THE FOUNDATIONAL INFLUENCE OF SPIRITUALS IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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There is a voluminous body of published scholarship on the history and cultural influence of the African-American spirituals tradition, beginning a century ago with a series of essays by W.E.B. Du Bois (1989) in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). However, there has been relatively little focus on spirituals from a comprehensively psychological and cultural perspective. That is, the issue of how the spirituals have functioned psychologically in the culture, both during North American slavery and in the time since the end of official slavery in 1865, has received some attention in several different realms but usually in piecemeal fashion. For example, John Lovell Jr.'s (1972) important work, *Black Song,* employs literary analysis to uncover recurrent psychological themes in the lyrics of slave spirituals. Dena Epstein (1977, 31n17) also explores aspects of the psychological dimension in her work, including a particularly illuminating exploration of the psychological experience of African captives in the Middle Passage and a discussion of the ways in which the singing of the captives reflected key aspects of cultural adaptation. James Cone (1991) and others (for example, Hopkins and Cummings 1991; Earl 1993; Kirk-Duggan 1997) have constructed experiential profiles of slave singers through a primarily theological lens, while others (Levine 1977; Raboteau 1978; Stuckey 1987) have elucidated circumscribed psychological aspects of the spirituals through the perspective of cultural history. Samuel Floyd's (1995) analysis builds substantially on previous work while also

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exploring important musicological elements. Thus, although there has been an absence of scholarship that focuses comprehensively on psychological and cultural issues, it is quite possible to begin to construct such a work through scholarly synthesis.

In this article, I want to share some small parts of the synthesis I have developed over the last several years, rooted in my background as a singer and clinical psychologist. I want to focus specifically on issues of emotion, resilience, and psychological coping, examined through the dual lenses of personal introspection and scholarly analysis. This discussion carries significant implications for a more complete understanding of the enduring legacy of Harry T. Burleigh, who devoted considerable time—both as a composer and as a performing artist—to the evolution of the spirituals in early twentieth-century American culture. As Simpson (1990 **[Au: Please provide page range of discussion in this source.]**) has shown, much of Burleigh's life work was influenced by his immersion in the spirituals, beginning with his relationship with his blind grandfather Hamilton Waters, from whom Burleigh learned many of the songs that he would later arrange for performance in concert settings.

My own entry into this field of study began quite serendipitously. Having recently returned to active singing after many years of work as a practicing clinical psychologist and university professor, I volunteered in November 1990 to perform a voice recital at a fundraiser for a community organization in Denver, Colorado. I programmed a wide variety of repertoire in the recital, ranging from musical theater to European art songs and opera arias. Consistent with traditional practice, I ended the recital with a set of Negro spirituals.

Following the program, the community outreach coordinator from the Denver Museum of Natural History approached me about doing a program for the museum's upcoming Black History Month celebration. Without hesitating, I volunteered to do a lecture-recital program titled "Hidden Meanings in African-American Spirituals." The outreach coordinator proceeded, enthusiastically, to schedule my program for the first weekend in February. I was left with the task of delivering the program I promised. While I had sung spirituals all my life and was aware of much of the popular lore concerning the use of the spirituals for clandestine communication on the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century, I had never devoted any substantial time to serious study of this issue. Armed with my years of experience as a student and as a university professor, I wasted no time doing everything I could to prepare myself to present a competent program. I was, in fact, able to do an adequate job, and the program was well received.[1] However, I was unprepared for the

1. It is noteworthy that most of the musical arrangements of the spirituals that I per-

personally consuming emotional experience that ensued or for the radical change that I was about to experience in the direction of my personal and professional life.

I was particularly unprepared for the flood of emotions that I experienced in the course of my performance. Especially puzzling were emotions that would seem to be impossible to experience simultaneously: joy and sadness, rage and love, tranquility and anxiety. I was so unnerved by these intense and seemingly incompatible emotions that I was nearly unable to complete my program. People in the audience with whom I talked after the program said that they did not notice anything unusual in my composure. I must have done a good job of masking my internal experience, because my sense of self was anything but usual. My personal equilibrium was completely upset, an experience unlike anything I had ever known. Having been trained as a practicing clinical psychologist to pay attention to the presence of unfamiliar emotional states, I knew that something very significant was occurring in my life. However, I had no idea what it was or what its source might be. What I did know was that although I had intended my Museum program as a one-time event, I would now have to spend more time with the spirituals.

In the days and weeks following the February 1991 program at the Denver Museum of Natural History, I spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on and attempting to understand the unsettling emotions that had captured me that day. I was aided by a series of dreams, including dreams that delivered remembrances of childhood summers spent in Edenton, North Carolina, visiting a great-aunt and -uncle who were significant parental figures for me. I remembered my great-aunt's singing of hymns and spirituals, and I remembered attending church with my great-aunt and great-uncle.[2]

During this period of personal reflection, I eventually understood that the disturbing emotions I had experienced during my lecture-concert program paralleled the emotions associated with life as a slave in North America in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Along with this revelation was the insight that the songs these slaves created have served throughout the centuries as a kind of oral repository of those

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formed that day were written by Harry T. Burleigh. Burleigh's published arrangements of spirituals are the ones most easily accessed in music stores in the United States, for good reason. In my judgment, Burleigh was able to provide a near-direct connection to the voices of the ancestors by providing accompaniments that supported but did not overwhelm the basic melodies that he sought to preserve.

2. Although I had not read it at the time, I have subsequently become aware that the well-known slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs (1987) is largely a recounting of Jacobs's life in Edenton, North Carolina, before escaping from slavery by sea on the Maritime Underground Railroad.

complex emotions. In giving myself completely over to a program devoted exclusively to slave songs, as interpreted in the musical arrangements of Harry T. Burleigh and other composers who were inspired by Burleigh's work, I had opened myself to a deeply personal understanding of the slave experience and the music associated with it. Along with this came a responsibility to engage in more study. It was then that I attempted to construct, from the large volume of extant scholarship, the beginnings of a specifically psychological and cultural perspective on the foundational cultural influence of spirituals.

My focus was on developing an understanding of the spirituals as they functioned in the context of slavery, because this was the center of my personal emotional response. Of course, in another context, one might also focus on the psychology of the concert tradition of spirituals that has emerged over the 140 years since Emancipation. In a way, this is a second legacy beyond the original slave tradition, one that has been advanced by numerous composers, conductors, and concert artists, including such notable figures as Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, R. Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson, Edward Boatner, Margaret Bonds, and numerous others, especially including the recent work of composer/conductor Moses Hogan. As Paul Allen Anderson (2001) has shown, there are a number of dynamics involving tensions between European and traditional African cultural traditions that framed the performance of concert spirituals from the early tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, through the Harlem Renaissance, and persisting in the current cultural environment in the United States. However, that more comprehensive and highly complex psychological analysis must be the subject of future study. The current discussion focuses more centrally on the origins of the spirituals and their foundational psychological and cultural functions in the slave community. In many ways, this was the primary cultural ground upon which Burleigh built his original concert arrangements (Simpson 1990 **[Au: Please provide page nos.]**).

Helping to solidify my sense of dedication to my task was the fact that as I participated in more programs in the community where I sang spirituals and engaged people in discussions, it became very clear that many people—from all walks of life and varied racial and ethnic backgrounds—had little knowledge of spirituals and their importance to African-American and, more broadly, American culture. I felt a responsibility to use my unique background and deepening insights to address this problem. The initial results of the work that ensued are reflected in my book *Wade in the Water, the Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Jones 1993). In the current article, however, I also want to describe the process that I followed.

My primary task was to review the published work on the spirituals with the aim of constructing the beginnings of a new, primarily psychological framework. One of the questions that framed the review was the issue of how African captives in the Atlantic slave trade coming from widely diverse ethnic communities, could come together to develop a unified sense of community, enriched by the creation of communal music. From a contemporary vantage point, it is difficult to comprehend what an extraordinary psychological task this must have been. It is clear that among black captives during the slave trade, there was little if any personal identification with the concept of "African." Rather, people reared in such divergent ethnic communities as the Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Mende identified almost exclusively with members of their own ethnic communities. All others were viewed as outsiders (see Eltis 2000 **[Au: Page range for discussion?]**). Developing a unified identity as Africans, therefore, was not easily accomplished.

Of course, a potent creator of unity in any situation is the sudden appearance of a common enemy. When ethnically diverse women and men were captured without warning and thrown together in the holds of slave ships, it was instantly advantageous for the captives to develop emotional attachments to one another, something that would have been unimaginable before their captivity. When the same blatant disregard for personal and ethnic identity was applied to the captives as they toiled together with other black-skinned people in North American slavery, it is easy to understand how the bonds of unity would have been strengthened even further. To imagine the significant social bonds created by such uniform mistreatment at the hands of slave crews and plantation owners, one need only consult the visual images created by an artist like Tom Feelings (1995), who worked for more than twenty years to develop visual depictions of the Middle Passage that would do justice to the psychological realities connected to that experience.

Beyond the pragmatic unity fostered by the coming together of diverse peoples to cope with the horrors of captivity and enslavement, there were additional cultural forces that would have facilitated the solidification of such cross-ethnic bonds. One of the most important of these cultural forces would have been the common tendency, across the African continent, to place music making and dancing at the center of community life (Jones 1963**[Au: 1993?]**; Lovell 1972; Southern 1983; Stuckey 1987 **[Au: Please provide page range of discussion in each of these sources.]**). In contrast to the primary function of music making as a form of entertainment in the West, music among Africans was tied to multiple events in the life of the community, including not only significant ceremonial events, like weddings and funerals, but also mundane daily events, such

as preparations for hunting expeditions, daily work rituals, and various individual events, such as the arrival of a child's first tooth (Southern 1983 **[Au: Please provide page range of discussion]**). Moreover, music—particularly songs—had the additional function of providing disguised commentary or ridicule concerning the actions of strangers or visitors (**[Au: Please provide page range of discussion.]**). Some scholars (Floyd 1995; Stuckey 1987 **[Au: Please provide page ranges of discussions in these sources.]**) have also argued that forms of a counter-clockwise ring dance, common among many ethnic communities in Africa during the slave trade, provided the basis for the ring shout, which in turn nurtured the development of many of the songs that are today called spirituals. While it is not known how these common music and dance practices came to be so ubiquitous on the African continent, it is easy to see that such common practices were likely very helpful in the evolution of a new group identity among enslaved Africans in North America. Moreover, it is not difficult to see continuities between the functional aspects of music that existed in Africa and the multifunctional character of the spirituals that emerged among African captives (Jones 1993**[Au: Please provide page ranges of discussion.]**).

There are two additional factors that likely facilitated a new group identification among African captives and their progeny during the slave trade. Both factors are articulated most clearly in the work of the contemporary East African scholar John Mbiti (1990). The first is the virtually universal tendency among African peoples to use complex systems of spiritual practice and belief as a central feature of their daily lives. According to Mbiti, the central tenets of religious belief and experience appear to have been remarkably similar across African ethnic communities. Therefore, despite the historical tendency for African peoples to identify personally as belonging to separate and distinct ethnic or tribal communities, the reality is that there were many aspects of their religious cosmologies that made the evolution of a unified group of identified Africans in America less remarkable. For example, among the common elements of African religions was a High God, omnipotent and distant from the people, assisted by a number of lesser spirits, less powerful than the High God but more intimately connected to the people (Mbiti 1990 **[Au: Page nos.?]**). Lovell (1972 **[Au: Page no.?]**) viewed this aspect of traditional African religion as one of the factors that made it possible, ultimately, for Africans to adopt Christianity, in which the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost paralleled the division of divine power in African religions. Lovell also speculated about the way in which this cosmological structure was reflected in the differences between the names God, Lord and Jesus in the lyrics of slave spirituals. References to God, conjec-

tured Lovell, reflected images of a powerful but distant divinity, with progressively more intimacy and experiential primacy associated with the use of "Lord" and "Jesus," respectively (230).

Ironically, a second factor identified by John Mbiti (1990, 106) as common among African tribal groups, both historically and in the present, is the importance of kinship (tribal) bonds, which were integral to religious beliefs and practices. The centrality of kinship bonds, captured in the idea that "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," originally applied to specific ethnic and tribal group identification, was a cultural force that could find its translation in ties to others in the slave community.

To summarize, there were several common features of cultural life in the African communities from which slaves were captured, including the ubiquitous presence of functional music, coupled with the centrality of religion and communal identity. These factors, combined with the unity of purpose in confronting a common experience of oppression as slaves, were likely powerful contributors to the slave culture in which spirituals were born.

There is no question that spirituals, for enslaved Africans, provided a plethora of essential psychological and social functions for the enslaved community (Jones 1993 **[Au: Page nos.?]**). Perhaps the most important of these functions, from a psychological standpoint, was the use of the songs for coping with and transcending emotional and physical trauma. For example, in a song like "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," the possibilities for personal transformation and transcendence are infinite. First, on the level of poetry, it is notable that if *sometimes* I feel like a motherless child, then (unstated but clearly implied) *sometimes* I do not! *Sometimes* (further implied), I feel like a child of God, empowered to reject the notions of inferiority and dehumanization imposed on me in these circumstances.

Beyond this subtle use of language to communicate the potential power to transcend psychologically untenable circumstances, the repetitive, ultimately soothing power of the melody, sung over and over, asserts a calming effect that nearly approaches a hypnotic trance. It is therefore not surprising that, as pointed out by Floyd (1995, 218), George Gershwin's famous lullaby "Summertime," used as a centerpiece of his opera *Porgy and Bess,* is built on the musical structure of this old spiritual. A group exercise of singing the melody over and over, with participants reporting their internal experience, confirms this notion: again and again, in multiple settings, participants in exercises like this report a progressive experience through the inherent sadness of the song to a paradoxical experience of inner calm.

As detailed in *Wade in the Water* (Jones 1993**[Au: Page nos.?]**), additional, important psychological functions of the spirituals as they operated during slavery include the following: the forging of community bonding (mirroring both traditional African values and the embracing of the new democratic ideals emerging among the slaveholding American colonists); the appropriation of Biblical stories in the songs to create ancestral equivalents (Levine 1977, 51); the (sometimes disguised) expression of protest (Spencer 1990 **[Au: Page nos.?]**); the clandestine communication of messages with specific, encoded meanings (Douglass 1971, 87); and the reinforcing of community attitudes and values (Jones 1993, 1011n120). Considered together, this diverse repertoire of social and psychological functions placed spirituals at the very center of the culture.

An overarching conceptualization that is particularly helpful in a specifically psychological understanding of spirituals and their role in the culture has been offered by Ferdinand Jones (2001, 1331n138), who has coined the term "challenge attitude" to describe the psychological dynamics embedded in jazz improvisation and in African-American culture more broadly conceived. According to Jones,

> The challenge attitude in African American culture is expecting that there is another, perhaps opposite, meaning to what white authority presents as truth, especially as it pertains to the challenger's self-identity. The individual interprets others' words, norms and givens from a skeptical position. The others' "truth" can therefore be either redefined or accepted unaltered. The action of interpretation is the key element in the interchange. (133)

Jones argues convincingly that the challenge attitude was present in African-American culture from its beginnings. Within the dynamic of the challenge attitude, African Americans, often branded by the outside world as inferior, worthless, and subhuman, have consistently been able to revise these pejorative labels, creating fresh, dynamic conceptions of the self that have been essential in the maintenance of positive self-identity. This pervasive psychological dynamic in black settings, according to Jones, is one of the factors contributing to the ability of a community of despised men and women to create music regarded worldwide as exceptional in beauty, emotional impact, and communicability. The challenge attitude, when operating full force in the interplay of jazz musicians, is reflected in musical improvisation, which "encourages the individual artist's assertiveness and hones the performance groups' intercommunication in the process of reaching a common goal" (138).

The idea of the challenge attitude is consistent with the way in which slave spirituals could be used to "challenge" the prevailing notions of slaves that were promulgated by white slaveholders. Take for, example,

the lyrics of the spiritual "Heaven, Heaven," also known as "I Got Shoes":

> I got shoes, you got shoes
> All God's children got shoes.
> When I get to Heaven gonna put on my shoes,
> Gonna walk all over God's Heaven, Heaven, Heaven.
> Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't going there, Heaven,
> Heaven,
> Gonna walk all over God's Heaven.

Although few slaves were blessed with wardrobes that included anything approaching fine shoes, the singers of a song like this could reinvent (challenge) that reality. In singing the song, the slave singer not only claims shoes (because "all God's children got shoes!") but also boldly asserts plans for walking (read *strutting*) "all over God's Heaven." Furthermore, in a disguised reference to the hypocritical slaveholder, the singer reminds everyone within hearing that "everybody's talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't going there" (Jones 1993, 8).

The notion of the challenge attitude might well be the central thread that pulls together all of the various psychological functions of the spirituals that African Americans created and first sang during the period of North American slavery. As Ferdinand Jones notes, this foundational aspect of the culture—the ability to challenge pervasively pejorative views of African-American self worth—can easily be seen throughout the history of the African-American experience, particularly in the continuing penchant of African Americans to create music that serves them psychologically in the face of the larger forces of cultural and institutional racism that are seemingly unending.

There is obviously much work to be done in the creation of a comprehensive picture and understanding of the spirituals within a primarily psychological and cultural framework. However, it is my view that much of the raw material for that understanding already exists in scholarship. The task for us today is to augment that work with new research that extends our understanding into new areas. My experience at the Museum of Natural History in Denver 1991 was for me the beginning of a journey—experientially—into these new realms. I discovered at the outset the powerful, central, and foundational role of the spirituals in the evolution of key elements of resilience that have made it possible for African-American culture to survive and, at many times, to thrive. Even with the historical tensions between the drive to preserve African sensibilities and the contradictory struggle to assimilate into American culture (Anderson 2001; The Spirituals Project 2004), the foundational cultural structures

laid down during the slave period will continue to exert their force at the center of the continuing tradition of the spirituals on the concert stage and in the community.

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