Preface

Often regarded as the most important body of folk songs created on American soil, African American slave songs as they have been passed down and inherited are likely to have had their roots in the mid- to late-eighteenth century. Some scholars, such as Miles Mark Fisher, believe that they were transported by the first Negroes who were brought as slaves to North America in 1619.[1] It is certain that they are older than the period when they first were formally transcribed and recorded in print, in the nineteenth century. But their precise time of origin, specific sources, and processes of composition remain mysterious and have been subjects for debate since these songs first were collected by figures such as Richard Allen, William Francis Allen, Charles P. Ware, Rev. Marshall W. Taylor, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

Consistently described by early observers using the terms "weird," "wild," "primitive," "quaint," "unforgettable," "other-worldly," "uncanny," "barbaric," "unearthly," "disjointed," "senseless," "pathetic," "naïve," "supernatural," "curious," "monotonous," "childlike," "repetitive," "strange" and "peculiar," paradoxically, slave songs also were criticized for being directly modeled in imagery, diction, and structure on white revival hymns. Any similarities to white Protestant, Methodist, and revival hymns were used by scholars such as George Pullen Jackson, Richard Wallascheck, Newman I. White, and Edmund S. Lorenz to demonstrate the fundamental lack of originality in slave songs in order to diminish their importance and prove that the slave poets were merely imitative—actually, that they were not poets at all. White hymns of the day undoubtedly influenced the slaves, who would have encountered them while being converted into Christianity, but it was evident to other early transcribers and

auditors that this material had become something unmistakably different through the slave poets' imaginative transformations.

Numerous observers noted their distinctiveness from the language and performance of white church music in the use of some of the following features, many of which are African survivals:

- Dancing in a circle during the "ring shouts" that took place after formal church services or in secret
- Clapping of hands or the body referred to as "patting juba"
- Rhythmic arm movements
- Coordinated foot shuffling and tapping
- Bodily swaying
- Shouts of loud abandon
- Ecstatic displays of jubilation
- Uncanny imagery whose references to enslavement—even on the literal level—transcended conventional Christian imagery of being in the body
- Interchangeable segments of lyrics with the same lines, images, phrases, or stanzas reappearing in multiple songs
- Extensive use of repetition, which often took place in triads
- Lines and verses whose lengths vary
- Irregular rhyme and general lack of stress on rhyme
- Extensive lexical or phrasal repetition
- Frequent thematic discontinuities—or what might be thought of as intuitive poetic leaps—between verses and refrains
- Complex rhythmical patterns
- Continuous and overlapping use of the antiphonal structure referred to as call-and-response, where a leader (or leaders, who would rotate during long sessions)—whose knowledge of the "catalogue" of slave songs would generally be particularly extensive—would start singing a particular song, and the group would echo lines serving as refrains
- Satirical humor and ironic wit
- Ostensibly religious songs that do not appear to have conventional Christian themes and diction
- Extended development of biblical narratives
- Vernacular diction and unusual syntax
- Direct address of ancestors, biblical figures, heroic models and spirit guides

- Absence of the Western philosophical framework of Cartesian dualism, which allowed the mind to be described as traveling freely from the body
- Satan shown as a trickster figure
- Sense of time that viewed the future as a direct and immediate extension of the present, with past and present as dominant modes of consciousness
- Description of human relationships and connections as being maintained even in a state of absence, including after death
- Stress on the importance of community for every individual.

By the middle of the nineteenth century—or even earlier, as described with horror by John F. Watson[2]—slave songs appear to have been recognized as a distinctive cultural development within the slave community, but no one at the time seemed to be entirely sure of what they were, where they came from, and most of all, how to evaluate them. Some early responders found them mesmerizingly beautiful, alternately describing them either as heartbreakingly sad or upliftingly cheerful. Others, like Watson, were appalled by their barbarity and wildness. Some early auditors were merely puzzled by their oddity, and others experienced a combination of these reactions.

The poetical qualities of slave songs were noted by a number of early commentators, but that was as far as it went. Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote that slave songs were "a flower of poetry."[3] William E. Barton's 1899 collection, *Old Plantation Hymns; a collection of hitherto unpublished melodies of the slave and the freeman, with historical and descriptive notes*, notably uses the technical diction applied to poetry in referring to "the variable character of the couplets which make up the stanzas."[4] W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in "The Sorrow Songs" in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the words of slave songs "conceal much of real poetry and meaning beneath conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody."[5] Also employing literary diction, William Francis Allen wrote that slave songs "will dash heroically through a trochaic tune at the head of a column of iambs with wonderful skill."[6] Mark Twain called them "utterly beautiful" and wrote that, in slave songs, "America has produced the perfectest flower of the ages."[7] More recent commentators have continued to mention the poetic qualities of slave songs, but the terms "poetry" and the "poetic" have largely remained metaphorical, suggesting occasional imaginative

inventiveness, memorable images or figures, or unexpected displays of verbal dexterity, rather than literary designations meaning part of a canonical body of American or even African American literature. In spite of these gestures that acknowledge their flights of "poeticism," the "folk" association has been perpetuated over recognition of slave songs as art.

Slave songs have been generally appreciated and studied for their musical significance, influence, and beauty, including serving as the foundation of gospel, jazz, and the blues. Their role in the formation and expression of African American Christianity explains the slaves' process of Christianization and demonstrates how the adoption of Western religious beliefs aided in their survival and sustenance. Historically and sociologically, slave songs created a system of coded communication in the slaves' efforts to build a functioning community, to elude detection by slaveholders when arranging shouts, meetings, escape routes and plans, giving warnings of "pattyrollers" (patrollers), and to offer one another the support and encouragement to carry on.

The roots of African American slave songs partially lay in African customs, community, and oral communication. They also directly reflect the immediate circumstances of slavery and plantation life in America. What F. Abiola Irele calls "The African Imagination" provided common ground and enabled the "black and unknown bards," as they are referred to by James Weldon Johnson in his poem by that name, to blend vestiges of their ancestral homelands with American influences to produce something utterly unique. Although they came from widely diverse geographical and linguistic backgrounds in Africa, the slaves would have shared music and dance as key elements in their ways of marking significant events and establishing a sense of individual and community identity.

While the issue of Africanisms has been a source of critical debate since slave songs first were preserved and written about, there is equal evidence that slave songs are a hybrid of African references, customs, and ontology juxtaposed with direct and immediate experiences of American slave culture. These influences include the adoption of Christianity, the religion of the slaveholders, which has been melded to African customs and suited to the slaves' psychological and emotional needs and worldview in slave songs; commentary on the daily routines and rhythms of particular kinds of enforced labor; reflections

on current political events that traveled through word of mouth via slave songs; the development of fluency in English as a new language; and the construction of a community across barriers of language and culture with other slaves who might share no common links beyond their African roots, the experience of being snatched away from home, their present shared location, and current status in life as chattel. Logic as well as concrete evidence suggest that, when transplanted unwillingly to their new surroundings, the slaves would have carried with them aspects of their cultures of origin as a mechanism to retain a sense of personhood and forge a new sense of community when cut off from past connections.

John Lovell Jr. has accounted for more than 6,000 slave songs, making them in all likelihood the largest early canon of American verse. The most famous and popular include the following:

- "Ain't Gonna Study War No More"
- "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"
- "You Got to Walk That Lonesome Valley"
- "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore"
- "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"
- "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child"
- "When the Saints Go Marching In"
- "Come By Heah, Lawd" ("Kumbaya")
- "Go Down Moses"
- "Go Tell It on the Mountain"
- "Joshua Fit De Battle of Jericho"
- "Do Lord, Do Lord, Do Remember Me"
- "Gimme That Old Time Religion"
- "I am a Poor Wayfaring Stranger"
- "Many Thousand Gone" ("No More Auction Block For Me")
- "Oh, Freedom!"
- "Let Us Break Bread Together On Our Knees"
- "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian in My Heart"
- "Rise, Shine, Give God the Glory"
- "Rock of Ages"
- "There's a Meeting Here Tonight"
- "This Little Light of Mine"

This brief listing of many that could have been selected of these classic songs—whose lyrics have been known, loved, translated into countless languages, treasured internationally, endlessly given new arrangements, recorded and sung in churches, opera recitals, choral, rock, folk and gospel performances, and at political and labor rallies, often by individuals who are unaware that they are slave songs—reflects a remarkable achievement. But even more remarkable is the consistent exclusion of slave songs (and information on their provenance) from anthologies, classrooms, and general attention when seriously considering and appreciating the full, rich historical range of American poetry.

Slave songs rarely are considered as lyric poetry and typically do not appear in the major instructional anthologies of either African American or American poetry or literature. When they are included, it generally is in special categories such as "vernacular poetry," "folk songs," "slave creations," "oral verse," "plantation songs," or simply "the spirituals," and not in the category of "poetry." The absence of slave songs from discussions of American lyric poetry is a serious oversight that reflects more on the formation and the exclusivity of the American poetry canon than on the literary qualities of slave songs themselves.

Their importance to the African American poetical tradition can be traced through their influence on countless African American poets, including James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Melvin B. Tolson, Calvin C. Hernton, Margaret Walker, Waring Cuney, Sterling A. Brown, Robert Hayden, Sonia Sanchez, Lance Jeffers, Amiri Baraka, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Raymond Patterson, among many others. Sterling A. Brown attributed a significant measure of their importance to the fact that they were self-defining, rather than an external description of the African American experience. Alain Locke considered them not only to be a racial product but to possess universal meaning for all of American culture. Yet they remain excluded from serious literary consideration. John Lovell Jr. summed up the situation with hands-up frustration and impassioned bluntness:

> And so we still have 800 to 1,000 original songs, comprising an epic tradition in the class of the Iliad, the Songs of Roland, or the Lays of the Nibelungs, with no clear analysis of the soil from which they sprung or the process of their growth. In other epic traditions, patient scholars have found seeds of racial and national culture. They look there first. And yet for how many years have the dabblers in American "Negroitis" ignored or treated with disgraceful cavalierness the heart of the Negro spirituals![8]

The lyrics of these indigenous American creations have a compelling power, sophistication, and complexity consistent with traditional expectations for lyric poetry. "I am a Poor Wayfarin' Stranger"; "Don't be Weary, Traveler"; "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"; "Oh Mary, Don't You Weep"; "My Lord What a Mornin'"; "Go, Tell It on the Mountain"; "Roll, Jordan, Roll"; "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"; "Lay This Body Down"; "Wade in the Water"; "Go Down, Moses"; and "No More Auction Block For Me," among numerous other examples of classic slave songs, are an integral part of America's literary treasures. The humble and anonymous nature of their authors *should* have no bearing on a full appreciation of their inventive imagery, rhetorical sophistication, and emotional pathos. The lyrics of slave songs have been foundational in reflecting and establishing the special identity of the individual African Americans who created them, and they are a unique and irreplaceable body of American poetry.

The erasure of slave songs as lyric poetry—versus folk music, religious hymns, or historical vestiges of plantation culture—is a reflection on how we conceive of the American lyric poetry genre, and how (and why) the American and African American poetry canons have developed as they have. Some of our finest and earliest American poems—which even now remain invisible as part of the lyric poetry tradition—were produced by anonymous African American slaves. The scope and significance of this body of writing as a major touchstone of American culture—in conjunction with some possible explanations for the consistent pattern of slave songs' neglect as poetry—is the focus of this book.

The profusion of writings on slave songs attests to the interest that they have held throughout the world since the 1860s, but little is available in the way of in-depth and current literary scholarship. A limited range of sources is available that discuss them in the context of music or religion or aimed at a popular audience. As a result, while slave songs have been treated with respect, the existing resources have led to a situation where they are regarded primarily as folk songs, artifacts of oral or vernacular culture, historical documents, cultural relics

of slavery, the roots of gospel or blues, or as part of the development of African American Christianity. While slave songs play an important role in all of these contexts, they are also central to the literary legacy of America and should be regarded as such.

This book discusses slave songs as lyric poetry, providing current critical and cultural analysis and bringing them into the present by discussing their continuing literary influence. Using the methodologies of fields including African American literature, American studies, poetry and poetics, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, religious studies, philosophy, and cognitive science, an interdisciplinary approach offers detailed analysis of slave songs' primary themes, stylistic devices, and imaginative metaphorical structures combining American experience with European inflections and African survivals resulting in highly original literary works. Literary criticism reframes slave songs to prove that they stand up to appreciative scrutiny as an authentic, significant and enduring body of lyric poetry with continuing influence. By showing the beauty and value of slave songs, I propose a reconsideration of both canons—American and African American—by calling for their consistent inclusion, which entails a reassessment of the contribution of African American poetry to early American poetry.

Considered as lyric poetry, slave songs are a record of the slave poets' ability to overcome adversity and illuminate the strength of slave society in achieving unprecedented cultural production under circumstances of dire repression. Viewing slave songs primarily as music or historical footnotes is a misrepresentation of their significance as living cultural artifacts, contemporaneous records of the daily experiences of these individuals and their society, a major body of poetry born of long suffering, and timeless expressions of the human ability to refuse to be destroyed by inhumanity. The finest examples stand up to anything produced in the American poetry tradition. Referred to by W. E. B. Du Bois as the sorrow songs, he justly claimed that they were "the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas."[9]

Introduction

Since the mid-nineteenth century, a wealth of writings on African American slave songs has been produced internationally by devoted amateurs and scholars in multiple disciplines, which serves as testimony to the virtually universal appeal of this inspirational, heart-rending, mystical, satirical, tragic, hopeful, pragmatic, and altogether multifaceted body of music and verse. Slave songs have been collected, recorded, performed, and studied as artifacts of slave culture, windows of insight into the sociopolitics of plantation life, a repository of African survivals for a diasporic population, the "true history" of plantation life for the slaves, the roots of African American musical forms including gospel and the blues, a treasured body of American and/or African American folklore, and one of the bedrocks of African American Christianity. But the relationship of slave songs to either "American" or "African American" poetry has been one of curious disregard.

The major purpose of this book is to address that omission, examine how it came about, and conclude that slave songs are entitled to a place at the foundation of the American and African American poetry canons. As a literary study, this book's primary focus is language and the critical questions associated with poetry and poetics. I set the stage in chapter 1 by reviewing the intersection of the oral and textual lyric poetry traditions. We see how slave songs connect those two artificially separated genres to create a quintessentially American product that echoes and binds the Western and African lyric poetry traditions.

There are invaluable resources available—aimed both at academic and popular audiences—that discuss slave songs, but they are almost