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**Black History Told through Spirituals, and Spirituals
Throughout History**

Diplomová práce

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma "Black History Told through Spirituals, and Spirituals throughout History" vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne.....

Podpis

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1. Black History

1.1. Introduction

Nowadays, the term "Black History" is mainly used concerning the more recent Black history. Though the twentieth century has been perhaps the most important and life-altering for African Americans, there is much more to the story. To tell the story right, we need to go back to the 1600s, when the slave trade began. At the time, there was a great need for a cheap and efficient workforce, and since the Native people were not suitable for hard manual labor, the whites had to start looking elsewhere.

1.2. The Middle Passage

During this period, often referred to as "the Middle passage," the whites started coming to Africa, where they encountered the native people. Now, using the term "people" feels a little strange because although these were people, the Africans certainly were not treated as such. A quote in "On My Journey Now," written by an African-American writer and historian, Nikki Giovanni, perfectly describes the situation: "We say that the slavers went to Africa to get the slaves, which is far from true. The slavers went to Africa to get the Africans to make them slaves."¹

One would say this is just a play on words, but I think Giovanni highlights a clear difference. The Africans had not always been slaves; the whites have made them be ones.

The Africans the whites found on the land were captured, bound, and marched to the west coast to be put into the bellies of ships and taken somewhere unknown. Not only that, but the villages of these people were being burnt to the ground, the weak and "invaluable" children murdered, and those that by some miracle had managed to escape the slavers were left without their home or their people. Many people did not survive the march to the coast. So many people died on the way or were too weak to continue, so they were left behind, which caused the scavengers living in the surrounding land to start to follow the slavers' paths. Just the fact that the actions of a man influenced the natural way of things on such a grand scale proves that there is something very unnatural about these actions.²

¹ Giovanni, Nikki, *On My Journey Now*, pp. (Cambridge: Cadlewick Press, 2007), 3.

² Ibid.

Those that survived the march were taken to places such as Cape Coast Castle or Goreé Island, where they were put into the bellies of the ships waiting for them and sent into the unknown. Giovanni also comments on this in "On My Journey Now":

*I've had the privilege of actually visiting Cape Coast Castle and Goreé Island and also Dachau, the site of the Nazi concentration camp. When I was in Dachau, I smelled the gas. As you traveled through, you could smell the gas. And in the dungeons where they were holding the Africans to take them to America to make them slaves, you could hear the moans. I was talking to the singer Roberta Flack at one point, and she said, "Did you, girl? Did you hear it?" And I said, "Ro, I did." I mean, you feel it, it's there. It's sort of a moan.*³

Once the Africans were at the coast, they were separated – families, tribes, and people who spoke the same language could not stay together. This was done so the people could not plot against the slavers. Once they were taken to the ships, they had to be kept under the deck for at least the first two days of the journey. This was because the slavers quickly learned that if they let the slaves see the African land on the horizon, they would try to jump overboard and swim back home. Only after the land was not visible anymore, the slaves would not risk jumping into the water as much. However, those that did jump would get shot by the white men, or sharks would often attack them. Much like the scavengers on land changed their patterns, even the sea predators started following the ships west, feeding on those who jumped overboard or the bodies were thrown out.

After a couple of days, when the Africans could not see land anymore, the slavers knew that this was the time when they had to be cautious. Once the slaves did not see the land anymore and realized there was no going back, the tension started to rise.⁴ It was also crucial for the slavers to keep them healthy-looking throughout the journey; otherwise, they would lose value on the auctioning block. The slaves figured this out fairly quickly, which is why they sometimes went on hunger strikes, refusing to eat. When this happened, the slavers had to force the slaves to eat.⁵

³ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 3-4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

It is important to remember that these people had no means of communication; they spoke a dozen different languages. Singing, or “the moan,” was the only thing they had to communicate, to unite as well as a way for the slaves to calm their fears. Nobody knew what was waiting for them on the shore when they finally arrived at their destination; the only thing they knew was that whatever it was, it would not be enjoyable.

1.3. In Slavery

Once they did arrive, they were taken to the auctioning block, stripped naked, and presented to the sellers. After they were bought, they were branded, chained, and left with their Masters.⁶ Giovanni hints at their incredible resilience in her re-telling of their story:

And despite being bought and sold, they had to find a way to thrive... Where they now lived was their home, which they came to love as their home. But it was also a plantation where they were owned. It was a place where they could leave behind bad things from the past, where they could be reborn. And yet, it was their prison.⁷

This resilience and will to not only survive but also live is apparent in the lyrics of the Spirituals. However, I will comment on that later.

The Africans had to adapt to the new environment, but that does not mean they left behind their ways of worship and their ways of work. When the slaves were forced to work in the plantations, they did what they would do back in Africa when tending to their crops. They sang songs to pace their work. Of course, these songs were not in English but in their native tongues, sometimes making the overseers uncomfortable because they did not understand what the slaves were singing about.

Like in Africa, the songs would be incorporated into the slaves' entire days; they would sing their prayers throughout the day and even sing work songs in the field. When it was time for lunch or dinner, they had different songs as well; some of them were similar to the prayers Christians are known to do before they start their meal. Others were purely secular and described their day and life experiences in slavery.

⁶ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

The songs became part of their storytelling. A slave could learn how to read and write, but it was unsafe for them to do so. If the slave was found reading or writing, they were punished, but often the owners would decide to sell the slave away. Because being literate meant that the slave could teach other slaves, it would be easier for the slaves to communicate. They could leave each other notes and make arrangements for escape, so it was safer for the owner to get rid of these people. So, it was often safer to communicate only verbally through songs. Because the slaves were already singing throughout the day, it was not unusual for them, and therefore it was not questioned by the overseers.⁸

1.3.1. The Introduction to Christianity

At first, there was no attempt to introduce the slaves to Christianity, as no whites cared for the slaves' salvation. The slaves' days were all the same; every day, the slaves woke up, ate breakfast, worked in the fields, ate some more, and went to bed. They did not know how much time had passed in their lives; the only difference they could tell was between day and night – during the day, the slaves worked, and at night they rested. But this eventually changed when in the late 1700s, the wandering preachers started coming to the South to spread the Lord's scripture. At this point, the people in bondage were introduced to Christianity, and most took on the religion as their own. Phillis Wheatley, an African-American author of the time, wrote:

*Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join the angelic train.*

Just from this short piece of writing, we can see that the Blacks were clever. They could find a relation to themselves in the Bible, even though it was essentially a scripture of the whites at this point. This text says this, "We are God's children, too. We are the same as those people in the Bible."

As the religion spread among the slaves more and more, their routines also started changing. The masters would eventually allow the slaves to stop working on Sundays so that they could pray and celebrate God and Jesus. Now, the slaves would count down

⁸ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 12-15.

the days until next Sunday when they could go to service again. And in service, they sang their prayers to the Lord.⁹

1.4. The Escape and The Underground Railroad

Given the circumstances in which the slaves found themselves, it is unsurprising that some tried to escape slavery. The ultimate goal was for the slaves to escape to Canada, where slavery was not legal as it was in the United States. If the runaways could not make it to Canada, at least they aimed for the Northern states where slavery was abolished.¹⁰ But they had to know how and where to run away. Of course, organizing mass gatherings with tips and tricks on how to escape was impossible, so they had to get creative with how to do it. And since songs had already been a significant part of their lives, why not use them for escape too?

One of the most famous people who helped slaves escape, Harriet Tubman, was also the one who had the idea of hiding secret messages in the lyrics of the songs. Given her reputation and the fact that the slaves have, at this point, been already familiar with the Bible, it was not surprising that in Tubman, they saw their own Moses – someone who was going to lead them out of bondage to freedom. While some of her songs, such as "The Old Ship of Zion," were her own, her reputation has reached so far ahead that the slaves have composed songs about her. An example would be "Go Down Moses," which was probably a call to Tubman to come to the South and help the slave escape.¹¹

In her book "On My Journey Now," Giovanni also mentions the secret organization that was created to help the slaves escape. This organization was called "The Underground Railroad," and Giovanni says this:

I've always been interested in the Underground Railroad. I'm proud of the Quakers, and I think it was a wonderful thing that they shared our love of freedom and opened up their homes for us. Quakers actually were arrested and sent to jail, as were European Catholics in World War II, who were kind enough to Jewish kids and families. You know, we've always had situations like that.¹²

Giovanni hints at the Quakers here, who were known for being very helpful to the slaves with their escape. She also points out an interesting parallel between the slaves

⁹ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 26-27.

¹⁰ Buckmaster, "The Underground Railroad:" 142-143.

¹¹ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 16-17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

and the Jews during World War II, showing that history repeats throughout the centuries.

Giovanni also mentions that it was not safe for the slaves to try and run during the night because there were way too many guard dogs around. This logic seems strange because many songs mention running during the night and following the stars to find the way.

The Quakers also used an interesting set of signals to tell the approaching slaves whether or not it was safe to come to the Quakers' houses. They made several quilts of various colors and patterns and hung them in front of their houses to communicate. If the quilt hanging outside their house was very colorful and full of patterns, it meant, "Be careful, don't come here now." Giovanni stresses that it would have been impossible for the slaves to read those quilts during the night, so they had to come mainly in the daytime when there was still light outside.¹³

One of the best ways to escape would be from plantation to plantation. The plantations typically had a larger number of slaves working on them, so if the runaway slave wanted to hide somewhere, it was the easiest to hide among the masses, in plain sight. No slave-owner or overseer could tell if the slave were there the day before or not by just looking at their face. The overseers likely did not bother memorizing the slaves' faces, so nobody could tell if a new face appeared and disappeared a few days later.¹⁴

If some of the slaves were caught during the day, it was important for the runaways to have a story in place. They would say that their master had sent them on an errand, but they needed to be believable in their story. If a runaway slave was stopped, they had to remain calm and keep their demeanor, saying, "I belong to somebody." The slave had to be able to look the other person straight in the eye and tell them their story. If they so much as broke a sweat, they would get caught.

It is fascinating that if someone tried to disappear among the others on a plantation, the slaves working there never turned anyone in. They would cover for the runaway slave and act as if they had always lived there. This was perhaps also why so many of them were never caught. Of course, some were found and returned to their owners, but a

¹³ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

much more significant percentage have managed to escape. The South admits it was about a hundred thousand slaves who successfully escaped from bondage.¹⁵

The Fugitive Slave Act, which passed in 1850, proves just how many slaves managed to get away. This Act was a severe complication not only for the escaping slaves but also for the Underground Railroad and anyone else who would help the slaves on their way to freedom. The Act stated that anyone who possesses the knowledge of a runaway slave must come forward and announce it to authorities. Anyone who would not come forward with the information would be punished upon being found out. Of course, anyone who helped the slaves with their escape, colored or not, would face imprisonment, financial fines, or other punishments.

However, the Fugitive Slave Act did not stop the slaves from running away. It did not stop the Quakers or the Underground Railroad from helping them, and it did not stop Tubman from coming back to the Southern states over and over again to help more slaves to freedom. It only made the process more complicated than before.¹⁶

1.5. Those Remaining in Slavery

Even though I have been concentrating on the slaves that decided to run away, it is still important to remember those who did not, those who stayed in bondage, and their stories. Those who chose to stay had to find a way to survive, and they had to find something to live for. Once their day on the plantation was over and they ate their dinner and said their prayers, they had a little time for themselves. But instead of going to sleep early, they often stayed up and brought out any musical instruments they could get their hands on. For example, they could make a simple flute out of a piece of wood or a drum out of a pot or a pan. Using these makeshift instruments, they made music. The slaves would pour their worries and struggles into this music, using it to flush out their sorrows.

The communities they created for themselves, these evenings after a day of hard work, were their safe havens. It was a place with no judgment or prejudice; therefore, they could open up, bring up their pain and sorrow, and let it go through music, through song.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 19-20.

¹⁶ Harriet Tubman Historical Society, "What Was the Underground Railroad?"

¹⁷ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, pp. 22-24.

1.5.1. Rebellion and Nat Turner

Just because some slaves chose not to run away does not mean they stopped fighting. There were several rebellions where the slaves tried to win their freedom by force. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these rebellions were quickly suspended by the whites.

The largest uprising to ever happen in the times before the American Revolution started in 1739 near the Stono River in South Carolina, which is why it is often called the "Stono rebellion." The slaves participating in the rebellion managed to raid a nearby firearms shop, and armed with the stolen weapons, they headed south. On their way, they killed over twenty whites, and by the end of the rebellion, the group of rebels grew to about 60 members. It is not clear where exactly the group was headed, but they may likely have been heading towards St. Augustine in Florida, which was under Spanish rule and was offering freedom and land to the escaping slaves. The rebellion was quickly stopped, and those that did not manage to escape the whites were captured and executed. Furthermore, a new Negro Act was passed, which further limited the rights of slaves.¹⁸ One of the things the Act was newly banned was the use of drums, as the whites feared that the Slaves were using drums as means of communication.¹⁹

Still, there was one rebellion, led by a slave by the name of Nat Turner, that nowadays is considered at least partially successful. Nat Turner was born into slavery in Virginia on October 2, 1800. Both he and his mother were the property of a wealthy plantation owner. His mother, an African native, was very passionate in her anti-slavery views, which influenced Turner's ideals and opinions in youth and later on in life. Turner learned how to read from one of his owner's sons, and thanks to this, he became familiar with the Bible and consequently became deeply religious.

Shortly after, in the early 1820s, he was sold to a neighboring farmer, and during the following decade, his deep spirituality slowly tumbled into religious fanaticism. He considered himself a prophet called upon by God, who was supposed to start a rebellion and lead his people from bondage to freedom. He has also managed to win over a portion of the nearby slaves, who started following him and his beliefs and even received the nickname "the Prophet."

¹⁸ "Stono rebellion," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed July 8, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Stono-rebellion>

¹⁹ "Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*," pp., 39.

In 1831, he was sold again to a craftsman named Joseph Travis. It was around a time of a Solar eclipse, which Turner interpreted as a sign from God that the time had come to start the rebellion. Turner planned first to capture Jerusalem, the armory at the county seat, and then continue east to the Dismal Swamp, where the uprising could start camp. On the night of August 21, Turner gathered several of his fellow slaves and followers, entered Travis' home, and murdered him together with his family in their sleep. During their 30-mile march on Jerusalem, which took them two days and nights, the group managed to murder around 60 whites. Despite his detailed planning, Turner's group never made it to Jerusalem, having been captured only a few miles before the county seat by the state militia of about 3000 armed men.

Turner's rebellion started mass hysteria among the whites, and apart from Turner and his group, many innocent slaves were also massacred by the whites in fear of another uprising. Turner and his followers were tried and sentenced to death by hanging.

This rebellion effectively ended the myth that the slaves were either content with their situation in bondage or too primitive and servile to start an armed rebellion. This event was discussed among the slaves for years to come, and the name Jerusalem became linked to the biblical city and the place where the rebel slaves met their death.

The rebellion also set off a new wave of legislation that made the lives of the slaves even more complicated than they were before. The slaves were strictly prohibited from education, free movement, and assembly. At the same time, proslavery and antiabolitionist convictions were strengthened in American society and lasted well until the American Civil War, which raged between 1861 and 1865.²⁰

1.6. Civil War

The tensions between North and South started growing approximately after 1815 when the economy of the Northern states began rapidly modernizing. The states no longer relied solely on agriculture as their primary source of income; now, industrialization was in full swing. The Northerners also started the construction of modern transportation systems that included railroads, canals, and roads. Moreover, the financial sphere also noted new developments with newly introduced banking and insurance.

²⁰ "Nat Turner," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed July 7, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nat-Turner>

On the other hand, the Southern economy still heavily relied on agriculture, which meant that the cheap workforce of slaves was necessary here. While the North invested mainly in the new industries, the South continued to invest in slaves. This was further reinforced in the 1850s when the price of cotton skyrocketed, and the slave trade continued to flourish. By 1860 the Southern whites were twice as wealthy as those from the North, and three-fifths of the wealthiest individuals were also from the South.

With the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, when the United States acquired new large territory, there was an even greater need for a workforce in the South than before. Around the same time, the calls for a total abolishment of slavery grew louder in the North. In 1860, after the election of Abraham Lincoln, who represented the antislavery Republican party, several Southern states allied and declared themselves as the "Confederate States of America."

The war started a year later, in 1861, and shortly after that, four states joined the Confederacy. Interestingly, even after the start of the war, Lincoln was somewhat apprehensive about the emancipation of the slaves. Lincoln was trying to keep the slave-owning states, such as Delaware, Missouri, and especially Kentucky, in the Union since these states joining the Confederacy could be fatal for the Union.

Additionally, slavery was protected by the law, especially property rights, which made it even more complicated for Lincoln if he wanted to abolish slavery nation-wide. Lincoln also believed that there was a high number of Unionists in the southern states and that, with time, they would eventually revolt against the Confederate government.

However, August of 1861 brought about developments that brought an advantage to the Union's interests. Congress passed its First Confiscation Act, which allowed the Union troops to confiscate the enemy property, which also included the slaves themselves.

In 1862, a Second Confiscation Act was passed, which mandated Confederate civilians to free their slaves. Two days later, slavery was banned from the territories by Congress as well. Later on, Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, which as of January 1, 1863, would free even those slaves who were not in the areas under the Union's control. The Emancipation Proclamation was mainly meant to target those states that were not entirely under Union's power.

The Emancipation Proclamation allowed Black men to serve in the Union army. Until this point, it had been illegal for Blacks to join the military as stated by the law enacted in 1792. The Blacks realized what Confederate's victory would mean to them, which drove them to join the service in large numbers. It is estimated that by the war's end, about 180,000 African Americans joined the army throughout its course. This number then made up about 10 percent of the entire troops.

Despite all this, the African Americans had to form their Black troops, separated from the whites. Only a few of these soldiers also received an officer's rank. Initially, the Black troops were also paid significantly less than the whites. Despite all of this, these soldiers fought with admirable bravery and efficiency. Throughout the war, twenty-five Black men were awarded the Medal of Honor.

While men volunteered to join the fighting in the North, the situation in the South was quite the opposite. With the passing of the so-called "Twenty-Slave" law, those White men that owned more than twenty slaves could avoid military service. This law, however, was not passed upon the initiative of the men themselves but rather the wives of these slave-owners, who would then be left to run the plantations by themselves. It is clear why these women did not want to take on the responsibility as it would put them to risk of life in case of an uprising, which would be much harder to contain with most men at war.

War ended in 1864 with the triumph of the North mainly thanks to Lincoln's excellent leadership and the Confederate's failures in leadership and transportation and supply defects.²¹

Slavery was officially abolished a year later, in 1865, with the publication of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Interestingly, the Constitution never mentions the words "slave" or "slavery." Those sections that dealt with the issue of slavery in the Constitution were codified as "peculiar institutions." While the Emancipation Proclamation had already been declared by Abraham Lincoln, in that case, the Proclamation was more of a military strategy rather than a policy that had to do with human rights. It was only in 1865 that emancipation became a national

²¹ Low, D. Augustus, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, inc., 1981), 61-63.

policy through the Thirteenth Amendment. The Amendment was passed by the Senate in 1864 but only passed in the House in 1865.²²

1.6.1. After the Civil War

When the war was nearing its end, many of those who still owned slaves who did not want to lose their money started selling those slaves that they still owned. This, together with the fact that many ran away prior to the war, caused many couples and families to be separated. After the war had ended and the slaves were freed, many tried to go North to find their lost loved ones. Many ex-slaves even attempted to put notices in the newspaper in hopes of reconnecting with whoever they were looking for.²³

Only a year after the Thirteenth Amendment was published, a new University was founded in Nashville, Tennessee. The Fisk University was the first university that allowed African Americans to attend and receive their education. However, the University quickly met with financial troubles after several attacks from members of the Ku Klux Klan. The students wanted to help to raise the money to keep the University running, which is how the Fisk Jubilee Singers came into existence. I will comment on this group in more detail in the following chapter.²⁴

1.7. The Great War

When the Great War broke out in Europe, Americans were reluctant to involve themselves in the conflict. It was only in 1917 when the war started to affect international shipping and American trade that the United States began sending troops to Europe.

Many African American men had military experience from the Civil War and decided to volunteer and enlist in the army to be sent to Europe as support. Despite their eagerness to fight, many who arrived in Europe were then placed into noncombative roles in the military, such as suppliers, stevedores, or laborers.

However, there were exceptions, and some of those who came from America participated in the fights. Those were the members of the 92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions assigned to the French Army in April 1918. These soldiers were so brave and effective in combat that they received the nickname "Harlem Hellfighters." Another

²² Low, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, inc., 1981), 63.

²³ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

group of African Americans were assigned to the 370th Infantry Regiment and were nicknamed the "Black Devils" by Germans.

Even though they have done some heroic deeds, they were not welcome as such after they returned to America. Perhaps the only place where they were recognized as heroes was Harlem.²⁵

1.8. Harlem Renaissance

Also known as "The New Negro" or "Harlem Renaissance," it is not as much of a movement as it is a new point of view of the African American people and their culture that became especially strong after the First World War. The Harlem Renaissance writers cast aside the "minstrel tradition" and did not acknowledge the stereotypes.

One of the most important names of the movement is Marcus Garvey. His ideas appealed to African Americans, as these ideas revolved around a mass return of African American people back to Africa. A new term was also introduced, referencing stories and poems celebrating the continent: "Literary Garveyism."

The Negro Renaissance was only of brief duration as it started in the mid-1920s and only lasted to the end of the decade, with an unofficial center in Harlem, New York, where most of the Garveyism writers originated. Harlem was part of the city of New York, full of different languages, dialects, and nationalities. It attracted many liberal people, together with young African American artists and intellectuals from the United States and abroad. As new artists and talents kept coming to the Negro "Culture Capital," jazz, folklore, and spiritual music became increasingly popular. Arna Bontemps, one of the Black novelists and poets, stated in the preface of his book of poems, *Personals* (London, 1963), the following:

It did not take long to discover that I was just one of many young Negroes arriving in Harlem for the first time and with many of the same thoughts and intentions. Within a year or two we began to recognize ourselves as a "group" and to become a little self-conscious about our "significance." When we were not busy having fun, we were shown off and exhibited and presented in scores of

²⁵ "African Americans in the Military during World War I," National Archives, accessed July 17, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/wwi/war>

*places to all kinds of people. And we heard the sighs of wonder and amazement and sometimes admiration when it was whispered or announced that here was one of the "New Negroes."*²⁶

From Bontemps' testimony, it is evident that Harlem was not only a place of Black unity for many but also entertainment, art, and music. The last sentence, namely the part "sighs of wonder and amazement and sometimes admiration... that here was one of the "New Negroes.," shows that at this point, the Blacks were not only seen as human and equals but also admired and celebrated for their identity and art.

However, Hayden suggests that the writers and poets of Harlem might as well have been just posing their identification with their African roots to seem "fashionably exotic." Either way, the coming of African Americans to Harlem eventually resulted in the highest concentration of different aspects of Negro culture in history. Alain Locke proclaims in his Foreword of "The New Negro":

*There has come a Development that makes these phases of Negro life interesting and significant segment of the general American scene... the full significance of that even is a racial awakening on a national and even perhaps a world scale.*²⁷

While their main aim was to integrate the Black and White people, not to separate them, Locke also stresses that despite mixing the two races, each should still keep their own customs and traditions. He also compares the significance of Harlem to Afro-Americans to the one of Prague to newly-formed Czechoslovakia.

1.9. American civil rights movement

Even though slavery was abolished after the Civil War, there were still tensions in American society regarding the integration of African Americans. These struggles continued until the next century. In response to this, the civil rights movement was established after the Second World War, and though it started in the 1950s, it became the most vocal and active in the '60s. After the significant civil rights legislation was passed between 1964 and 1965, the activists concentrated their efforts on other social

²⁶ Locke, *The New Negro*, 16.

²⁷ *The New Negro*, 16-17.

issues, such as the economic, cultural, and political consequences of past racial oppression.²⁸

This was also when the still prevalent racial segregation was primarily criticized by the members of the civil rights movement. Amongst those who advocated for the rights of the Blacks were, for example, African American author and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, a prominent African American entertainer Paul Robeson or Thurgood Marshall. However, those people had already challenged racial inequality even before the movement started. In 1909, some African American intellectuals joined their white proponents and formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which became the nation's most prominent civil rights organization.

This organization kept gaining momentum throughout the 20th century, and during the civil rights movement has inspired more people to join the movement and protest against racial inequality and segregation. However, once segregation was ruled unconstitutional in 1954, schools and other official institutions had no set time limit to desegregate. The call for desegregation "with deliberate speed" caused the process to last years before segregation was reduced entirely.²⁹

1955 brought yet another wave of Black resilience when the bus boycott began. The boycott started after an incident that involved a Black activist Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. Since then, the Black activists and their allies refused to use public transport until it was fully desegregated. These boycott supporters chose Martin Luther King jr. as the head of their movement in Montgomery, Alabama, called the "Montgomery Improvement Association." Shortly after, King became one of the most influential personalities of non-violent resistance against segregation. The following year, in 1956, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of King and his supporters and ordered the desegregation of the bus system.

In 1961, the civil rights protests grew in intensity. This time even the southern states were targeted. The activists organized protests, some even coming down from other states. These protests were, however, often stopped, and many of these activists were arrested for disobeying the rules of racial segregation. Some African Americans would

²⁸ Low, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, 241-243.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

purposefully get on the White buses to protest against the segregation laws. Their protests were later-on titled "the Freedom Rides."³⁰

The Freedom Rides also encouraged other Southern states and cities to protest against segregation in similar non-violent ways.

As the 1960s progressed, these non-violent demonstrations would get interrupted by sometimes very brutal law-enforcement personnel. This was especially the case in Birmingham, Alabama, where these confrontations were televised and caused federal intervention. Even King reacted to these events in his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," where he defended the activists and warned that if not heard, these African Americans might turn to Black Nationalism, which could eventually lead to racial war in the United States. In reaction to both these events and King's essay, the president of the time, John F. Kennedy, introduced new legislation that would eventually become the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The protests continued to grow in intensity and numbers until August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This event was attended by over 200 000 participants and was concluded by King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Two years later, following the mass protests in Selma nad Montgomery, two cities of Alabama, African Americans were also granted the right to vote, which was introduced by Pres. Lydon B. Johnson in new legislation. This legislation became the Voting Rights Act od 1965.³¹

However, even this success was still not enough for the African Americans as they stived absolute equality, including political power and cultural autonomy. To achieve this, they needed to build Black-controlled institutions.

1.9.1. Martin Luther King jr.

As already mentioned, Martin Luther King jr. was a very loud voice of African Americans in times when they were yet to be heard by state officials. King's efforts were awarded in 1964 when he received a Nobel Peace Prize, an accomplishment for King himself and all the African Americans in the country.

³⁰ "Montgomery bus boycott to the Voting Rights Act," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/American-civil-rights-movement/Montgomery-bus-boycott-to-the-Voting-Rights-Act>

³¹ Ibid.

Two years later, in 1966, King turned his attention toward the Black issues of the North when he launched a campaign in Chicago. King wanted to address the still-prevalent segregation issues and the living conditions in the city slums. King, however, encountered an obstacle, this time not from whites but Blacks. At this time, new militant organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, were on the rise. These organizations were not peacekeepers like King and called for more drastic measures to be taken in the name of "Black Power." These activists claimed the non-violent reforms were insufficient and did not help poor and powerless Blacks. They claimed that African Americans should take their power "by any means necessary." King, being the peacekeeper, criticized these separatist ideologies and armed self-defense.

It was not only this kind of violence that King was openly against. During the Vietnam War, he also openly criticized American involvement in the conflict. Furthermore, he voiced his opinions on American involvement in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In 1967, King launched Poor People's Campaign, one intended to end poverty, but this campaign was unsuccessful as it floundered after King's assassination in April 1968.

Despite all the efforts, it was concluded that racial integration efforts were unsuccessful, and the American society was moving "toward two societies. One Black, one white – separate and unequal." Later there were also claims that Black gains caused "reverse discrimination" against whites. Those claims were also used against the civil rights activists of the 1970s and '80s.³²

1.10. Into the 21st century

The American civil rights legislation formed the basis for other affirmative action. New programs were being created to help victims of discrimination – not only African American students and workers but also women or the disabled. Some former civil rights activists, such as Jonh Lewis, Andrew Young, or Jesse Jackson, entered politics to continue their work. The newly gained right to vote ensured that there were African American representatives in the political system. Soon enough, those elected African Americans held more power than nonviolent civil rights activists.

³² Low, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, 243-244.

Despite all this, the civil rights movement failed to enforce change in racially segregated communities where public schools, health care, and housing were of poor quality.³³

In April of 2014, the 50th anniversary of the civil rights act was celebrated at the Lyndon Presidential Library in Austin, Texas. The event included speeches of several influential politicians such as the President of the time, Barack Obama, and former presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. During the celebrations, Martin Luther King jr. was also posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. The same medal was also awarded to King's wife, Coretta Scott King,³⁴ another influential civil right activist, who passed away in 2006.³⁵

1.10.1. Black Lives Matter

The most recent developments in the situation of African Americans in the United States are marked by the formation of a new movement named "Black Lives Matter." This movement was formed in response to the United States' still-present anti-Black violence, especially police brutality, which primarily targets African Americans. The name "Black Lives Matter" calls attention to the unjust killings of African Americans, often by the hands of police officers, and demands that the Black lives are valued as much as the lives of White Americans.

One of the most infamous cases of police brutality against African American citizens is the case of George Floyd. Floyd passed away after the brutal intervention of a White Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes despite the man's pleas and protests that he could not breathe.

This incident was recorded on video by a bystander who then released it on social media, triggering massive, nationwide demonstrations. These protests also brought more attention to other victims of anti-Black police brutality, such as Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, who were both also murdered at the hands of police officers.

These events brought massive attention to the still-present issue in American society. The Black Lives Matter movement, being involved in the protests, consequently gained

³³ "From Black power to the assassination of Martin Luther King," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/American-civil-rights-movement/From-Black-power-to-the-assassination-of-Martin-Luther-King>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Low, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, 489.

more positive attention from the public. After these events, there were more calls for the accountability of the police, which was also perhaps why in 2021, Chauvin was tried in court and found guilty of murder. Floyd's case was one of the very few which were punished accordingly and sent the perpetrator to prison.³⁶

This movement perhaps had a critical influence on the most recent U.S. presidential elections of 2020. While the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, had been openly critical of the movement, claiming that it led to violence during protests, his opponent Joe Biden embraced the movement, which gained him the support of Black voters and eventual victory.³⁷

2. The Spirituals throughout history

2.1. The middle passage

It is safe to say that the African influence was present in forming the Spirituals as a genre. One element brought from Africa is the connection between the sacral and the secular, which is often present in the lyrics, as I have already proven in my thesis "The Hidden Messages in Negro Spirituals, and the Underground Railroad."³⁸ This meant that the Africans did not separate their working lives from the time of prayer – an element that would resurface later once they were in bondage on the New Continent.

It was a common practice to separate people – families, people from the same tribe, so they could not communicate with one another. Giovanni says they still found a way to unite: "What these captured people had - which is why I so admire these people – was a tone, a voice, a moan... Now, they ultimately are going to sing a lot of songs."³⁹ Some of these songs were genuinely sorrowful, but not all of them. Some were very hopeful. This was the time when the slaves had to decide whether they were going to let the slavers break them or whether they were going to rise:

*Done made my vow to the Lord,
And I never will turn back.
I will go,*

³⁶ "Subsequent protests George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed July 24, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Lives-Matter/Subsequent-protests-George-Floyd-Ahmaud-Arbery-and-Breonna-Taylor>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Eliška Týrová, "The Hidden Messages in Negro Spirituals, and the Underground Railroad" (Bc. thes., Palacký University, 2021), 36.

³⁹ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 7.

*I shall go,
To see what the end will be.*

*Done opened my mouth to the Lord,
And I never will turn back.
I will go,
I shall go,
To see what the end will be.⁴⁰*

Giovanni gives an example of the song above, which speaks of the experience of those first slaves brought from Africa. The lines "I will go, I shall go" show the determination that they felt—the determination to fight no matter what the future will bring. The line "Done made my vow to the Lord" suggests that this song likely came around only after the Christianization of the slaves. It is also the Christianization that it refers to. The term "made my vow to the Lord" says that the slaves accepted the Lord as their creator and vowed to follow Him. The line "Done opened my mouth to the Lord" probably means "I prayed to God." Finally, the refrain "I will go, I shall go, to see what my end will be." It shows the resilience and determination of the slaves to face their situation and fight for their lives and freedom. Concerning the religious theme, the slave says, "I put my fate in the hands of God, and I am ready for whatever fate he chose for me."

There is another song telling a similar story as the one above; however, this one is quite sorrowful compared to the first one:

*I told Jesus it would be alright if he changed my name,
I told Jesus it would be alright if he changed my name,
I told Jesus it would be alright if he changed my name.
And he told me that I would go hungry if he changed my name,
And he told me that I would go hungry if he changed my name,
And he told me that I would go hungry if he changed my name.⁴¹*

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 7-8.

The first line expresses a sort of humility. The slaves entrust themselves to God's hands and trust God to lead their fate no matter where it will lead them. A name was often all those people had left after they were enslaved, yet they were willing to give it up for God all the same. This shows how deeply spiritual these people were. The second line shows that the slave knew their future would not be easy, even with God on their side. Something that they are willing to risk nonetheless.

Giovanni also adds: "I always think it was a woman who started the singing because women do that. Somewhere in the belly of that ship, a woman started humming."⁴² Giovanni's writing often shows her what we would call "feminist views" today, but at the same time, she does so with a non-forceful elegance. I am convinced that it is because Giovanni utilizes her poet's language to express her opinions.

2.2. In slavery

As mentioned previously, the Blacks brought some of their old lifestyle and habits over the Atlantic. One of those habits was singing during their work in the fields. Now, these songs were more secular as they often described the slaves' everyday life:

Sunup to sundown, picking that cotton;

Sunup to sundown, work for the master;

Sunup to sundown, chains and shackles;

*No more auction block for me.*⁴³

This song clearly describes the slaves' routine – they would work throughout the day for their masters, picking cotton, chained up. The last line is the most interesting to me – "no more auction block for me." This line is more optimistic than the others as if the slaves were saying, "I am here, I have to work all day, and I have to work hard, but at least I am not being sold anymore. At least I have a place to stay."

Given that the slaves were not allowed to read or write, there was often no other way but to put some of their rules and routines into a song:

Let us break bread together on our knees (on our knees),

⁴² Ibid., 8.

⁴³ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 13.

Let us break bread together on our knees (on our knees),

When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,

O Lord, have mercy on me.⁴⁴

The first two lines speak of eating bread. This could refer to the solitary act of eating, or it could also refer to the Biblical Last Supper, during which it is believed that Jesus had instituted the Christian tradition of Eucharist; that is, eating bread, which represents Jesus' body. The following two lines are religious, but it is the line "When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun" that is very interesting. In "On My Journey Now," Giovanni mentions that some slaves brought to America were Muslim. Some of them must have kept their religious practices even in Slavery, as Muslims pray on their knees with their face turned to the east.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the line "O Lord, have mercy on me" sounds more like a typical Christian prayer. I think this is proof that not only were the slaves influenced by their Masters' beliefs, but they also passed their beliefs onto one another.

A more religious song that described the experience of the enslaved people was "They Crucified My Lord":

They crucified my Lord,

Not a word, not a word, not a word.

They crucified my Lord,

Not a word, not a word, not a word.

They crucified my Lord,

But he never said a mumbling word,

Not a word, not a word, not a word.⁴⁶

This song refers to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. According to Giovanni, the repeated phrase "not a word" refers to the fact that Jesus did not try to convince anyone to spare him or even advocate for himself. He knew it was what needed to be done, so he just

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁵ On My Journey Now, 14. Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 43.

accepted his fate. Giovanni draws a parallel between Jesus and the slaves, who also had to accept their fate. Giovanni adds: "but to accept is not embrace."⁴⁷

2.3. The Escape and The Underground Railroad

As already mentioned, one of the most famous personalities of the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman. She used some of her songs to communicate with the slaves, to let them know she was coming:

*'Tis the old ship of Zion,
'Tis the old ship of Zion,
'Tis the old ship of Zion,
Get on board! Get on board!*⁴⁸

While this song meant nothing much to the overseers, the slaves knew what was happening; Moses was coming to get them.⁴⁹ However, there were only so many slaves Tubman could help out of bondage herself. Some had to take their chances and run away without Tubman's assistance. In that case, Tubman came up with other songs. Songs that could help the runaways navigate their way to freedom:

*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.*⁵⁰

The first stanza of this song speaks of spring – when birds are starting to sing and the sun "comes back." It tells the slave which time of the year is the best to escape. The line "the old man is a-waiting to carry you to freedom" could speak of a member of the Underground Railroad who would be waiting somewhere to meet the slave, or it could

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.

refer to God himself. The last line of the stanza, "follow the drinking gourd," likely refers to the Big Dipper constellation, which would help the slaves find their way north.

The second stanza gives more instructions on how to escape. The line "The riverbank makes a very good road" tells the slaves to walk through water to avoid being found by the slave hunters' dogs. The following line, "The dead trees will show you the way," once again tells the slaves which way to go – generally, the moss on dead trees grows on the side facing North, so this is another way how the slave could get oriented in case the stars were not visible at the time or they were running during the day.

Another one of these songs was "Go Down, Moses." According to Giovanni, this one was different from the other two because though this song was about Tubman, it was likely not a Tubman song⁵¹:

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go*⁵²

Just from the first line, "Go down, Moses," we can see that this song is a call. A call to Tubman to come "down" south to save the slaves. "Egyptland," in this case, would be the southern states notoriously known for having been the states with the highest number of slaves. The word "Pharaoh" could, in this case, indicate the slave owners or perhaps the overseers at the plantations as well. The final line, "To let my people go," clearly expresses the longing for freedom all of these slaves felt.

2.4. Those Remaining in Slavery

Sometimes, those remaining in slavery would get an unexpected visitor, someone running away and hiding in plain sight. When these runaway slaves appeared, they had to let others know. But this could not be said plainly, because there was always the risk of being heard and caught. Instead, these runaways had a song to say, "I'm a runaway, don't punk me out":

*I'm trampin', trampin',
Trying to make heaven my home,*

⁵¹ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 17.

⁵² Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 14.

*I'm trampin', trampin',
Trying to make heaven my home.⁵³*

The line "I'm trampin'" is relatively self-explanatory. The slave was saying, "I am on the move. I am running." The other line, "Trying to make heaven my home," could be interpreted in more ways. One would be, "wherever I am going, it is going to be heaven; I am going to be free." The other way could also mean that the slave had to collect the courage and run. Perhaps these slaves thought that their life in slavery and escape was some sort of God's trial, and by facing it, they expected to get to heaven afterward. Given the dual nature of the spirituals, which carry both sacral and secular meanings, I am not leaning towards either of those interpretations as I think both are equally possible.

There were also more sorrowful songs. Sometimes the slaves must have felt like the whole world was crumbling around them. Perhaps their brother was sold, their child died, or they got whipped as a punishment. In these cases, they would sing:

*I've been in the storm so long,
You know I've been in the storm so long,
I've been in the storm so long,
O Lord, give me more time to pray.*

*I am a motherless child,
Singing, I am a motherless child,
I've been in the storm so long,
O Lord, give me more time to pray.⁵⁴*

The first stanza describes the harsh life these slaves had been living. "The storm" likely represents their lives – being sold, punished, working, and losing friends and family. The call to God "give me more time to pray" was perhaps the plea to be able to use prayer as an escape from their daily realities. Maybe prayer was the only thing that kept these people going.

⁵³ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 22-23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

The second stanza begins with the phrase, "I am a motherless child," and while many of these slaves have lost their mothers, I can not help but think of another meaning behind these words. Perhaps the slave singing this was saying that they felt alone with nobody to help them or soothe their sorrow like a mother would. Now the line "give me more time to pray" seems to be calling God to be the one who soothes these sorrows.

Many of these songs are genuinely sorrowful, and despite the Africans' incredible resilience, it is no surprise that sometimes they did feel truly hopeless and alone:

*And I couldn't hear nobody pray, O Lord,
I couldn't hear nobody pray, O Lord,
Oh, way down yonder by myself,
And I couldn't hear nobody pray.⁵⁵*

The line "I couldn't hear nobody pray" expresses loneliness and the fear that perhaps people are losing their faith and hope. The feeling of loneliness is further emphasized: "Oh, way down yonder by myself." The word "down" is vital here because it draws an imaginary line between humans and God. As if the slave was saying, "I know you are with me, but you are up there, and I am down here, alone."

There is also one more song that Giovanni mentions. This song is one of the more known songs, and it is also one of the happier songs; it is called "This Little Light of Mine":

*This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine,
Let it shine,
Let it shine!⁵⁶*

⁵⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

The most obvious interpretation of this song is, "This is me, and I am proud of who I am." In this case, the song is joyful. However, there is another interpretation by Kathleen Battle, who sings it more as a demand: "I am going to let it shine," which, according to her, means "I am going to live."⁵⁷

2.4.1. Rebellion and Nat Turner

As mentioned previously, Nat Turner was a deeply religious person. So it is no surprise that even Turner used the Spirituals during his rebellion. His song was "Steal Away":

*Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.*⁵⁸

Turner used this song to call out to his followers during the revolt he led in Southampton, Virginia, in 1831.⁵⁹ The repeated call to "steal away" could signal the slaves to escape their masters and join the revolt. The phrase "to Jesus" again highlights Turner's religious beliefs, as if he was saying, "we are doing this in the name of Jesus Christ." The phrase "steal away home" likely has no specific meaning other than "freedom." The slaves probably did not have any particular place or a "home" in mind where they could go after breaking free, so "home" to them was wherever freedom was. The last line, "I ain't got long to stay here," is full of hope, as if saying, "soon, I will be free."

Another Nat Turner song was "Were You There?" This song was, however, not sung by Turner but by the slaves about Turner. It emerged after Turner had already been captured and his rebellion had been dispersed:

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.*

⁵⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁹ "Unit 3, Emergence of Modern America," Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh, accessed July 29, 2022, <http://voices.pitt.edu/come-all-ye/ti/2006/Song%20Activities/03TamStealAway.html>

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*⁶⁰

The phrase "when they crucified my Lord" perhaps refers to the capture of Turner. Turner and many others believed that Turner was a prophet of God sent on Earth to save his people. The question "Were you there?" sounds like a rhetorical question as not many of those singing the song were present during Turner's capture. This means that nobody knows the truth about what happened. The phrase "it causes me to tremble" likely means that the slaves were emotional about this event, as many wished that Turner had been successful in his revolt. Turner's capture was then a very emotional moment for the slaves.

2.5. Civil War

During the Civil War, many of the runaway slaves coming from the South sought refuge in Washington D.C., in camps that president Abraham Lincoln often visited. These runaways were often referred to by the codename "contraband" since the Union soldiers would often free them during the Civil War and bring them North as a sort of "contraband." During one of those visits, which took place on Seventh Street in 1863, Lincoln joined the camp members while singing some of the spirituals. A very popular song sometimes nicknamed "The Song of the Contrabands" was the aforementioned "Go Down, Moses":

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go*⁶¹

In this case, the song probably changed meaning from the version that the slaves were singing to Tubman. In this case, it seems that the refugees were singing to Lincoln himself to send his soldiers south and free the slaves remaining there.

There is another spiritual popular at the time not mentioned previously, though it is one of the more popular songs. It is also said that the president was wiping tears from his

⁶⁰ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, pp. 41.

⁶¹ Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, 14.

eyes when singing this song. The song is called "Nobody Knows The Trouble I've seen":

Refrain:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,

Nobody knows but Jesus.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,

Glory hallelujah.

1 Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down,

Oh, yes, Lord!

Sometimes I'm almost to the ground,

Oh, yes, Lord! O [Refrain]

2 Although you see me going 'long so,

Oh, yes, Lord!

I have my troubles here below,

Oh, yes, Lord! O [Refrain]⁶²

The refrain of this song very clearly states that the suffering the African Americans have gone through is unique to them, and nobody else other than Jesus can genuinely understand them. The song continues with "sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down," which represents the process of dealing with one's past, where some days are better than others. The line "sometimes I'm almost to the ground" refers to the worst days when people feel like giving up. The last stanza calls to God, saying, "although you see me going so low," which means that the African Americans knew God was always watching over them, even in their lowest moments. The last line, "I have my troubles here below," sounds like the person is pouring their heart to God.

Another song that was very popular among freed people at the time, and one that could be often heard around those camps, was "Free At Last":

Refrain:

Free at last, free at last,

⁶² "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," Hymnary, accessed August 1, 2022, https://hymnary.org/text/sometimes_im_up_sometimes_im_down_oh_yes

*I thank God I'm free at last;
Free at last, free at last,
I thank God I'm free at last.
O free at last, free at last,
I thank God I'm free at last;
Free at last, free at last,
I thank God I'm free at last.*

*1 'Way down yonder in the graveyard walk,
I thank God I'm free at last.
Me and my Jesus goin' to meet and talk,
I thank God I'm free at last. O [Refrain]*

*2 On my knees when the light passed by,
I thank God I'm free at last.
Thought my soul would rise and fly,
I thank God I'm free at last. O [Refrain]*

*3 Some of these mornings, bright and fair,
I thank God I'm free at last.
Goin' meet King Jesus in the air,
I thank God I'm free at last. O [Refrain]⁶³*

The refrain of this song expresses the joy and relief of finally gaining freedom. It would not be a spiritual song if the singers did not turn to God with their thanks. The first stanza speaks of the afterlife: the line "Way down yonder in the graveyard walk, I thank God I'm free at last" means "When I die and go to heaven, I will finally thank God for giving me freedom."

The first line of the following stanza, "On my kneed when the light passed by," is a little bit more difficult to interpret but gains clarity as the verse continues. The line "Thought my soul would rise and fly" most likely refers to the moment when the slaves were freed; the "light" that passed by was perhaps God coming to Earth. The line "thought

⁶³ "Free At Last," Hymnary, accessed August 2, 2022, https://hymnary.org/text/way_down_yonder_in_the_graveyard_walk

my soul would rise and fly " expresses the utter happiness the Blacks must have felt at the time.

The last stanza seems to be talking about the afterlife again, mainly because the line "Goin' to meet King Jesus in the air" describes the souls' ascend to heaven.

As the war was nearing its end, the slaves could feel the change coming. This time, they felt more confident and did not care if their master heard them sing their songs.

Giovanni comments: "There is no mistaking songs like "Oh, Freedom!".⁶⁴

*Before I'd be a slave,
I'd be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord
And be saved.⁶⁵*

These words clearly state the slaves' intentions – they will have freedom even if it means death. The lines "I'd be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be saved" even express that the slaves are not afraid of death because it is not the end for them. They only see death as the moment when they are finally united with their savior.

2.6. The Fisk Jubilee Singers

The Fisk Jubilee Singers was a group founded as the Fisk University program in 1871 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 Bureau, known initially as the Bureau of Refugees. The Freedman's Bureau was a facility developed in 1865 to support ex-slaves and poor white citizens in the aftermath of the Civil War; it provided the war victims with basic accommodation, food, and medical help.

White taught Sunday-school classes to Black students, where they taught him many African-American folk songs.⁶⁶ At the time, Fisk University struggled with financial issues after the repeated attacks of the Klu Klux Klan and was in desperate need of money. The African American students decided they wanted to help raise money by

⁶⁴ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, pp. 52.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ DU BOIS, W. E. Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. New York: Fawcett Publications, inc., 1961.

forming a choir and performing. However, at the time, it was not safe for young Black people to be traveling around the country alone, which is why White volunteered to accompany them.

After their success in the Congregational Council at Oberlin, Ohio, where they performed "Steal Away" or "Mount Zion," the Fisk Jubilee Singers became known Worldwide. They went on a European tour, and eventually, they even performed for Queen Victoria. However, even those successes were not enough for the American press, as it criticized the group and down-played its accomplishments at the time.

Apart from England, the group also performed in other countries, such as Switzerland, Germany, and Ireland. After seven years of performing, they earned around one hundred and fifty thousand American dollars for Fisk University, which was then used to build the Jubilee Hall.⁶⁷

Giovanni also mentions that after the international success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the spirituals, there were attempts from White Americans to take credit for it. The whites claimed that the Blacks were inspired by hearing White people singing during church service. These claims were fruitless as most of the lyrics speak of the Black experience.⁶⁸

2.7. The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a period in which African American music finally received the recognition that it deserved. With new movement, there were also new music genres entering the scene. The spirituals evolved into genres such as blues and jazz, both of which quickly became a worldwide sensation. But Harlem was not only the "Mekkah" of music but art and literature. Some of the most influential Black writers of the time, such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Jean Toomer, viewed blues as the "secular equivalent of the spirituals"⁶⁹ and the "indigenous art form of the country's most oppressed people."⁷⁰

As the Harlem Renaissance was the time of the new, the spirituals were not overly present in this historical period. Instead, the author would like to present a song that

⁶⁷ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, pp. 59-60.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Low, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, 417-418.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

summarizes the nature of blues described above. The song is called "Southern trees" and was written by a young African American singer-songwriter, Billie Holiday:

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!*

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁷¹*

In the first stanza, the author speaks of "strange fruit" growing on the "Southern trees." The mention of the South might not seem as important to somebody who does not know the proper context, but after having summarized the history of slavery, it seems clear that the term "Southern trees" is no coincidence. The line "Blood on the leaves and blood on the root" further builds the ominous yet very realistic picture. The following line, "Black body swinging in the Southern breeze," reveals what this "strange fruit" really is. The author was building an image of a common occurrence in the times of slavery when the slaves would often get murdered and hung for the slightest acts of disobedience.

The following stanza uses oxymorons to further add to the shock value of this song. The lines "Pastoral scene of the gallant South" and "Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh" alternate with the lines "Bulging eyes and twisted mouth" and "And the sudden smell of burning flesh," where this contrast paints a genuinely gruesome scene depicting the slaves hung from the trees. The last stanza then describes the elements of nature aiding

⁷¹ David Margolick, "Strange Fruit, Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights," *New York Times*, March 8, 2017, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/m/margolick-fruit.html>.

in the further decomposition of these bodies, and it further adds to the eerie tone of the song.

When Holiday first performed her song in a nightclub named "Café Society," which at the time was New York's only integrated nightclub, she was initially rewarded with silence followed by enormous applause. Her song became extremely popular on the Harlem scene and is said to "have left its mark on generations of writers, musicians, and other listeners, both black and white, in America and throughout the world."⁷² A jazz writer Leonard Feather once even called this song "the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism."⁷³

Holiday continued to perform this song in the following two decades of her life. Unfortunately, the singer-songwriter would begin to struggle with alcohol and drug addiction, eventually leading to her pre-mature death. Despite its significance, the song remains almost forgotten today.⁷⁴ Either way, several elements are similar to those appearing in the spirituals. One is the experience of the then-slaves. Being hung and otherwise murdered by their masters was common in the times of slavery. On the other hand, none of the spirituals analyzed in this work seem nowhere near as gruesome as Holiday's song.

2.8. American Civil Rights Movement

During the times when the Civil Rights Movement first emerged in the 1950s and 60s, spiritual and gospel songs were often used to support the efforts of the movement. These songs often called the "freedom songs," were adopted from folklore music and given a new meaning. One already mentioned song resurfaced again: "Oh, Freedom!"⁷⁵:

*Before I'd be a slave,
I'd be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord
And be saved.*⁷⁶

⁷² Magolick, "Strange Fruit, Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights."

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ "African American Spirituals," Library of Congress, accessed August 8, 2022,

<https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>

⁷⁶ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, pp. 52.

In this case, however, the line "before I'd be a slave" is perhaps more metaphorical than it was before. The word "slave" might not be meant in the literal sense but rather as a metaphor for someone who does not have equal rights. In this case, one could say the Black people were "slaves" to American society and government.

Another song typical of the Civil Rights Movement was "Eyes on the Prize." This was also a song adapted from the traditional spirituals, and it is a song of resilience much like many traditional spirituals⁷⁷:

*Freedom's name is mighty sweet
And soon we're gonna meet
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on*

*I got my hand on the gospel plow
Won't take nothing for my journey now
Keep your eyes on the prize
Hold on⁷⁸*

The first line: "Freedom's name is mighty sweet," summarizes the longing for freedom all those African Americans must have felt at the time. The line "and sure we're gonna meet" brings promise and hope. As if saying, "soon we will all have our sweet freedom, the freedom we are all longing for." The refrain "keep your eyes on the prize, hold on" calls all those oppressed African Americans not to give up and keep fighting for their freedom and rights.

The next stanza is introduced by the line "I got my hand on the gospel plow," which is a call of determination; the Blacks essentially say, "I am ready, I will fight for my rights." "Won't take nothing for my journey now" is quite challenging to interpret in this context, but given the determination coming from that last line, it appears that the meaning could be "There is no going back now; we must fight."

⁷⁷ "African American Spirituals," <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>

⁷⁸ "Eyes On Theon the Prize," AZLyrics, accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brucespringsteen/eyesontheprize.html>

However, this movement's perhaps most significant song is "We Shall Overcome."
From the title alone, the resilience and determination of the African Americans are
apparent:

*We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.*

*Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, some day.*

*We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand, some day.*

Oh, deep in my heart,

*We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace, some day.*

Oh, deep in my heart,

*We shall all be free,
We shall all be free,
We shall all be free, some day.*

Oh, deep in my heart,

We are not afraid,

We are not afraid,
*We are not afraid, TODAY*⁷⁹

Just the first stanza, "We shall overcome, someday," shows the hope that there is a brighter future ahead; the word "someday," however, adds an element of uncertainty. The future will be brighter, and it is just not sure when. The following lines, "Deep in my heart, I do believe, " sound very hopeful. The line "We'll walk hand in hand" then conveys that these African Americans longed for equality, living "hand in hand" with the White citizens. "We shall live in peace" perhaps goes further than just the racial issues in America. After two world wars and the war in Vietnam, there is also a call for worldwide peace, where there is no war and suffering. The following stanza seems to have a similar meaning. Perhaps "we shall *all* be free" applies beyond the African Americans and the borders of the United States. It is a call for World peace. The final stanza, however, has a more specific message. "We are not afraid today" refers to those who were part of the Civil Rights Movement. The word "today" makes it clear that these people fighting for racial equality are not afraid to fight. They are determined to reach their goal, whatever it takes.

2.8.1. Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King has already been introduced in the previous chapter, but there is also another side to King that has not been mentioned yet. Apart from being a civil rights activist and a political figure, King was also a deeply spiritual person and a preacher.

While leading sermons, King often involved various rhythmic patterns and other elements in his speech that gave his speeches almost a poetry-like quality. He would often utilize features such as repetition, different syllable stress, pausing patterns, the rise and fall of the tempo of his speech, as well as alliteration. King often repeated phrases similar to the previously mentioned spiritual lyrics, such as "Were You There" or "This Little Light of Mine."

All of these elements were also important because it was more likely for King's listeners to connect with him during his sermons. Last but not least, King often relied on the call-

⁷⁹ "We Shall Overcome," AZLyrics, accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/joanbaez/weshallovercome.html>

and-response style of preaching, which was important for Black preachers if they wanted to establish a good bond with their congregations.⁸⁰ This was because this preaching style was familiar to Blacks from the times of slavery when the Spirituals came about.⁸¹

2.9. Into the 21st century

The spirituals have also functioned as an inspiration for the so-called "freedom songs." These songs have helped many nations outside of America who struggled for democracy in the period leading up to the 21st century. Those countries included Russia, Eastern Europe, South Africa, and China.⁸² I will, however, elaborate on this in a separate chapter.

If we were to remain on the American continent, some artists would have composed and performed some of these freedom songs. One of them would be the well-known singer Bob Marley with his "Redemption Song"⁸³:

[Chorus]
Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom?
'Cause all I ever have
Redemption songs
Redemption songs
[Verse 2]
Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our minds
Have no fear for atomic energy
'Cause none of them can stop the time
How long shall they kill our prophets
*While we stand aside and look?*⁸⁴

⁸⁰ "The Spiritual Rhythms of Dr. Martin Luther King's Sermons," The Rhythmic Theology Project, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://rhythmictheologyproject.com/2018/01/15/rhythm-of-mlks-sermons/>

⁸¹ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, pp. 35.

⁸² "African American Spirituals," Library of Congress, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ "Redemption Song," Genius, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://genius.com/246368>

In the chorus, Marley calls his fellow Black Americans to "help to sing," to be vocal about their struggles, and to raise their voices, so they are heard. The lines "All I ever have redemption songs" shows how meaningful these songs were to him.

The verse is a call to these people; Marley says, "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, non, but ourselves can free our minds." Here Marley stresses that freedom is not only about physical bondage but also about the mental state. He encourages people to be stronger because people will be free as long as they want to be free and as long as they fight for it. The lyrics continue: "None of them can stop the time," "them" being those opposed to African Americans claiming their freedom. Here Marley says that the change is inevitable; it will come, sooner or later. The final lines are calls for action: "How long shall they kill our prophets while we stand aside and look?" Here Marley refers to the many Black people who have lost their lives due to racial violence. He also uses the Biblical term "prophets" to emphasize that those people fought for their African American brothers and sisters. The final line, "while we stand aside and look," carries a compelling message, as if he was saying, "let's not stand aside and look anymore, let's fight."

This is a song of resistance and resilience. It describes African Americans' struggles and expresses their sadness over the situation. We could say that this song is the modern moan of Black people.

2.9.1. Black Lives Matter

It is obvious that these "Freedom songs" are protest songs. Therefore, it is no surprise that they made a comeback in recent times when there were protests following the death of George Floyd and other African American citizens who have died at the hands of police officers. These songs varied from spirituals and gospel to contemporary pop songs. Robert Darden, a professor at Baylor University and a founder and director of its Black Gospel Music Restoration Project, was asked to compile a list of protest songs that were relevant to the ongoing protests. Darden has previously said that singing in groups is quite helpful to people protesting, as it raises endorphins and creates a sense of community in the people who are protesting.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Brumley, Jeff, "Freedom songs' make a reprise during this year of protests," *Baptist News*, November 12, 2020, <https://baptistnews.com/article/freedom-songs-make-a-reprise-during-this-year-of-protests/#.YvTxAoRBzIV>

Jeff Brumley, the author of the article "' Freedom songs,' make a reprise during this year of protests," comments on these songs: "Whether they are called "freedom songs" or "protest spirituals," and whether they are modern or centuries old, the hymns usually are adapted to modern realities." It is also said that the meaning of these songs is never static but continuously adapts to the situation in which they appear.⁸⁶ This is, after all, something that has already been proved in this thesis.

One of the songs that made an appearance in the protests was "Up Above My Head, I Hear Freedom in the Air.":

Well, up above my head (Up above my head)
I hear freedom in the air (I hear freedom in the air)
Well, up above my head (Up above my head)
You know I hear freedom in the air (I hear freedom in the air)
Well, up above my head (Up above my head)
I hear freedom in the air (I hear freedom in the air)
And I really do believe, yes
I really do believe
*There is a heaven somewhere.*⁸⁷

The refrain "Up above my head, I hear freedom in the air" likely refers to the heavens, to God. It is as if the Blacks believed that it was God who was going to give them their freedom. Perhaps what they were saying was, "God wants us to be free, it is his wish to free our people." The following lines, "I really do believe there is a heaven somewhere," show the undying faith not only in heaven but also faith in a better tomorrow, in a brighter future. As has already been said, the spirituals are not exclusively only sacral in meaning but often can equally as much carry a secular meaning which also seems to be the case here.

Another song appearing on Darden's list is the well-known "We Shall Overcome":

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ "Up Above My Head," Genius, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://genius.com/Vika-and-linda-up-above-my-head-i-hear-music-in-the-air-lyrics>

We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

I do believe

We shall overcome, some day.

We'll walk hand in hand,

We'll walk hand in hand,

We'll walk hand in hand, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

We shall live in peace,

We shall live in peace,

We shall live in peace, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

We shall all be free,

We shall all be free,

We shall all be free, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

We are not afraid,

We are not afraid,

We are not afraid, TODAY⁸⁸

This song has already been analyzed before, and the meaning is perhaps the same in this case "We shall overcome" refers to the current issues the African Americans are dealing with today; that is racism and police brutality. "We shall live in peace" expresses the

⁸⁸ "We Shall Overcome," AZLyrics, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/joanbaez/weshallovercome.html>

hope that the Black and White will finally live in harmony, where there is no division into Black and White Americans, and where the Black Americans do not have to live in fear of the White police officers. We shall all be free perhaps not only expresses the comparison between Black and White, that is, "we shall be free, just like the whites are," but maybe also expresses the fact that all Black Americans will be free. There are perhaps some African Americans who live freely unafraid of their lives and hardly ever experience racial inequality, but there are still many who do not have this freedom.

2.10. Spirituals Outside of America

Last but not least, I would like to talk about the influence this African American music genre had outside the American continent. While the experience of the African slaves was unique in some ways, it was also a similar experience to many other nations worldwide that have experienced oppression. One such nation would be former Czechoslovakia, a country that had experienced its fair share of oppression.

2.10.1. The History of Czechoslovakia

First, in the 1800s, the lands were under the rule of the Austrian-Hungarian empire, the collapse of which led to the first formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, at the end of World War I. Only two decades later was the country invaded in 1938 by Nazi Germany. The occupation lasted for seven years until the country was freed again in 1945 when World War II ended. However, even then, the country did not enjoy its freedom for long because, in 1948, the Communists staged a virtual coup d'état, and a people's republic was formed. Over the following years, the Soviets crushed the internal opposition, and the country's industry was nationalized and its agriculture collectivized. In the following decades, the country's economy deteriorated, and in August 1968, Warsaw Pact troops invaded the country and seized its leader, Alexander Dubček.⁸⁹

For the following thirty years, that is, between 1968 and 1989, the country was under the rule of the Communist totalitarian regime. Given the circumstances, it is no surprise that in this period, media censorship was stricter than before. Overall, censorship is a helpful tool for any ruling party, as its primary goal is to eliminate any texts that could be harmful or oppose said party.

⁸⁹ "Czechoslovakia," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 8, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Czechoslovakia>

The media which is the easiest to censor is written text. In the case of Czechoslovakia, censorship influenced publishing houses; many of these houses were shut down, and the remaining smaller number was easier to control. The government also published a list of authors and titles that were completely forbidden. Those works that had already been published and later deemed to oppose the Communist party were also collected and eliminated. Elements that deemed literature exceptionable were erotic themes, vulgarisms, and even religious themes. It was also forbidden to translate books from a foreign language.

It was, however, more difficult to censor lyrics. Even though every musician had to present their texts to a committee before they started performing, it was quite easy to alter the official lyrics of these songs. Moreover, it was not difficult for the musicians to perform their songs unofficially, such as at weddings, private celebrations, or secret gatherings. Some of these underground artists then performed at made-up events, such as the wedding of one of the group members. One such occasion led to the creation of a vinyl album titled *Magor's wedding*.⁹⁰

2.10.2. The Songs of Spirituál Kvintet

As already mentioned, there are some parallels between the African Americans and the Czechoslovakian people who have experienced the Communist regime in their country. Both groups had their freedom taken away from them, and both were controlled by other nations and used for their oppressors' benefit. Both of these groups have also turned to secret ways of expressing their disagreement with their current situation. This parallel did not go unnoticed by this group's members, especially the lead singer and its founder, Jiří Tichota, who decided to name the group "Spirituál kvintet."

As mentioned previously, religious themes were not allowed by the Communist censorship, which would be a problem for Spirituál Kvintet if they wanted to sing songs that were literal translations of the originals. Moreover, due to the censorship of most religious texts, the number of religious people in the country dropped drastically. This was further encouraged when families influenced by communist propaganda would raise their children to detest religion. The translations of these songs would then often change those passages which directly mentioned God or Jesus and would aim to highlight the topics of one's struggles and the attempts to overcome those struggles.

⁹⁰ Kristýna Bártová, "Spirituální motivy v tvorbě hudební skupiny Spirituál kvintet" (Bc. thesis, Masarykova University, 2016), 20-21.

Those were the topics that resonated with the people the most. One of the songs that “erased” the mentions of Jesus is the translation of “Jesus Met a Woman.”

*Jesus met the woman at the well
Jesus met the woman at the well
Jesus met the woman at the well
And He told her everything she'd ever done⁹¹*

This song refers to the biblical story of the Samaritan woman at the well, in which Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well and asked her to give him water to drink. However, this woman refused to give him water because he was Jewish. Jesus tells her that the Jews are God’s chosen people and that the day of their salvation is coming to the “true worshippers” because they believe in God. The woman responds: “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus responds, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” In the story, Jesus proves to the woman who he is, by telling her he knows she has had five husbands in her life,⁹² which is what the line “And He told her everything she’d ever done” refers to. In Czech, this song is called “Poutník a dívka”⁹³:

*Kráčel krajem poutník, šel sám,
kráčel krajem poutník, šel sám,
kráčel krajem poutník, kráčel sám
tu potkal dívku, nesla džbán, přistoupil k ní a pravil
...
tak přistup bliže, nehodná, a dej mi pít,⁹⁴*

“A wayferer travelled alone,
A wayferer travelled alone,

⁹¹ “Jesus Met the Woman,” Spirituály, accessed September 9, 2022, http://www.spirituály.cz/component/option,com_mjoosic/page,song/task,view/id,114/Itemid,6/lang,cs/

⁹² Jn. 4:4-26

⁹³ In Eng.: “a wayferer and a girl”

⁹⁴ “Poutník a dívka,” Spirituály, accessed September 9, 2022, http://www.spirituály.cz/component/option,com_mjoosic/page,song/task,view/id,114/Itemid,6/lang,cs/

A wayferer travelled alone,
He met a girl who carried a pitcher, he approached and said
...
Come closer, unkind one, let me drink,”

As seen above, the translation does not use Jesus’ name but instead uses a more vague term, “a wayfarer.” The other elements, such as the Samaritan woman, her being judgemental, or Jesus asking for water, were still preserved, so we know this song is still about the same story.

Another example of a song that was altered to avoid censorship was the translation of the original “Wade in the Water”:

*Wade in the water,
wade in the water, children,
wade in the water,
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.⁹⁵*

This is the well-known spiritual about Moses and the Israelites. One interpretation of “wade in the water” is that it refers to the parting of the sea from the Biblical story. “God’s a-gonna trouble the water” would then describe the miraculous parting of the sea that Moses had done with God’s help. “See that host all dressed in white” refers to the group of Israelites that Moses led out of slavery. The line “The leader looks like the Israelite” describes Moses himself. Now, let’s look at the Czech translation:

Dál, dál tou vodou,

⁹⁵ “Wade in the Water,” Spirituály, accessed September 12, 2022, http://www.spirituály.cz/component/option.com_mjoosic/page.song/task.view/id,112/Itemid,6/lang.cs/

*dál, dál tou vodou, bratří,
dál, dál tou vodou,
než vítr vlny kalné rozbouří.*

*Bílý zástup spěchá dál,
vítr vlny kalné rozbouří,
hned v patách vojsko má, které vyslal král,
vítr vlny kalné rozbouří.⁹⁶*

“On and on, through the water,
On and on, through the water, brethren,
On and on, through the water,
Before the wind troubles the dark waves.

The host in white hurries on,
The wind troubles the dark waves,
The king’s army follows along
The wind troubles the dark waves.”

As we can see, the first stanza is not too different from the original, apart from the vocative “brethren” used instead of “children.” However, one big difference is that the word “God” was omitted again. Whereas in the original “God’s gonna trouble the water,” in the translation, the word “wind” is used instead of the word “God.”

The first line in the second stanza is translated almost literally, while there is another significant difference in the third line. While in the English original, there is a reference to Moses, in Czech, it was opted to include the mention of the pharaoh’s army that was sent after the Israelites, a less obvious reference.

One last song I would like to comment on is one where the translation is entirely different from the original. This song is called “This Little Light of Mine”:

⁹⁶ “Dál, dál tou vodou,” Spirituály, accessed September 12, 2022, http://www.spirituály.cz/component/option,com_mjoosic/page,song/task,view/id,112/Itemid,6/lang,cs/

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, shine, shine
Let it shine!⁹⁷*

This song is clearly not one of the “sorrow songs.” It is, actually, one of the more joyful songs with a very simple message: “I am not going to feel down, I am going to be happy,” In this case, in the Czech version the writer worked with the joyful melody but wrote a completely new text for it:

*R: Já slyším mlýnský kámen, jak se otáčí
já slyším mlýnský kámen, jak se otáčí,
já slyším mlýnský kámen, jak se otáčí,
otáčí, otáčí, otáčí...⁹⁸*

“I can hear the millstone, turning around,
I can hear the millstone turning around,
I can hear the millstone turning around,
Turning around, turning around, turning around....”

This refrain works with the saying, “God’s mill grinds slow but sure.” Because God’s name could not be used, the translation utilizes a synecdoche where only the millstone is mentioned. Given the historical context previously mentioned, this song was probably meant for the people as a sort of consolation, essentially saying that evil will be punished.

*Ty mlýny melou celou noc a melou celý den,
melou bez výhod a melou stejně všem,
melou doleva a melou doprava,
melou pravdu i lež, když zrovna vyhrává,*

⁹⁷ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 77.

⁹⁸ “Mlýny,” *Písničky Akordy*, accessed September 12, 2022,
<https://pisnicky-akordy.cz/spiritual-kvintet/mlyny>

*melou otrokáře, melou otroky,
melou na minuty, na hodiny, na roky,
melou pomalu a jistě, ale melou včas,
já už slyším jejich hlas⁹⁹*

“These mills grind all night and all day long,
They grind no benefits, and they grind the same for all,
They grind left, and they grind right,
They grind truth and grind lie, just when it’s winning the fight
They grind slavers, and they grind slaves,
They grind for minutes, grind for hours, and they grind for days,
These mills, they grind slow, but they grind sure,
And I can already hear their voice.”

This stanza is all about the fairness of God. It essentially says that God is fair and just. The lines “they grind slavers, and they grind slaves” refer to the fact that nobody can evade God’s will, no matter how they live. The last line is especially powerful. It expresses people's hope that justice is coming soon, and it is so close that we can hear it just around the corner. Even though the text of this song was changed entirely, it still kept the original message; that no matter what happens, there is hope for a brighter future.

Overall, it is clear that the Spirituals’ lyrics were something the people of Czechoslovakia could relate to, and there were many parallels between the two groups. The slight changes in the translated lyrics is definitely an interesting phenomena worth mentioning.

3. The Spirituals' Influence on Contemporary American Literature

The legacy of the spirituals does not end with the protest songs. Many contemporary artists take inspiration from African American folk music. In this chapter, I will introduce some of them, especially a very important figure of contemporary African American literature, Nikki Giovanni.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

3.1. Nikki Giovanni

3.1.1. Life

Nikki Giovanni was born on June 7, 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee. In 1957, she started studying at Austin High School, where she met two of the most important influences of her life – her English teacher, Alfreda Dealney, and her French teacher, Emma Stokes.

Since 1960 she attended Fisk University but immediately conflicted with the University's Dean of Women. Giovanni eventually left Fisk and moved to Cincinnati, where she enrolled in classes at the University of Cincinnati. In the fall of 1964, she, however, came back to Fisk and met the new Dean Blanche McConnell Cowan who quickly became her mentor and her friend. It was that moment when Giovanni became interested in writing. In 1967 she was awarded her B.A. with honors. She also started working on her first poems that would be published in her first collection *Black Feeling, Black Talk*.

In 1968 she dropped out of graduate school and later attended the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King. She attempted to get her Master's degree at the School of Fine Arts at Columbia University but resigned again after being told that she could not write. The same year she also published her first volume of *Black Feeling, Black Talk*.

In 1969 Giovanni taught at Queens College and attempted to promote her collection *Black Feeling, Black Talk*. This attempt was so successful that she managed to sell 10 000 copies of her book in the following eight months. Later on, she published her second volume of poetry, *Black Judgement*. In July 1971, Nikki Giovanni read her poetry with the background of Gospel music of the New York Community Choir to a crowd of 1,500 people.

Over the years, Giovanni received several awards as well. In 1972, *Truth Was On Its Way* received N.A.T.R.A.'s Award for Best Spoken Word Album. Between the years 1974 and 1991, she received several Honorary Doctorates from various American universities. Giovanni also taught at some of them in the 1980s.

3.1.2. Prose

Giovanni is known primarily for her poetry, but her work is not limited to only that specific genre. I am convinced Giovanni's love for spirituals is visible in her poetry, but that is something I will comment on later. First, I would like to introduce a book of hers called "On My Journey Now: Looking at African American History Through the

Spirituals," which has been a beneficial source of information for the previous two chapters of this thesis.

In her book, Giovanni tells the story of African Americans, from the Great Passage to the period of slavery and the Civil War until modern and contemporary events.

Throughout the book, Giovanni includes the lyrics of the spirituals, which reflect each given period. Interestingly, while she provides us with the circumstances under which the slaves would sing each of these songs, Giovanni does not offer concrete interpretations of every one of them but instead leaves it up to the readers to muse over the lyrics and find in them their meaning.

Despite this lack of interpretation, the author's presence is still visible in her comments on specific historical facts. For instance, in one of the first few chapters, where Giovanni describes the Great Passage and how the slaves were transported to the American continent on ships, she says, "I always think it was a woman who started the singing, because I think women do that. Somewhere in the belly of that ship, a woman started humming."¹⁰⁰ This is not the only time Giovanni expresses what today would be called "feminist views," as there are many instances where Giovanni seems to concentrate on the enslaved African American women rather than men. In the dedication, one other case appears immediately at the beginning of the book: "To the bravery of the African women who, in 1916, stood on the gangplank of a Dutch man-of-war, held hands, and courageously walked into the new world." Such comments appear throughout the book, and I think it perfectly sums up Giovanni's personality. It also makes her writing so enjoyable as she manages to present hard historical facts with a poet's grace.

In the closing chapter of her book, Giovanni speculates about what the future might bring to us as humanity. A little unexpectedly, she brings out the possibility of there being another life in the universe. She proceeds to explain that if we were ever to settle on other planets, the African American experience would be significant to us, as their ancestors have already experienced something similar, being brought to a "foreign world," which was America. Despite all that, the Africans have managed to come out of this experience, finding a way to raise their voice through song. Giovanni adds: "When

¹⁰⁰ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 8.

we go to Mars when we go to Jupiter when we go to the Dark Star, somebody is going to have to sing a song.”¹⁰¹

3.1.3. Poetry

As mentioned previously, Giovanni’s poetry is where her influence on the spirituals is the most obvious. In some of her poems, she writes about secular topics such as the Black experience in slavery and afterward, while in others, she writes about the spirituals and their significance. One such poem is “How You Gonna Save ‘Em?”:

*How you gonna save ‘em
If they can’t learn how to pray
Give ‘em a song I guess
To chase those blues
Away*¹⁰²

Giovanni hints at the spirituals and the slave experience in this short poem. As mentioned previously, the slaves could hardly ever read and write, which is implied in the line “If they can’t learn how to pray,” which likely means they could not read the Bible; hence they could not “learn” how to speak to God properly. To this question, “How you gonna save ‘em” – how will they be redeemed if they cannot talk to God properly? The answer comes the very next moment: “Give ‘em a song I guess, to chase those blues away.” Giovanni hints at the fact that the spirituals were often the only way they could talk to God and ease their worries.

Another poem of Giovanni’s that carries the notes of the spirituals is “The First Dream”:

*Mrs. Bethune had the First Dream
That people who looked
Like her could dream
That people whose people had toiled
Unpaid unappreciated unwanted though sought
It could take time to reflect*¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Giovanni, *On My Journey Now*, 65.

¹⁰² Nikki Giovanni, *Acolytes* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 45.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 82.

This stanza hints at the slaves' experience – the line “that people who looked like her” refers to the Blacks. The statement that they “could dream” highlights that these people wanted more from life than just survival; they had dreams and hopes, much like the slaves who wanted their freedom. The following two lines again refer back to the times of slavery where Giovanni writes, “That those people had toiled, unpaid unappreciated unwanted,” which describes the slaves' reality where they were forced to work in slavery with no pay or gratitude for the work they had done. The final line, “could take time to reflect,” expresses the wish of this Mrs. Bethune that those people have the time and opportunity to relax for a little while, to pray and work through the traumas in their life. The phrase “First Dream” then describes all mentioned above. “First Dream” likely means the fundamental human right of freedom.

In summary, this stanza not only describes the slave experience but also contains the religious aspect often found in the spirituals. It also expresses the sorrow many African Americans must feel even today for their ancestors. Perhaps this Mrs. Bethune represents every African American who has to live with the knowledge of what their ancestors had to endure in the past.

The poem continues:

*Mrs. Bethune had the First Dream
That kindness and caring and love
Could be taught
That people whose people had toiled could take
The time to contemplate
Possibilities¹⁰⁴*

This stanza turns the attention away from the enslaved and toward the slavers. The lines “that kindness and caring and love could be taught” are directed toward the descendants of the white slave owners. Giovanni points out that nobody is inherently evil, and it is the environment in which a person grows up that determines who they are. In other words, Giovanni calls out to future generations and asks them not to repeat the mistakes

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

of their ancestors. She calls for peace. The closing lines of this stanza, “That people whose people had toiled could take the time to contemplate possibilities, ” refer to the descendants of the slaves and express the wish that they live in freedom and peace.

The poem finishes as follows:

Mrs. Bethune had the First Dream

That art and beauty

That sanctuary and solace

Could come to the people

Whose people had toiled

And we dedicate this realization

To that First Dream

And while awake

We dream on¹⁰⁵

This stanza again brings the attention back to the African Americans. The wish for “art and beauty,.. sanctuary and solace” to come to these people once again notes freedom and prosperity. Generally, the eras in which art develops the most are peaceful ones. Giovanni wishes her people would not have to fight anymore. With the lines “and we dedicate this realization to that First Dream,” Giovanni circles back to the main element of this poem – freedom. Only once people have the freedom can they truly live. The final lines, “And while awake, we dream on,” express the wish and hope that someday, all those wishes will finally come true.

This whole stanza again carries some elements which can also be found in the spirituals. Apart from the main one – the wish for freedom – Giovanni also includes the topic of slavery and describes the reality of the enslaved people. Finally, this poem leaves us with hope for a brighter future, which can also often be visible in the spirituals.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

One final poem of Giovanni I would like to analyze is “The Song of the Feet,” which contains several historical references. The focus, however, will be on those parts referring back to the times of the spirituals:

*It is appropriate that I sing
The song of the feet*

*The weight of the body
And what the body chooses to bear
Fall on me¹⁰⁶*

The first two lines of this poem are somewhat vague to be interpreted without further context. One thing that comes to mind is perhaps the methods of worship the Africans brought with them to America – dance or “the song of the feet.” The following lines, “the weight of the body and what the body chooses to bear,” perhaps refer to the symbolic “weight” of one's troubles. The phrase “chooses to bear” suggests that there is a choice whether or not to have these troubles. In the context of slavery, this could mean that the slaves had the option to submit or fight back and escape their masters. The following stanza further confirms that it is slavery Giovanni is hinting at:

*I trampled the American wilderness
Forged frontier trails
Outran the mob in Tulsa
Got caught in Philadelphia

And am still unreparate¹⁰⁷*

“I trampled the American wilderness” evokes the scene of an escaping slave running through the wilder parts of the country in hopes of not being discovered. The following line hints that there is a sort of border that the slave helped forge. This line is the division between the free states and those where Blacks were still prosecuted for escape.

¹⁰⁶ Nikki Giovanni, *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (HarperCollins e-books, 2002), 107.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

The speaker “forged” this line by crossing it into the free states. The escape continued when this person “outran the mob in Tulsa” but was cut short when the slave “got caught in Philadelphia.” The final line points to the injustice of the situation, or perhaps the inequity in American society back then and today.

One last part of this poem I would like to comment on is the final lines, as I believe these contain another element typical for the spirituals; faith in God:

*I wiggle my toes
In the sands of time
Trusting the touch that controls my motion
Basking in the warmth of the embrace
Day's end offers with warm salty water*

*It is appropriate I sing
The praise of the feet*

I am a Black woman¹⁰⁸

Just the opening of this stanza – “I wiggle my toes in the sands of time,” suggest that the poet is speaking of something greater than our earthly experience. The “sands of time” refers to the entire universe, or whatever greater-than/man is out there. The phrase “I wiggle my toes” means the person is experiencing life, or experiencing the Universe, just on a microscopic scale. There is, after all, so much we as humans will never be able to experience. Giovanni reminds us how minuscule we are compared to God or the Universe. We only get to wiggle our toes in it before we are gone again.

Now the opening lines appear again. Having interpreted the entire poem, it is safe to say that these lines speak of our experience here on Earth. The word “song,” however, is changed to “praise,” which translates to “prayer.” As a deeply religious person, Giovanni is thanking God for giving her life. The final line, “I am a Black woman,” is a statement as if Giovanni was saying, “I will praise the Lord because I am a Black woman, and that is what us Black women do.” This poem is another that connects

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 107-108.

speaking of the secular and religious experiences, which points to the fact that Giovanni took her inspiration from the spirituals. Finally, I would like to point out that Giovanni named her poem “Song,” which I also think was an intentional reference.

In conclusion, it is clear that Giovanni’s work contains some elements that can also be found in the spirituals. Apart from the Black experience itself, Giovanni also includes religious themes both in her prose and poetry, all of which can be found in the spirituals as well. Additionally, in some of her work, Giovanni mentions or directly talks about the spirituals themselves.

3.2. Maya Angelou

Another African American poet I would like to talk about is Maya Angelou. Angelou is another author who takes inspiration from African American folk music, particularly the spirituals.

3.2.1. Life

Angelou, originally named Marguerite Annie Johnson, was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, but spent most of her childhood in Arkansas under the care of her maternal grandmother. When she was only eight years old, she was raped by her mother’s boyfriend, a traumatic experience that left her almost entirely mute for several years. Later on, this experience was the base of her autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969. She later received a movie adaptation in 1979 and was nominated for a National Book Award.

Other autobiographical works Angelou published later in her life include *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013). All of her autobiographical works also explored the themes of economic, racial, and sexual oppression.¹⁰⁹

In 1940, Angelou and her mother moved to San Francisco, where she alternated between several job positions, one of which being a dancer, which is when she assumed her professional name, Maya Angelou. Having moved to New York City over a decade later, Angelou was encouraged by several authors from the Harlem Writer’s Guild to

¹⁰⁹ “Maya Angelou,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maya-Angelou>

take on writing herself. At the same time, she briefly worked in the production of Goerge Gershwin's folk opera *Porgy and Bess*, studied dance, and performed in Jean Genet's play *The Blacks*.

In 1961, she married a South African dissident, who persuaded her to move to Cairo, where she worked for the *Arab Observer*. Later, she moved to Ghana, where she worked for *The African Review*. Five years later, Angelou returned to California, where she continued writing; this time, she turned her attention to theatre and film. Some of her works include *Black, Blues, Black* (aired in 1968), a television series about the role of African culture in America, and the movie drama *Georgia, Georgia* (1972).

Apart from writing, Angelou also acted in several movies and plays, such as *Poetic Justice* (1993), *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995) or *Look Away* (1973). It was *Look Away* that landed her a nomination for a Tony Award, even though this Broadway play closed after only the first performance.

It was from the early 1970s onwards when Angelou started publishing poetry. Some of her collections include: *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971), *And Still I Rise* (1978), *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987), and *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990). At the same time, Angelou published several children's books, including *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken and Me* (1994), and *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1998). Last but not least, Angelou also published anecdote-laden advice to women in her work titled *Letter to My Daughter* (2008). The name of this work is particularly interesting, given that her only biological child was male.

Entering the 1980's Angelou became a professor of American studies at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Even though she lacked any college education, she was often called "Dr. Angelou." Later in the 1990s, she was invited to compose and deliver a poem for the inauguration of Pres. Bill Clinton, after which she wrote a poem to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, and also wrote an elegy to Nelson Mandela in 2013. She passed away shortly after on May 28, 2014.¹¹⁰

3.2.2. Work

From the previous sub-chapter, it is clear that Angelou has created works across several genres over the years. However, for this thesis, I will concentrate on her poetry, as I

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

believe it is where the influence of the spirituals is the most prevalent. One of her poems that describes the slave experience, particularly the Great Passage, is called “Child Dead in Old Seas”:

*Father,
I wait for you in oceans
tides washing pyramids high
above my head.
Waves, undulating
corn rows around my
black feet.*¹¹¹

From the title, the reader can tell that this poem of Angelou’s is not going to be joyful. The first stanza is opened by the vocative “Father,” which does not tell the reader much at first, but the following lines, “I wait for you in oceans, tides washing pyramids high above my head,” suggests that this “Father” is likely God himself. The line “I wait for you in the oceans” hints at those Africans who jumped overboard in an attempt to escape the slavers and drowned trying to get back to the shore. The picture Angelou paints, describing the oceans, the tides, and most importantly, the pyramids, tells us that this poem is about Africa. It was not only about Africa but about the period of the Great Passage when the slave ships would come to the African coast and take away the people on their ships. The mention of the pyramids is interesting because the slaves brought from Africa were not from Egypt, so this reference likely has to do with the biblical story of Moses and the Israelites.

Angelou continues to describe the sea: “Waves, undulating corn rows around my black feet.” These three lines are packed with meaning, and have described the nature of the spirituals, and I am convinced that Angelou chose those words on purpose because she wanted to mimic those lyrics. The phrase “corn rows around my black feet” takes us to the plantations where corn would be one of the commonly grown crops. At the same time, “cornrows” is a traditional African hairstyle that consists of several rows of braids braided closely to the scalp. Here, the phrase “around my black feet” evoke the scene from the slaver ship, where if the slaves ended up passing away, they would probably lie at the other people’s feet for some time before being thrown into the sea.

¹¹¹ Maya Angelou, *Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York, Random House, Inc., 1994), 110.

The poem continues, describing the slaves' experience once they arrived in America:

*Childhood's absence has
not stilled your
voice. My ear
listens. You whisper
on the watery passage.¹¹²*

Here, the point of view changes, and God is responding to his children: "Childhood's absence has not stilled your voice," which refers to the harsh condition under which many of those born into slavery had to grow up. However, these people are still willing to fight for their freedom, as their voice is not "still." The affirmation "my ear listens" tells the African Americans that God is with them, or, at the same time, Angelou could be saying that she is listening to the people's struggles. "You whisper on the watery passage" could either refer to the parting of the sea in the biblical story of Moses or to the escape of the slaves when they decided to go North. "The watery passage" could also be watery because of the tears those people have shed due to their suffering. The second stanza of this poem continues in a similar yet more gruesome tone:

*Deep dirges moan
from the belly of the sea
and your song
floats to me
of lost savannahs
green and
drums. Of palm trees bending
woman-like swaying
grape-blue children¹¹³*

The first line mentions the moan, the sorrowful songs the slaves would often sing after being captured, and the songs which became the foundation for the spirituals as we

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

know them today. The same image in the previous stanza is also painted here when the author says that the moan comes “from the belly of the sea.” Here “the belly of the sea” again brings us back to the slaver ships. The narrator continues: “and your song floats to me of lost savannahs green and drums.” These lines describe the longing of the slaves to return to their homeland. The poem goes from sorrowful to gruesome in this last part, where the poet describes the “grape-blue children.” Those children are most likely dead, whether murdered by the slave hunters or drowned themselves.

The last poem I would like to mention is “Thank you, Lord.” Just from the title, it is evident that this poem is more about the sacral rather than the secular. Nonetheless, it still includes the element of the Black experience, much like the spirituals do:

*I see You
Brown-skinned,
Neat Afro,
Full lips,
A little goatee.
A Malcolm,
Martin,
Du Bois.
Sunday services become sweeter when you're Black,
Then I don't have to explain why
I was out balling the town down,
Saturday night.¹¹⁴*

The poem begins with a description: “Brown-skinned, neat Afro, full lips, a little goatee.” Angelou is clearly describing an African American man or men. The “I see you” that precedes this description is an assurance, “you are being seen, your voice is being heard.” The question “seen by whom? Heard by whom?” immediately arises. Perhaps it is herself that Angelou speaks of here. Of course, this could also mean that God is watching over the people, but the name “Thank you, Lord” would suggest that this poem is written from the point of view of a human rather than God.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 175.

Angelou lists a few important names: “A Malcolm, Martin, Du Bois.” All those men were prominent personalities of the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King jr. and W.E.B. Du Bois were already mentioned in this thesis, but the name Malcolm was not. Angelou refers to Malcolm X, a prominent figure of the 1960s who articulated concepts of Black nationalism and Black pride. Like King, Malcolm X was also assassinated due to his political activities. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which came out in 1965 after his assassination, made him an ideological hero.¹¹⁵ Angelou mentions all of these names to highlight the fact that even African Americans have the potential to become great people.

The stanza continues: “Sunday services become sweeter when you’re Black,” where Angelou hints at the fact that African Americans are closer to God, perhaps given what they went through. Perhaps Angelou suggests that the Blacks are God’s chosen people, much like the Israelites are in the Bible. The final lines, “Then I don’t have to explain why I was out balling the town down, Saturday night,” express the joy God brings to the Blacks. These lines also refer back to when the dance was a big part of worship for the slaves.

The following stanza gives the poem the feeling of a worship song:

*Thank you, Lord
I want to thank you, Lord
For life and all that’s in it.
Thank You for the day
And for the hour and for the minute.
I know many are gone,
I’m still living on,
I want to thank You.¹¹⁶*

This stanza can be easily summarized: it expresses the thanks to God for the life he gave us and for all the time people spend here on Earth. The lines “Thank You for the day, and the hour and for the minute. I know many are gone” suggest that the author feels

¹¹⁵ “Malcolm X,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed September 7, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Malcolm-X>

¹¹⁶ Angelou, *Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, 175.

she is getting older, but then in, “I’m still living on, I want to thank you” Angelou is thanking God for her long life.

Overall, it is evident that Angelou’s work was to some degree inspired by the spirituals. Some of her texts mention the Black experience in slavery, while others also contain religious themes, which are elements often found in the spirituals.

Conclusion

In summary, we could say that the spirituals have been a constant in African American history. Even though they emerged during the period of slavery, their timeless themes of Black resilience and religious themes ensured that those songs were never forgotten, even centuries after the abolishment of slavery. Their meaning, however, kept changing throughout history. In the times of slavery, the slaves used them to express their longing for freedom. Furthermore, the songs were later used practically when Harriet Tubman hid secret messages in the lyrics to help runaway slaves find their way to freedom.

During the Civil War, the songs continued to carry a similar meaning – that of freedom, which now seemed a step closer than before. The end of the war brought a wave of migration. Many freed slaves went North, hoping to find their loved ones who had previously managed to escape slavery. This mass migration resulted in the establishment of Black communities, the largest of which was in Harlem, New York. What followed was a period known as “The Harlem Renaissance,” which was a time when Black art was born. While Black theater, literature, and new music genres flourished, the spirituals were left forgotten for a little while. This has changed with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, established by George L. White. To raise money for Fisk University, a group of African American students decided to perform the spirituals on stage, an act that introduced the spirituals not only to the American public and the public abroad.

The spirituals emerged again in the 1950s and 60s with the establishment of the Civil Rights Movement. This movement was born in response to the racial segregation and racist ideologies still prevalent in American society at the time. These newly called “freedom songs” were often sung during the movement’s protests, giving these protestants a sense of unity and courage.

Elements of these songs were also used by one of the most significant personalities of this movement. Martin Luther King jr. King would use features such as repetition, the

rise and fall in volume, or change in tempo during his speeches which effectively caught the listeners' attention.

However, the message of spirituals made it even further than just America. When former Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet army in 1968, and a new, totalitarian regime was established in the country, somebody noticed the parallel between this small nation and the Black slaves. This “somebody” was Jiří Tichota, the founder of the folk music group, Spirituál kvintet. Spirituál kvintet wanted to express their longing for freedom just like the African Americans had, so they translated the English lyrics of the spirituals into Czech. This process, however, was not easy because to perform and record these songs, the group's songs would have to be checked by the censorship. To avoid complications, the translations had to omit several terms, such as the names of “God” and “Jesus,” or other religious references. Nonetheless, these songs still contained the same longing for freedom and spirituality, only in a more subtle way.

Finally, even in contemporary literature, we can still find the influence of the spirituals. The two African American authors mentioned in this thesis are Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou. Giovanni is an author who not only writes poetry but also prose. Nonetheless, both genres contain elements suggesting that she took inspiration from the spirituals. Similar characteristics can also be found in the work of Angelou, with the only difference being that Giovanni also directly mentions the spirituals in some of her work while Angelou does not.

Resumé

Dalo by se tedy říci, že spirituály byly přítomny v průběhu celé afroamerické historie. Ačkoli se zrodily v období otroctví, jejich nadčasová témata černošské nezlomnosti společně s těmi náboženskými se postarala o to, že spirituály nebyly nikdy zapomenuty, a to ani staletí po zrušení otroctví. Nicméně jejich význam se časem neustále měnil. V období otroctví jimi otroci vyjadřovali svou touhu po svobodě. Později byly však tyto písně využity i daleko praktičtěji, když se Harriet Tubmanová rozhodla v jejich textech ukrýt tajné vzkazy, které měly otrokům na útěku pomoci najít cestu ke svobodě.

Během občanské války tyto písně nadále nesly podobný význam, a to svobodu, která se v tomto období zdála být o krok blíže, než dříve. Konec války byl následován vlnou migrace, protože mnoho nyní již osvobozených otroků se vydalo na sever země s nadějí, že se jim podaří nalézt své blízké, kteří v minulosti z otroctví uprchli. Tato hromadná

migrace byla základem pro vznik černošských komunit, z nichž největší se nacházela v Harlemu v New Yorku. Následující období se proto nazývalo „Harlemská renesance,“ což bylo období zrodu černošského umění. Zatímco ale černošské divadlo, literatura a hudba vzkvétaly, na spirituály se v tuto dobu zapomnělo. To se ale změnilo s příchodem pěveckého sboru s názvem Fisk Jubilee Singers, založeným Georgem L. Whitem. Ve snaze vydělat peníze na chod Univerzity Fisk se tehdy skupina afroamerických studentů rozhodla, že spirituály přinese na pódium, což představilo spirituály nejen americké společnosti, ale i té zahraniční.

Spirituály pak učinily návrat v 50. a 60. letech minulého století společně se zrodem Hnutí za lidská práva. Toto hnutí vzkilo v odpovědi na rasovou segregaci a ideologie, které byly i v této době v americké společnosti dominantní. Tyto nově nazývané „písně svobody“ zaznívaly během protestů, které Hnutí pořádalo.

Prvky spirituálů byly pak adaptovány i jednou z nejvýznamějších osobností tohoto hnutí, kterým byl Martin Luther King jr. Konkrétně ve svých projevech King využíval prvky jako např.: repetici, vyšší a nižší hlasitosti, nebo změny tempa. Všechny tyto prvky zaručily to, že si King dokázal získat pozornost svých posluchačů.

Spirituály se ale dostaly i za americký kontinent. Když bylo v roce 1968 tehdejší Československo napadeno sovětskou armádou, a v zemi byl nastolen nový, totalitní režim, někteří si povšimli podobnosti mezi tímto malým národem, a afroamerickými otroky. Jedním z nich byl i Jiří Tichota, zakladatel folkové hudební kapely, Spirituál kvintet. Stejně jako afroameričtí otroci, i členové Spirituál kvintetu chtěli vyjádřit svou touhu po svobodě, což vedlo ke snaze přeložit originální spirituály do češtiny. Takový proces nicméně nebyl vůbec jednoduchý, protože pro to aby kapela mohla svoje písně hrát a nahrávat, musely tyto texty být nejprve schváleny cenzurou. Proto, aby se kapela vyhnula komplikacím, bylo nutno některé pojmy z textů odstranit. Takové pojmy byly například jména Boha a Ježíše Krista, nebo další náboženská témata. Přesto však texty obsahovaly tematiku spirituality a touhy po svobodě, tentokrát však ale ve značně omezené míře.

Dále se práce zabývá současnou literaturou, která obsahuje jevy přítomné v textech spirituálů, konkrétně dílem autorek Nikki Giovanniové, a Mayy Angelouové.

Giovanniová je autorkou, která se nezaměřuje pouze na poezii, ale do její tvorby patří i próza. Nicméně oba tyto žánry obsahují prvky, které naznačují, že se Giovanniová

spirituály inspirovala. Podobné charakteristiky se pak vyskytují i ve tvorbě Angelouové, s tím rozdílem, že zatímco Angelouová se spirituály pouze inspiruje, Giovanniová o nich i sama píše.

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Anotace

Tato práce se zabývá analýzou textů Černošských spirituálů, s důrazem na rozdíl ve významech s ohledem na kulturně-historický kontext, ve kterém byly spirituály využívány jako protestní písně od dob otroctví, až po současnost. Dále se práce věnuje i českým překladům těchto textů, které vznikly ve druhé polovině 20. století v době socialistického režimu v Československu. Tyto texty podtrhovaly jistou paralelu mezi situací afroamerických otroků, a situací československých občanů, kde obě skupiny byly připraveny o svou svobodu. Dále jsou také zmiňovány změny v těchto překladech, vynucené tehdejší komunistickou cenzurou. V neposlední řadě se práce zaměřuje i na současné afroamerické autory, jejich život, a především jejich tvorbu, která obsahuje rysy totožné s rysy přítomnými právě ve spirituálech.

Klíčová slova: černošské spirituály, afroamerická historie, otroctví, Občanská válka, hnutí za lidská práva, současná afroamerická poezie, Spirituál kvintet

Anotation

This thesis deals with the analysis of the lyrics of the negro Spirituals, with special attention on the differences in their meanings throughout American history when the spirituals were used as protest songs starting from the days of slavery until today. The thesis also discusses the Czech translations of these texts, which emerged in the second half of the 20th century at the times of socialistic regime in Czechoslovakia. These texts highlighted a parallel between the situation of the African American slaves and the Czechoslovak citizens, both of which had had their freedom taken away from them. Furthermore, the author comments on the changes made in the Czech translations of those texts which at the time were forced by the Communist censorship. Finally, the thesis introduces some contemporary African American authors, their lives, and especially their work which contains features identical with the features of the Spirituals.

Key words: The Negro Spirituals, African American history, slavery, Civil War, The Civil Rights Movement, contemporary African American poetry, Spirituál kvintet