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Freedom on the Inside: How Enslaved People Created Freedom in Bondage through Song

Mercedes Reid

When we think of enslaved people and freedom, we often think of freedom in terms of something that they could not achieve due to the constraints of slavery; in fact, in America we know they did not achieve it until after the Civil War ended in 1865. Because the practice of slavery was such an affront to Black people's ability to move freely, freedom is often measured in terms of how much control one has over his or her movement. Reducing freedom only to how it applies to one's physical condition prevents us from realizing how enslaved people managed to be free in spite of their social status. When we examine slavery from an outside lens, we are so often astonished by the obvious ways enslaved people created resources for their own survival that we neglect to notice the ways in which they created a type of personal freedom within themselves to survive as well. This freedom is most prevalent in the spirituals they sang and shared amongst one another. In analyzing the slave spirituals, many scholars have either spent time looking closely at the songs' deep ties to Christianity or examined the clear desire for freedom from bondage, but very few have investigated what these songs meant to the people who sang them on a personal level. When enslaved people sang their spiritual songs, they created a space within themselves where they could access a sense of freedom that helped to sustain them both spiritually and emotionally. They successfully illustrated that freedom can be something people create within themselves, which has been long overlooked by reducing it to its physical capabilities.

Enslaved people created spirituals out of the need to access freedom on some level. These songs allowed them to redefine freedom so that they too could share in its glory. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature states: "For one thing, along with a sense of the

slaves' personal self-worth as children of a mighty God, the spirituals offered them much needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery's restrictions and cruelties" (10). They were able to create a place to escape to in their songs that helped them push through. Scholars are often caught up in trying to define what exactly the enslaved people were saying, but we should instead be more focused on what they were doing. The truth is two people could have been singing the same song and both have different meanings for it, but what it personally means to them remains the same: a sense of personal freedom to help them cope. This was a new way to access life and live it on their own terms. Shane and Graham White implore us not to get too caught up in trying to define what the songs meant. In their book *The Sounds of Slavery*, they ask us instead to focus on the intention behind singing the songs: "Undoubtedly, slaves did encode veiled meanings in their spirituals, but that was hardly the main purpose of these African American songs. As Christianity took a powerful hold on the slave community in the decades before the Civil War, slaves, through their spirituals, sang a different world into existence, a syncretic world that subtly blended Anglo-American and African religious belief and practice and gave promise of deliverance that transcended human time" (White & White 119). Another way of putting this is that in their music, they were able to "escape" slavery, creating a sense of freedom within.

In order to understand the deep connection that Black people had with the spirituals, one first has to understand their connection to religion. Enslaved people had a tie to Christianity through slavery. They were drawn to the stories in the Bible in which those who were in danger or oppressed were rescued or saved by God. They connected deeply with the story of Moses and the Israelites

because they were able to draw a lot of similarities to their lives. Taking notice of the way God fought to free his chosen people, they believed that they too were chosen, and that God would come to free them as well. White and White note that enslaved people were “Keenly attentive to Old Testament stories” (116). The Old Testament stories helped Black people to build up a spiritual resistance. They were able to understand all too well the struggle of the oppressed; all they needed was a savior. In drawing inspiration from the Old Testament, “They sang proudly of David, who defeated the giant Goliath, of Samson, who brought down the temple of his enemies, of the Hebrew children who were delivered from the fiery furnace, but much less frequently of the New Testament followers of Jesus, who often suffered persecution for their faith” (White & White 115). As they sang, they were celebrating the defeat of the oppressor both in the Bible and of their own, which they believed was to come.

The ties to religion help us understand enslaved people’s faith, but in addition to using religion in their music, they also often expressed the desire for freedom. This can be interpreted in many ways: escape/freedom from slavery, the end of slavery, or death. They believed that when they died, they had a special place prepared for them in God’s kingdom where they’d be relieved of their burdens and finally given the rest they deserve. Their faith, along with their immense desire for freedom, came together in the spirituals to offer them relief and give them a sense of peace that encouraged them to stay strong and keep going. In their music they were able to create a space for themselves where they could access those basic freedoms they were denied.

Famed activist, orator, and writer Frederick Douglass took time to illustrate the major importance of the spirituals in his three autobiographies. His intention was to communicate how important the singing was while also

clearing up any misconceptions that singing meant enslaved people were happy. In his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Douglass pays special attention to the depth of emotion that went into the spirituals and what that represented to the enslaved people: “The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery” (24). Douglass wasn’t singing to celebrate. By his own definition he sang to relieve his pain. White people often mistook singing for a sign that enslaved people were compliant with their forced condition; Douglass’ statement of the opposite showed them how far from the truth they were. Singing was an outlet for all of the painful emotion he had to carry while being forced into slavery. He knew that singing could not change his physical situation, as he would still be held in bondage despite releasing his sorrows into songs but singing helped him to release some of the pain. In no way should any White person relieve themselves of guilt by thinking these songs meant that the practice of slavery wasn’t horrendous. Douglass highlights the need to sing by comparing it to crying when you are broken hearted. Tears do not heal your heart, we all know that, but they are a step to releasing your pain. They give you a chance to let go of but also to process some of the emotional burden that can be too heavy to carry.

Slave spirituals also served as a reminder for how physical death and spiritual ascension to heaven remedied the destruction of their families caused by slavery. “Soon I Will Be Done” is one example of a song where Black people were not only free but would reunite with their loved ones in the afterlife. “Goin’ to live with God” is repeated eight times, drawing emphasis on their belief of gaining freedom in heaven. “I want t’ meet my mother”

(Norton 13-15) is repeated three times in a row along with “I want t’ meet Jesus” (Norton 21-23); here, the enslaved person is creating a space for themselves to dream in. A lot of the time families were separated and broken apart, but they believed that in death they’d be able to reunite with their loved ones in the place specifically created for them by God. The idea of going to live with God in heaven after a lifetime of living in slavery was something they couldn’t wait for; in their eyes, they knew it was coming. Separation from their loved ones here on earth was painful, but through their belief they knew they were destined to meet again.

The audio version of “Soon I Will Be Done” lingers in your spirit long after listening. In multiple versions, singers use lower tones to accentuate the repetitive lyrics that expresses how deeply they believed. This song wasn’t a hope, it was a fact. It was something that would come to be. Of the spirituals, Douglass said, “They were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains” (24). This song is quite literally them envisioning the deliverance Douglass mentioned. In this song they visualized their freedom and claimed it as their own. When “No more weepin’ and a-wailing” (Norton 5-7) is repeated three times, they are saying that the day will come when they will be completely free, and nothing can change that. Though the depth of this song may cause it to sound a bit heavy, the overall tone of the song is an internal celebration of freedom, a private secret between the enslaved person and God that no one can take that away from them

Other songs like “Go Down Moses” reminded Black people to stay faithful and wait on God. The words “Let my people go” are repeated eleven times throughout the song, saying that not only is their freedom important

but it is necessary. They will be freed because God said so. The lyrics were intended to give them comfort that they too would be led to their freedom:

The Lord told Moses what to do
Let my people go;
To lead the children of Israel through,
Let my people go, (Norton 16-20).

Believing their freedom to be coming gave them the opportunity to celebrate it in their music, to demand it and fight for it. In an analysis of the meaning and importance of slave spirituals, Jon Cruz, in his book *Culture on the Margins*, writes, “The production of music and other cultural forms enabled slaves to collectively exercise symbolic control. Song making helped them comprehend their fate and wrest from their conditions some sense of order” (48). This symbolic control is highlighted in songs like “Go Down Moses” because the enslaved people were able to use the story of Moses symbolically to represent their own bondage, desire for freedom, and their promise from God of eventual freedom from slavery. In the song God says:

No longer shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go;
Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil,
Let my people go (Norton 16-20).

The fact that these are God’s words in the song makes them even more meaningful. Not only are enslaved people celebrating the promise of freedom, but they are demanding what is rightfully theirs. Singing about Moses and believing themselves to be chosen people destined for freedom allowed them to create hope within themselves. Their day was coming. Not only would they achieve their freedom,

but they would be rewarded for their faithfulness.

In many of the spirituals, it can be easy to get too caught up in the lyrics and misconstrue the message. What sounds like anger can really be passion, and what appears as a lack of faith is just a misunderstanding of the intention in the song. “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” can be mistaken as the people angrily questioning God, asking, ‘How come he can’t deliver everyone the way he delivered Daniel? What makes Daniel so special?’ The words “Deliver Daniel” appear twenty-two times in the text, all in the form of a question, but the singers did not doubt that Daniel was delivered; instead, their repeated question highlights the passion of their belief and their celebration of God’s work. A closer listen to the lyrics illuminates an interpretation of the song that is important. Many versions of this song are sung upbeat. The lyrics draw attention to the many works of God in the second verse:

He delivered Daniel from the lion’s den,
Jonah from the belly of the whale.
And de Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
An’ why not every man? (Norton 5-8).

They call attention to these acts of God to provide examples of his glory. They are saying that they believe in God’s power, they know that he has performed great miracles and saved those who are faithful to him. They have been faithful, and they will continue to be, but they are also ready to be delivered from slavery. The setup of this verse highlights how powerful God is and ends by the singers asking the listener (and themselves) to think about this: If God can do all those amazing things, how could it be that he couldn’t save you?

When analyzing the spirituals, it’s important to realize that first and foremost, enslaved people had a deep respect for God. This respect came in large part by their

belief in God’s works. In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, James Cone breaks down what exactly the enslaved people intended in their spirituals: “They ritualized God in song and sermon. That was what the spirituals were all about—a ritualization of God” (Cone 66). Praising God in their music was important to them as a way not only to glorify God but also to obtain and claim the promise of freedom that he offered them. Ritualizing God in song made His promise of freedom accessible to them by serving as a constant reminder of God’s glory and power. Through their music, they illustrated their freedom as a sort of “divine liberation. Their experience of it and their faith in its complete fulfillment became factual reality and self-evident truth for the slave community” (Cone 67). Their music represented the power of their promise of freedom.

Through slavery, people forced into bondage molded freedom into something that they could carry within themselves. They often claimed freedom as if they were already free, because through their faith in God they are free. In, “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” freedom is not only possible, but it has also already been obtained. The lyrics illustrate that that singer is free, never to be enslaved again.

I set my foot on de Gospel ship,
An’ the ship begin to sail.
It landed me over on Canaan’s shore
And I’ll never come back no more (Norton 30-34).

Canaan is considered the promised land, so referencing it in song represents how their belief in God provided them with a type of personal and spiritual freedom that couldn’t be taken away from them, even in slavery. Being enslaved was an extremely unfortunate condition in their lives, but as Cone explains: “Through the song, black people were able to affirm that Spirit who was continuous with their

existence as free beings” (Cone 29). In their music they claim a freedom in the presence of God that is all their own, to be rejoiced about and celebrated.

When we focus in on defining the spirituals, we can easily get lost in the many different possibilities that the enslaved people could have been communicating. When we take time to focus instead on the way the enslaved people used these songs to help uplift themselves, we come to understand that in singing these songs, they were giving themselves permission to access the freedom that slavery prevented them from. This was something that was made by them specifically for them. Douglass highlights that their songs, “To many would seem unmeaning jargon, but . . . nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves” (23-24). Their ability to create freedom where there was none highlights their emotional and spiritual strength. We live in a world where we take for granted the small things, like choosing to be a Vegan or going around the corner to play basketball at the park, but enslaved people didn’t even have the right to tell those who held them in slavery that they were sick and couldn’t work or that they wanted their family unions to be honored. The horrors of what slavery was meant that they had to find a way to survive. Cone points out that in their music, “Black slaves were in fact carving out a new style of earthly freedom. Slave religion was permeated with the with the affirmation of freedom from bondage and freedom-in-bondage” (28). By believing they were destined to be free, they created a sense of freedom within that was accessible through song. The songs helped to remind them of God’s promises, illustrating what was to come and imploring them to remember what God was capable of.

To create freedom within oneself highlights an extremely oppressive situation and an admirable hunger to survive it. Enslaved people didn’t always have the option

to try to make a physical escape because the truth is simple: everyone couldn’t run away. For those who couldn’t run from it, they had to create a place where they could go within themselves that would help them make it through. In creating this place for themselves, they literally redefined freedom so they could share in it in some way as well. Their music allowed them to be free in their minds and spirits despite being bound by the chains of slavery.

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About the Author

Mercedes Reid is a junior majoring in English and Secondary Education. This research project was completed in the fall of 2020 under the mentorship of **Dr. Emily Field** (African American Studies) and made possible with funding provided by an Honors Program semester grant. Mercedes took a course with Dr. Field and immediately thereafter picked up the African American Studies Minor.