape from their master. This would suggest, that “Go down Moses” is yet another example of a signal song.

With the knowledge we now have about the practices the Underground Railroad often used to help the slaves escape to safety, it does not seem far-fetched to say that using the song lyrics to communicate secretly was very possible, whether we are talking about the map songs or the signal songs. I would say it is very possible that the songs were really used in such way, since, as I have found out and proved, there are quite a lot of different songs that seem to hide those messages.

¹⁰⁹ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 14.

Conclusion

In summary, the Spirituals have evolved under quite unique circumstances, from the African cultural origin of the enslaved Blacks which was deeply spiritual and included the worship of the divine into everyday life of the people, and the enslavement of the Blacks itself, which caused the pain and suffering, as well as the undying resilience, a feature that is not hard to notice in the lyrics of the Spirituals.

When the slaves had arrived at the new continent, not only has it resulted in mixing and combining their individual religious beliefs but later-on these beliefs merged with the Christian religion of their masters as well. The introduction of the slaves to the Christian religion was however not immediate, as at first, the slave owners did not care for the slaves' religious education. They were only introduced to the Bible roughly about a century after the slave trade had been established. Even though the Bible was intended to be used as a tool to make the slaves more obedient, it has done quite the opposite, as the slaves interpreted the word of God in their way, and were able to see the parallels between themselves and the Moses' people who had also been enslaved by the Egyptian Pharaoh. It is not a surprise that the character of Moses was one of the most popular among the slaves, as he represented the messiah through whom God saved the Israelites from slavery. For this reason, the Spiritual texts are full of references to the Old Testament of the Bible, as well as the figures it features.

The lyrics of the songs that the Blacks sung during their works in the fields therefore reflected their deep spiritualism as well as the newly discovered biblical themes. Additionally, the rhythm of the songs would help them to keep up the same pace of their work, something they were used to practice from the life back in Africa. However, it was not only the slaves' will to sing while working. Frederick Douglass also mentions in his "My Bondage and My Freedom," that the slaves would be made to sing during their work so that their overseers were able to easily locate them in the often too-high crops, so the songs was also a practical tool utilized by the whites.

Further on, I also highlight a potential double meaning of the lyrics of the Spirituals, which stems from the closeness of the sacred and secular in the Blacks' minds. It is hard to say whether the lyrics speak of freedom in the literal way, that is, the slaves wish to escape and go to Canada to be free, or if they simply speak of the freedom they would acquire in the afterlife, and so they are singing about the wish to escape their misery by

dying. Given that the sacred and secular worlds are so tightly intertwined for the Negroes, I think there is no right answer to that question, and the truth simply lies somewhere in between.

In my second chapter I then concentrate on the Underground Railroad, a secret organization which was established at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is safe to say that the Underground Railroad was one of the biggest and most complex secret organizations that has ever existed. It is a proof of the Black resilience, as well as representation of human solidarity, given that those that have made part of the Underground Railroad, were willingly putting themselves in danger for the sake of others, expecting nothing in return, whether we are talking about those that have directly led the slaves from the plantation to freedom, those who provided them with a place to hide, or those who simply provided the organization with financial or material help. It is a chapter of history that definitely deserves more attention and recognition.

I talk specifically about three important characters that have helped greatly to the Blacks who have decided to pursue their freedom. The first one being Harriet Tubman, an ex-slave herself, who has decided to help others escape from their masters after her successful escape. Tubman also allegedly hid secret messages within the lyrics of the spiritual songs which were supposed to help the slaves find their way to freedom, if they decided to run on their own.

The second character I mention is William Still, also born into slavery, who has managed to escape at a very young age with his mother. Still was what the Underground Railroad called “a Station Master,” meaning that he provided his house to those that needed hideout when on the run. He was also chairman of the society’s revived Vigilance Committee, which supported the fugitive African slaves.

Last, but not least I talk about Levi Coffin, who had a similar role to that of Still. Coffin was also “a Station Master” himself. Unlike the previous two I talked about, Coffin was a free white man. He and his wife have however dedicated their lives to helping those in need, despite it putting them in danger as well. Coffin has accustomed his house to the work he did, equipping it with many secret rooms and spots for the slaves to hide when they arrived to his house.

I then go on and describe the secret language the members of the Underground Railroad used to ensure their activity stayed secret. I bring up and explain several of the terms

that were used by the Conductors when communicating among each other that were used to refer to the slaves themselves, the different members of the organization, or even the activities which concerned the transport of the slaves.

Additionally, when it comes to the question of whether or not the lyrics of the Spirituals contain hidden messages within their lines, it is still hard to make a sure conclusion. I feel that if the members of the Underground Railroad could come up with so many terms to secretly communicate their activities to one another, it is possible that this reflected onto the Spirituals as well. Having learned about the level of secrecy these slaves had to be escaping with, it is nearly impossible they all had the opportunity to meet up with some member of the organization and be instructed in detail on how to safely get to the free states. So, for some of those, the only instruction to a successful escape might be the coded message in a song they once heard at the plantation.

Resumé

Spirituály vznikly za unikátních podmínek, od afrického kulturního původu zotročených černochů, který byl hluboce spirituální, a zahrnoval uctívání božského do běžného života lidí, až po samotné zotročení těchto černochů, které v nich vzbudilo pocity bolesti a utrpení, stejně jako rezistence, tématice, kterou není v textech spirituálů těžké zaznamenat.

Příchod otroků na nový kontinent nejen způsobilo mísení jejich individuálních náboženských přesvědčení, ale tato přesvědčení také později splynula s vírou jejich pánů. Nicméně, sezámení otroků s Křesťanstvím nenastalo okamžitě, a to z toho důvodu, že majitelé těchto otroků se nezajímali o jejich náboženské vzdělání. Těm byla tedy Bible představena až zhruba století po tom, co byl zaveden obchod s otroky. Ačkoli bylo zamýšleno použít Bibli jako nástroj k tomu, aby byli otroci více poslušní, stal se spíše pravý opak, jelikož ti si Slovo Boží vyložili po svém, a byli schopni odhalit podobnosti mezi jimi samými, a Mojžíšovým lidem, který byl rovněž zotročen egyptským faraonem. Z tohoto důvodu jsou také texty Spirituálů plné odkazů na Starý zákon a postavy, které v něm figurují.

Texty písní, které tito černoši zpívali během práce na polích tudíž ukazovaly jejich hluboký spiritualismus, stejně jako jimi nově objevená témata z Bible. Rytmus těchto písní jim také napomáhal udržet stejný rytmus práce, což využívali již dříve v Africe. Nicméně, nebyli to pouze otroci, kteří využívali písně při jejich práci. Frederick

Douglass také ve svém díle “My Bondage and My Freedom” zmiňuje, že otroci byli nuceni při práci zpívat, aby jejich dozorcí měli snadný přehled o tom, kde se v často příliš vysoko rostlých plodinách v polích nacházeli, takže písňe se prokázali být praktické i bílým otrokářům.

V první kapitole mé práce také podtrhuji možný dvojsmysl textů Spirituálů, který vychází ze spjatosti, se kterou černoši vnímali pojmy duchovna a světství. Těžko říci, zda tyto texty mluví o svobodě ve svém doslovném smyslu, což by znamenalo přání otroků utéct za svobodou do Kanady, nebo zda jednoduše vypovídají o svobodě, kterou by získali po smrti, a proto zpívají o přání útěku z jejich neštěstí ve formě smrti. Vzhledem k tomu, že tyto dva protipóly byly pro černochoy natolik sblížené, domnívám se, že na tuto otázku neexistuje správná odpověď, a pravda jednoduše leží někde na pomezí.

V druhé kapitole se také zaměřuji na Podzemní železnici, tajnou organizaci, která vznikla na počátku devatenáctého století. Dalo by se říci, že Podzemní železnice patří mezi jednu z největších a nejkomplexnějších tajných organizací, která kdy existovala. Jedná se o důkaz černošské rezistence, stejně jako reprezenataci lidské solidarity, bereme-li v potaz to, že ti, kteří byli členové Podzemní železnice, se vědomě vystavovali nebezpečí ve prospěch druhých, aniž by za to očekávali cokoli nazpět, ať už mluvíme o těch, kteří je osobně dovedli z plantáží až ke svobodě, o těch, kteří jim poskytli úkryt, nebo o těch, kteří pouze poskytli této organizaci finanční, nebo materiální podporu. Jedná se o kapitolu z historie, která si rozhodně zaslouží více pozornosti a uznání.

V kapitole druhé se věnuji především třem důležitým postavám, které obzvláště pomohly těm černošům, kteří se rozhodli vydat za svobodou. První z nich je Harriet Tubmanová, jenž sama bývala otrokem, a která se po svém úspěšném útěku rozhodla pomoci i ostatním v cestě za svobodou. Tubmanová dále také údajně skrývala tajné vzkazy do textu spirituálů, které měly pomoci otrokům, pokud se rozhodli o útěk na vlastní pěst.

Další osobností, kterou zmiňuji, je William Still, také narozený do otroctví, jemuž se podařilo utéct ještě v mladém věku společně s jeho matkou. Still byl sám také tak zvaným „Pánem stanice,“ což znamenalo že poskytoval potřebným úkryt ve svém vlastního domě. Byl také předsedou Strážní komise, která podporovala otroky na útěku.

V neposlední řadě zmiňuji také Leviho Coffina, který v této organizaci měl podobnou roli jako Still. Coffin byl také „Pánem stanice.“ Narodil od předchozích dvou osobností, o kterých jsem mluvila, Coffin byl svobodným bělochem. Nicméně on i jeho žena věnovali svůj život pomoci potřebným, ačkoli je to stavělo do nebezpečné pozice. Coffin upravil svůj dům své práci, a vybavil ho mnohými tajnými pokoji a místy, kam se otroci mohli ukrýt když do domu dorazili.

Dále také popisují tajný kód, který využívali členové Podzemní železnice, aby se ujistili že jejich aktivita zůstala utajena. Jmenuji a dále také vysvětlují několik pojmů, které převozci používali ke komunikaci, a které označovaly buďto samotné otroky, různé členy organizace, nebo také aktivity které souvisely s přepravou otroků.

Co se týče otázky, zda spirituály ve svých rádcích obsahují skryté vzkazy, tak je stále těžké dojít k jistému závěru. Osobně se domnívám, že pokud členové Podzemní železnice byli schopni přijít na tolik různých pojmů, aby si mezi sebou tajně předali informace o svých aktivitách, je dost možné, že se tyto pojmy dostaly i do spirituálů. Vzhledem k tomu, že museli otroci ze zajetí utíkat v utajení, je téměř nemožné, aby měli všichni příležitost se setkat se členem Podzemní železnice, a byli do detailu poučeni o tom, jak se bezpečně dostat do svobodných států. Proto pro některé z nich byl dost možná jedinou instrukcí vzkaz skrytý v písni, kterou kdysi na plantáži zaslechli.

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Anotace

Tato práce se zabývá analýzou textů Černošských spirituálů. Spirituály vznikly v Severní americe po příchodu Afričanů, kteří byli zotročeni bělochy, a využívání jako levná pracovní síla. V tomto žánru se zrcadlí hluboké spirituální založení původních obyvatel Afriky, jenž se mísilo s křesťanskými ideologiemi, se kterými Afričané v Americe přišli do styku. Mým hlavním cílem bylo analyzovat tyto texty s ohledem na kulturní a náboženský původ afrických otroků, s důrazem na dvojitý význam sakrálních a sekulárních prvků, které se v těchto textech objevují. Dále se věnuji tajné organizaci zvané „Podzemní železnice,“ která těmto černošům pomáhala uniknout z otroctví, a údajně využívala spirituály jako způsob tajné komunikace tím, že do nich zakódovala tajné vzkazy.

Klíčová slova: černošské spirituály, otroctví, sakrální a sekulární význam, Podzemní železnice

Annotation

This Thesis deals with the analysis of the lyrics of the Negro Spirituals. Spirituals came into being in North America as a result of arrival of Africans who were enslaved by the Whites and used as a cheap workforce. The genre reflects the deep spirituality of the original African peoples mixed with the Christian ideologies that the slaves encountered in America. My main goal was to analyze the Spiritual texts, taking into consideration the Slaves' cultural and religious origin, highlighting the double meaning of sacral and secular that those texts carry. I also describe the secret organization called “the Underground Railroad” that helped the Blacks escape from slavery and allegedly used the Spirituals to hide secret messages in.

Key words: The Negro Spirituals, slavery, sacral and secular meaning, The Underground Railroad