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Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery

IT IS NOT EXCESSIVE to advance the view that some historians, because they have been so preoccupied with demonstrating the absence of significant slave revolts, conspiracies, and “day to day” resistance among slaves, have presented information on slave behavior and thought which is incomplete indeed. They have, in short, devoted very little attention to trying to get “inside” slaves to discover what bondsmen thought about their condition. Small wonder we have been saddled with so many stereotypical treatments of slave thought and behavior.¹

Though we do not know enough about the institution of slavery or the slave experience to state with great precision how slaves felt about their condition, it is reasonably clear that slavery, however draconic and well supervised, was not the hermetically sealed monolith—destructive to the majority of slave personalities—that some historians would have us believe. The works of Herbert Aptheker, Kenneth Stampp, Richard Wade, and the Bauers, allowing for differences in approach and purpose, indicate that slavery, despite its brutality, was not so “closed” that it robbed most of the slaves of their humanity.²

¹ Historians who have provided stereotypical treatments of slave thought and personality are Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918); Samuel Eliot Morrison, and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1950); and Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959).

² See Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York, 1956); Richard Wade, *Slavery in the Cities* (New York, 1964); and Alice and Raymond Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History*, XXVII No. 4, October, 1942.

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It should, nevertheless, be asserted at the outset that blacks could not have survived the grim experience of slavery unscathed. Those historians who, for example, point to the dependency complex which slavery engendered in many Afro-Americans, offer us an important insight into one of the most harmful effects of that institution upon its victims. That slavery caused not a few bondsmen to question their worth as human beings—this much, I believe, we can posit with certitude. We can also safely assume that such self-doubt would rend one's sense of humanity, establishing an uneasy balance between affirming and negating aspects of one's being. What is at issue is not whether American slavery was harmful to slaves but whether, in their struggle to control self-lacerating tendencies, the scales were tipped toward a despair so consuming that most slaves, in time, became reduced to the level of "Sambos."³

My thesis, which rests on an examination of folk songs and tales, is that slaves were able to fashion a life style and set of values—an ethos—which prevented them from being imprisoned altogether by the definitions which the larger society sought to impose. This ethos was an amalgam of Africanisms and New World elements which helped slaves, in Guy Johnson's words, "feel their way along the course of American slavery, enabling them to endure. . . ."⁴ As Sterling Brown, that wise student of Afro-American culture, has remarked, the values expressed in folklore acted as a "wellspring to which slaves" trapped in the wasteland of American slavery "could return in

³ I am here concerned with the Stanley Elkins version of "Sambo," that is, the inference that the overwhelming majority of slaves, as a result of their struggle to survive under the brutal system of American slavery, became so callous and indifferent to their status that they gave survival primacy over all other considerations. See Chapters III through VI of *Slavery* for a discussion of the process by which blacks allegedly were reduced to the "good humor of everlasting childhood." (p. 132).

⁴ I am indebted to Guy Johnson of the University of North Carolina for suggesting the use of the term "ethos" in this piece, and for helpful commentary on the original paper which was read before the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History at Greensboro, North Carolina, on October 13, 1967.

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times of doubt to be refreshed.”⁵ In short, I shall contend that the process of dehumanization was not nearly as pervasive as Stanley Elkins would have us believe; that a very large number of slaves, guided by this ethos, were able to maintain their essential humanity. I make this contention because folklore, in its natural setting, is of, by and for those who create and respond to it, depending for its survival upon the accuracy with which it speaks to needs and reflects sentiments. I therefore consider it safe to assume that the attitudes of a very large number of slaves are represented by the themes of folklore.⁶

II

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, commenting on slave songs, remarked his utter astonishment, on coming to the North, “to find persons who could speak of the singing among slaves as evidence of their contentment and happiness.”⁷ The young DuBois, among the first knowledgeable critics of the spirituals, found white Americans as late as 1903 still telling Afro-Americans that “life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy.” “I can easily believe this of some,” he wrote, “of many. But not all the past South, though it rose from the dead, can gain-say the heart-touching witness of these songs.”

They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappoint-

⁵ Professor Brown made this remark in a paper delivered before The Amistad Society in Chicago, Spring, 1964. Distinguished poet, literary critic, folklorist, and teacher, Brown has long contended that an awareness of Negro folklore is essential to an understanding of slave personality and thought.

⁶ I subscribe to Alan Lomax’s observation that folk songs “can be taken as the signposts of persistent patterns of community feeling and can throw light into many dark corners of our past and our present.” His view that Afro-American music, despite its regional peculiarities, “expresses the same feelings and speaks the same basic language everywhere” is also accepted as a working principle in this paper. For an extended treatment of these points of view, see Alan Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America* (New York, 1960), Introduction, p. xx.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1960), p. 38. Originally published in 1845.

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ment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.⁸

Though few historians have been interested in such wanderings and ways, Frederick Douglass, probably referring to the spirituals, said the songs of slaves represented the sorrows of the slave's heart, serving to relieve the slave "only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears." "I have often sung," he continued, "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."⁹

Sterling Brown, who has much to tell us about the poetry and meaning of these songs, has observed: "As the best expression of the slave's deepest thoughts and yearnings, they (the spirituals) speak with convincing finality against the legend of contented slavery."¹⁰ Rejecting the formulation that the spirituals are mainly otherworldly, Brown states that though the creators of the spirituals looked toward heaven and "found their triumphs there, they did not blink their eyes to trouble here." The spirituals, in his view, "never tell of joy in the 'good old days' . . . The only joy in the spirituals is in dreams of escape."¹¹

Rather than being essentially otherworldly, these songs, in Brown's opinion, "tell of this life, of 'rollin' through an unfriendly world!" To substantiate this view, he points to numerous lines from spirituals: "Oh, bye and bye, bye and bye, I'm going to lay down this heavy load"; "My way is cloudy"; "Oh, stand the storm, it won't be long, we'll anchor by and by"; "Lord help me from sinking down"; and "Don't know

⁸ John Hope Franklin (ed.), *Souls of Black Folk in Three Negro Classics* (New York, 1965), p. 380. Originally published in 1903.

⁹ Douglass, *Narrative*, p. 38. Douglass' view adumbrated John and Alan Lomax's theory that the songs of the folk singer are deeply rooted "in his life and have functioned there as enzymes to assist in the digestion of hardship, solitude, violence (and) hunger." John A. and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country* (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1941), Preface, p. xiii.

¹⁰ Sterling Brown, "Negro Folk Expression," *Phylon*, October, 1953, p. 47.

¹¹ Brown, "Folk Expression," p. 48.

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what my mother wants to stay here fuh, Dis ole world ain't been no friend to huh."¹² To those scholars who "would have us believe that when the Negro sang of freedom, he meant only what the whites meant, namely freedom from sin," Brown rejoins:

Free individualistic whites on the make in a prospering civilization, nursing the American dream, could well have felt their only bondage to be that of sin, and freedom to be religious salvation. But with the drudgery, the hardships, the auction block, the slave-mart, the shackles, and the lash so literally present in the Negro's experience, it is hard to imagine why for the Negro they would remain figurative. The scholars certainly did not make this clear, but rather take refuge in such dicta as: "the slave never contemplated his low condition."¹³

"Are we to believe," asks Brown, "that the slave singing 'I been rebuked, I been scorned, done had a hard time sho's you bawn,' referred to his being outside the true religion?" A reading of additional spirituals indicates that they contained distinctions in meaning which placed them outside the confines of the "true religion." Sometimes, in these songs, we hear slaves relating to divinities on terms more West African than American. The easy intimacy and argumentation, which come out of a West African frame of reference, can be heard in "Hold the Wind."¹⁴

When I get to heaven, gwine be at ease,
Me and my God *gonna do as we please.*

Gonna chatter with the Father, argue with the Son,
*Tell um 'bout the world I just come from.*¹⁵ (Italics added.)

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 407.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁴ Addressing himself to the slave's posture toward God, and the attitudes toward the gods which the slave's African ancestors had, Lomax has written: "The West African lives with his gods on terms of intimacy. He appeals to them, reviles them, tricks them, laughs at their follies. In this spirit the Negro slave humanized the stern religion of his masters by adopting the figures of the Bible as his intimates." Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America*, p. 463.

¹⁵ Quoted from Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America*, p. 475.

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If there is a tie with heaven in those lines from “Hold the Wind,” there is also a clear indication of dislike for the restrictions imposed by slavery. And at least one high heavenly authority might have a few questions to answer. *Tell um 'bout the world I just come from* makes it abundantly clear that some slaves—even when released from the burdens of the world—would keep alive painful memories of their oppression.

If slaves could argue with the son of God, then surely, when on their knees in prayer, they would not hesitate to speak to God of the treatment being received at the hands of their oppressors.

Talk about me much as you please, (2)
Chillun, talk about me much as you please,
Gonna talk about you when I get on my knees.¹⁶

That slaves could spend time complaining about treatment received from other slaves is conceivable, but that this was their only complaint, or even the principal one, is hardly conceivable. To be sure, there is a certain ambiguity in the use of the word “chillun” in this context. The reference appears to apply to slaveholders.

The spiritual, *Samson*, as Vincent Harding has pointed out, probably contained much more (for some slaves) than mere biblical implications. Some who sang these lines from *Samson*, Harding suggests, might well have meant tearing down the edifice of slavery. If so, it was the ante-bellum equivalent of today’s “burn baby burn.”

He said, ‘An’ if I had-’n my way,
He said, ‘An’ if I had-’n my way,
He said, ‘An’ if I had-’n my way,
I’d tear the build-in’ down!’

He said, ‘And now I got my way, (3)
And I’ll tear this buildin’ down.’¹⁷

¹⁶ Quoted from Brown, Sterling A., Davis, Arthur P., and Lee, Ulysses, *The Negro Caravan* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1941), p. 436.

¹⁷ Vincent Harding, *Black Radicalism in America*. An unpublished work which Dr. Harding recently completed.

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Both Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass have reported that some of the spirituals carried double meanings. Whether most of the slaves who sang those spirituals could decode them is another matter. Harold Courlander has made a persuasive case against widespread understanding of any given "loaded" song,¹⁸ but it seems to me that he fails to recognize sufficiently a further aspect of the subject: slaves, as their folktales make eminently clear, used irony repeatedly, especially with animal stories. Their symbolic world was rich. Indeed, the various masks which many put on were not unrelated to this symbolic process. It seems logical to infer that it would occur to more than a few to seize upon some songs, even though created originally for religious purposes, assign another meaning to certain words, and use these songs for a variety of purposes and situations.

At times slave bards created great poetry as well as great music. One genius among the slaves couched his (and their) desire for freedom in a magnificent line of verse. After God's powerful voice had "Rung through Heaven and down in Hell," he sang, "My dungeon shook and my chains, they fell."¹⁹

In some spirituals, Alan Lomax has written, Afro-Americans turned sharp irony and "healing laughter" toward heaven, again like their West African ancestors, relating on terms of intimacy with God. In one, the slaves have God engaged in a dialogue with Adam:

'Stole my apples, I believe.'

'No, marse Lord, I spec it was Eve.'

¹⁸ See Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 42, 43. If a great many slaves did not consider Harriet Tubman the "Moses" of her people, it is unlikely that most failed to grasp the relationship between themselves and the Israelites, Egypt and the South, and Pharaoh and slavemasters in such lines as: "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel / And why not every man"; "Oh Mary don't you weep, don't you moan / Pharaoh's army got drowned / Oh Mary don't you weep"; and "Go down Moses / Way down in Egypt-land / Tell old Pharaoh / To let my people go."

¹⁹ Quoted from Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America*, p. 471.

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Of this tale there is no mo'
Eve et the apple and Adam de co'.²⁰

Douglass informs us that slaves also sang ironic seculars about the institution of slavery. He reports having heard them sing: "We raise de wheat, dey gib us de corn; We sift de meal, dey gib us de huss; We peel de meat, dey gib us de skin; An dat's de way dey take us in."²¹ Slaves would often stand back and see the tragicomic aspects of their situation, sometimes admiring the swiftness of blacks:

Run, nigger, run, de patrollers will ketch you,
Run, nigger run, its almost day.
Dat nigger run, dat nigger flew;
Dat nigger tore his shirt in two.²²

And there is:

My ole mistiss promise me
W'en she died, she'd set me free,
She lived so long dat 'er head got bal'
An' she give out'n de notion a-dyin' at all.²³

In the ante-bellum days, work songs were of crucial import to slaves. As they cleared and cultivated land, piled levees along rivers, piled loads on steamboats, screwed cotton bales into the holds of ships, and cut roads and railroads through forest, mountain and flat, slaves sang while the white man, armed and standing in the shade, shouted his orders.²⁴ Through the sense of timing and coordination which characterized work songs well sung, especially by the leaders, slaves sometimes quite literally created works of art. These songs not only militated against injuries but enabled the bondsmen to get difficult

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 476.

²¹ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 146.

²² Brown, "Folk Expression," p. 51.

²³ Brown, *Caravan*, p. 447.

²⁴ Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America*, p. 514.

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jobs done more easily by not having to concentrate on the dead level of their work. "In a very real sense the chants of Negro labor," writes Alan Lomax, "may be considered the most profoundly American of all our folk songs, for they were created by our people as they tore at American rock and earth and reshaped it with their bare hands, while rivers of sweat ran down and darkened the dust."

Long summer day makes a white man lazy,
Long summer day.
Long summer day makes a nigger run away, sir,
Long summer day.²⁵

Other slaves sang lines indicating their distaste for slave labor:

Ol' massa an' ol' missis,
Sittin' in the parlour,
Jus' fig'in' an' a-plannin'
How to work a nigger harder.²⁶

And there are these bitter lines, the meaning of which is clear:

Missus in the big house,
Mammy in the yard,
Missus holdin' her white hands,
Mammy workin' hard (3)
Missus holdin' her white hands,
Mammy workin' hard.

Old Marse ridin' all time,
Niggers workin' round,
Marse sleepin' day time,
Niggers diggin' in the ground, (3)
Marse sleepin' day time,
Niggers diggin' in the ground.²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

²⁷ Courlander, *Negro Folk Music*, p. 117.

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Courlander tells us that the substance of the work songs “ranges from the humorous to the sad, from the gentle to the biting, and from the tolerant to the unforgiving.” The statement in a given song can be metaphoric, tangent or direct, the meaning personal or impersonal. “As throughout Negro singing generally, there is an incidence of social criticism, ridicule, gossip, and protest.”²⁸ Pride in their strength rang with the downward thrust of axe—

When I was young and in my prime, (hah!)
Sunk my axe deep every time, (hah!)

Blacks later found their greatest symbol of manhood in John Henry, descendant of Trickster John of slave folk tales:

A man ain't nothing but a man,
But before I'll let that steam driver beat me down
I'll die with my hammer in my hand.²⁹

Though Frances Kemble, an appreciative and sensitive listener to work songs, felt that “one or two barbaric chants would make the fortune of an opera,” she was on one occasion “displeased not a little” by a self-deprecating song, one which “embodied the opinion that ‘twenty-six black girls not make mulatto yellow girl,’ and as I told them I did not like it, they

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁹ Brown, “Folk Expression,” p. 54. Steel-driving John Henry is obviously in the tradition of the axe-wielding blacks of the ante-bellum period. The ballad of John Henry helped spawn John Henry work songs:

Dis ole hammer—hunh
Ring like silver—hunh (3)
Shine like gold, baby—hunh
Shine like gold—hunh

Dis ole hammer—hunh
Killt John Henry—hunh (3)
Twont kill me baby, hunh
Twon't kill me. (Quoted from Brown, “Folk Expression,” p. 57.)

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have since omitted it.”⁸⁰ What is pivotal here is not the presence of self-laceration in folklore, but its extent and meaning. While folklore contained some self-hatred, on balance it gives no indication whatever that blacks, as a group, liked or were indifferent to slavery, which is the issue.⁸¹

To be sure, only the most fugitive of songs sung by slaves contained direct attacks upon the system. Two of these were associated with slave rebellions. The first, possibly written by ex-slave Denmark Vesey himself, was sung by slaves on at least one island off the coast of Charleston, S. C., and at meetings convened by Vesey in Charleston. Though obviously not a folksong, it was sung by the folk.

Hail! all hail! ye Afric clan,
Hail! ye oppressed, ye Afric band,
Who toil and sweat in slavery bound
And when your health and strength are gone
Are left to hunger and to mourn,
Let independence be your aim,
Ever mindful what 'tis worth.
Pledge your bodies for the prize,
Pile them even to the skies!⁸²

⁸⁰ Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation, 1838-1839* (New York: Alfred Knopf), pp. 260-61. Miss Kemble heard slaves use the epithet “nigger”: “And I assure you no contemptuous intonation ever equalled the prepotenza (arrogance) of the despotic insolence of this address of these poor wretches to each other.” Kemble, *Journal*, p. 281. Here she is on solid ground, but the slaves also used the word with glowing affection, as seen in the “Run, Nigger, Run” secular. At other times they leaned toward self-laceration but refused to go the whole route: “My name’s Ran, I wuks in de sand, I’d rather be a nigger dan a po’ white man.” Brown, “Folk Expression,” p. 51. Some blacks also sang, “It takes a long, lean, black-skinned gal, to make a preacher lay his Bible down.” Newman I. White, *American Negro Folk Songs* (Cambridge, 1928), p. 411.

⁸¹ Elkins, who believes Southern white lore on slavery should be taken seriously, does not subject it to serious scrutiny. For a penetrating—and devastating—analysis of “the richest layers of Southern lore” which, according to Elkins, resulted from “an exquisitely rounded collective creativity,” see Sterling A. Brown, “A Century of Negro Portraiture in American Literature,” *The Massachusetts Review* (Winter, 1966).

⁸² Quoted from Archie Epps, “A Negro Separatist Movement,” *The Harvard Review*, IV, No. 1 (Summer-Fall, 1956), 75.

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The second, a popular song derived from a concrete reality, bears the marks of a conscious authority:

You mought be rich as cream
And drive you coach and four-horse team,
But you can't keep de world from moverin' round
Nor Nat Turner from gainin' ground.

And your name it mought be Caesar sure,
And got you cannon can shoot a mile or more,
But you can't keep de world from moverin' round
Nor Nat Turner from gainin' ground.³³

The introduction of Denmark Vesey, class leader in the A.M.E. Church, and Nat Turner, slave preacher, serves to remind us that some slaves and ex-slaves were violent as well as humble, impatient as well as patient.

It is also well to recall that the religious David Walker, who had lived close to slavery in North Carolina, and Henry Highland Garnett, ex-slave and Presbyterian minister, produced two of the most inflammatory, vitriolic and doom-bespeaking polemics America has yet seen.³⁴ There was theological tension here, loudly proclaimed, a tension which emanated from and was perpetuated by American slavery and race prejudice. This dimension of ambiguity must be kept in mind, if for no other reason than to place in bolder relief the possibility that a great many slaves and free Afro-Americans could have interpreted Christianity in a way quite different from white Christians.

Even those songs which seemed most otherworldly, those which expressed profound weariness of spirit and even faith in death, through their unmistakable sadness, were accusatory, and God was not their object. If one accepts as a given that some of

³³ Quoted in William Styron, "This Quiet Dust," *Harpers*, April 1965, p. 135.

³⁴ For excerpts from David Walker's *Appeal* and Henry H. Garnett's *Call to Rebellion*, see Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. 2 vols. (New York: Citadel Press, 1965). Originally published in 1951.

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these appear to be almost wholly escapist, the indictment is no less real. Thomas Wentworth Higginson came across one—
“... a flower of poetry in that dark soil,” he called it.³⁵

I'll walk in de graveyard, I'll walk through de graveyard,
To lay dis body down.
I'll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms,
Lay dis body down.

Reflecting on “I'll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms,” Higginson said that “Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered, was his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively than in that line.”³⁶

There seems to be small doubt that Christianity contributed in large measure to a spirit of patience which militated against open rebellion among the bondsmen. Yet to overemphasize this point leads one to obscure a no less important reality: Christianity, after being reinterpreted and recast by slave bards, also contributed to that spirit of endurance which powered generations of bondsmen, bringing them to that decisive moment when for the first time a real choice was available to scores of thousands of them.

When that moment came, some slaves who were in a position to decide for themselves did so. W. E. B. DuBois re-created their mood and the atmosphere in which they lived.

There came the slow looming of emancipation.
Crowds and armies of the unknown, inscrutable,
unfathomable Yankees; cruelty behind and before;
rumors of a new slave trade, but slowly,
continuously, the wild truth, the bitter truth,
the magic truth, came surging through. There
was to be a new freedom! And a black nation
went tramping after the armies no matter what

³⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (New York: Collier, 1962), p. 199.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

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it suffered; no matter how it was treated, no matter how it died.³⁷

The gifted bards, by creating songs with an unmistakable freedom ring, songs which would have been met with swift, brutal repression in the ante-bellum days, probably voiced the sentiments of all but the most degraded and dehumanized. Perhaps not even the incredulous slavemaster could deny the intent of the new lyrics. "In the wake of the Union Army and in the contraband camps," remarked Sterling Brown, "spirituals of freedom sprang up suddenly. . . . Some celebrated the days of Jubilo: 'O Freedom; O Freedom!' and 'Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave!, and 'Go home to my lord and be free.'" And there was: "'No more driver's lash for me. . . . Many thousand go.'"³⁸

DuBois brought together the insights of the poet and historian to get inside the slaves:

There was joy in the South. It rose like perfume—like a prayer. Men stood quivering. Slim dark girls, wild and beautiful with wrinkled hair, wept silently; young women, black, tawny, white and golden, lifted shivering hands, and old and broken mothers, black and gray, raised great voices and shouted to God across the fields, and up to the rocks and the mountains.³⁹

Some sang:

Slavery chain done broke at last, broke at last, broke at last,
Slavery chain done broke at last,
Going to praise God till I die.

I did tell him how I suffer,
In de dungeon and de chain,
And de days I went with head bowed down,
And my broken flesh and pain,
Slavery chain done broke at last, broke at last, broke at last.⁴⁰

³⁷ W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (Philadelphia: Albert Saifer), p. 122. Originally published in 1935 by Harcourt, Brace and Company.

³⁸ Brown, "Folk Expression," p. 49.

³⁹ DuBois, *Reconstruction*, p. 124.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Brown, *Caravan*, pp. 440-41. One of the most tragic scenes

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Whatever the nature of the shocks generated by the war, among those vibrations felt were some that had come from Afro-American singing ever since the first Africans were forcibly brought to these shores. DuBois was correct when he said that the new freedom song had not come from Africa, but that “the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days was in and through it.”⁴¹ Thus, the psyches of those who gave rise to and provided widespread support for folk songs had not been reduced to *tabula rasas* on which a slave-holding society could at pleasure sketch out its wish fulfillment fantasies.

We have already seen the acute degree to which some slaves realized they were being exploited. Their sense of the injustice of slavery made it so much easier for them to act out their aggression against whites (by engaging in various forms of “day to day” resistance) without being overcome by a sense of guilt, or a feeling of being ill-mannered. To call this nihilistic thrashing about would be as erroneous as to refer to their use of folklore as esthetic thrashing about.⁴² For if they did not regard

of the Civil War period occurred when a group of Sea Island freedmen, told by a brigadier-general that they would not receive land from the government, sang, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” DuBois, *Souls*, p. 381.

⁴¹ DuBois, *Reconstruction*, p. 124.

⁴² If some slavemasters encouraged slaves to steal or simply winked at thefts, then slaves who obliged them were most assuredly *not acting against their own interests*, whatever the motivation of the masters. Had more fruitful options been available to them, then and only then could we say that slaves were playing into the hands of their masters. Whatever the masters thought of slaves who stole from them—and there is little reason to doubt that most slaves considered it almost obligatory to steal from white people—the slaves, it is reasonable to assume, were aware of the unparalleled looting in which masters themselves were engaged. To speak therefore of slaves undermining their sense of self-respect as a result of stealing from whites—and this argument has been advanced by Eugene Genovese—is wide of the mark. Indeed, it appears more likely that those who engaged in stealing were, in the context of an oppressor-oppressed situation, on the way to realizing a larger measure of self-respect. Moreover, Genovese, in charging that certain forms of “day to day” resistance, in the absence of general conditions of rebellion, “amounted to individual and essentially nihilistic thrashing about,” fails to recognize that that which was possible, that which conditions permitted, was pursued by slaves in preference to the path which led to passivity or annihilation. Those engaging in “day to day” resistance were moving along meaningful rather

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themselves as the equals of whites in many ways, their folklore indicates that the generality of slaves must have at least felt superior to whites morally. And that, in the context of oppression, could make the difference between a viable human spirit and one crippled by the belief that the interests of the master are those of the slave.

When it is borne in mind that slaves created a large number of extraordinary songs and greatly improved a considerable proportion of the songs of others, it is not at all difficult to believe that they were conscious of the fact that they were leaders in the vital area of art—giving protagonists rather than receiving pawns. And there is some evidence that slaves were aware of the special talent which they brought to music. Higginson has described how reluctantly they sang from hymnals—“even on Sunday”—and how “gladly” they yielded “to the more potent excitement of their own ‘spirituals.’”⁴³ It is highly unlikely that the slaves’ preference for their own music went unremarked among them, or that this preference did not affect their estimate of themselves. “They soon found,” commented Alan Lomax, “that when they sang, the whites recognized their superiority as singers, and listened with respect.”⁴⁴ He might have added that those antebellum whites who listened probably seldom understood.

What is of pivotal import, however, is that the esthetic realm was the one area in which slaves knew they were not inferior

than nihilistic lines, for their activities were designed to frustrate the demands of the authority-system. For a very suggestive discussion of the dependency complex engendered by slavery and highly provocative views on the significance of “day to day” resistance among slaves, see Eugene Genovese, “The Legacy of Slavery and the Roots of Black Nationalism,” *Studies on the Left*, VI, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1966), especially p. 8.

⁴³ Higginson, *Black Regiment*, p. 212. Alan Lomax reminds us that the slaves sang “in leader-chorus style, with a more relaxed throat than the whites, and in deeper-pitched, mellower voices, which blended richly.” “A strong, surging beat underlay most of their American creations . . . words and tunes were intimately and playfully united, and ‘sense’ was often subordinated to the demands of rhythm and melody.” Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America*, Introduction, p. xx.

⁴⁴ Lomax, *Folk Songs*, p. 460.

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to whites. Small wonder that they borrowed many songs from the larger community, then quickly invested them with their own economy of statement and power of imagery rather than yield to the temptation of merely repeating what they had heard. Since they were essentially group rather than solo performances, the values inherent in and given affirmation by the music served to strengthen bondsmen in a way that solo music could not have done.⁴⁵ In a word, slave singing often provided a form of group therapy, a way in which a slave, in concert with others, could fend off some of the debilitating effects of slavery.

The field of inquiry would hardly be complete without some mention of slave tales. Rich in quantity and often subtle in conception, these tales further illumine the inner world of the bondsmen, disclosing moods and interests almost as various as those found in folksongs. That folk tales, like the songs, indicate an African presence, should not astonish; for the telling of tales, closely related to the African griot's vocation of providing oral histories of families and dynasties, was deeply rooted in West African tradition. Hughes and Bontemps have written that the slaves brought to America the "habit of storytelling as pastime, together with a rich bestiary." Moreover, they point out that the folk tales of slaves "were actually projections of personal experiences and hopes and defeats, in terms of symbols," and that this important dimension of the tales "appears to have gone unnoticed."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Commenting on the group nature of much of slave singing, Alan Lomax points out that the majority of the bondsmen "came from West Africa, where music-making was largely a group activity, the creation of a many-voiced, dancing throng. . . . Community songs of labour and worship (in America) and dance songs far outnumbered narrative pieces, and the emotion of the songs was, on the whole, joyfully erotic, deeply tragic, allusive, playful, or ironic rather than nostalgic, withdrawn, factual, or aggressively comic—as among white folk singers." Lomax, *Folk Songs*, pp. xix and xx of Introduction. For treatments of the more technical aspects of Afro-American music, see Courlander, *Negro Folk Music*, especially Chapter II; and Richard A. Waterman, "African Influences on the Music of the Americas," in *Acculturation in the Americas*, edited by Sol Tax.

⁴⁶ Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes (ed.), *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1965), Introduction, p. viii. Of

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Possessing a repertoire which ranged over a great many areas, perhaps the most memorable tales are those of Brer Rabbit and John.⁴⁷ Brer Rabbit, now trickster, ladies' man and braggart, now wit, joker and glutton, possessed the resourcefulness, despite his size and lack of strength, to outsmart stronger, larger animals. "To the slave in his condition," according to Hughes and Bontemps, "the theme of weakness overcoming strength through cunning proved endlessly fascinating."⁴⁸ John, characterized by a spiritual resilience born of an ironic sense of life, was a secular high priest of mischief and guile who delighted in matching wits with Ole Marster, the "patterollers," Ole Missy, and the devil himself. He was clever enough to sense the absurdity of his predicament and that of white people, smart enough to know the limits of his powers and the boundaries of those of the master class. While not always victorious, even on the spacious plane of the imagination, he could hardly be described as a slave with an inferiority complex. And in this regard it is important to note that his varieties of triumphs, though they sometimes included winning freedom, often realistically cluster about ways of coping with everyday negatives of the system.⁴⁹

Slaves were adept in the art of storytelling, as at home in this area as they were in the field of music. But further discus-

course if one regards each humorous thrust of the bondsmen as so much comic nonsense, then there is no basis for understanding, to use Sterling Brown's phrase, the slave's "laughter out of hell." Without understanding what humor meant to slaves themselves, one is not likely to rise above the superficiality of a Stephen Foster or a Joel Chandler Harris. But once an effort has been made to see the world from the slave's point of view, then perhaps one can understand Ralph Ellison's reference to Afro-Americans, in their folklore, "backing away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves," in order to "depict the humor as well as the horror of our living." Ralph Ellison, "A Very Stern Discipline," *Harpers* (March, 1967), p. 80.

⁴⁷ For additional discussions of folk tales, see Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935); Richard Dorson, *American Negro Folktales* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1967); and B. A. Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945).

⁴⁸ Bontemps and Hughes, *Negro Folklore*, Introduction, p. ix.

⁴⁹ The fact that slaveowners sometimes took pleasure in being outwitted by slaves in no way diminishes from the importance of the trickster tales, for

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sion of the scope of folklore would be uneconomical, for we have already seen a depth and variety of thought among bondsmen which embarrasses stereotypical theories of slave personality. Moreover, it should be clear by now that there are no secure grounds on which to erect the old, painfully constricted "Sambo" structure.⁵⁰ For the personalities which lay beneath the plastic exteriors which slaves turned on and off for white people were too manifold to be contained by cheerful, childlike images. When it is argued, then, that "too much of the Negro's own lore" has gone into the making of the Sambo picture "to entitle one in good conscience to condemn it as 'conspiracy',"⁵¹ one must rejoin: Only if you strip the masks from black faces while refusing to read the irony and ambiguity and cunning which called the masks into existence. Slave folklore, on balance, decisively repudiates the thesis that Negroes *as a group* had internalized "Sambo" traits, committing them, as it were, to psychological marriage.

III

It is one of the curiosities of American historiography that a people who were as productive esthetically as American slaves could be studied as if they had moved in a cultural cyclotron,

what is essential here is how these tales affected the slave's attitude toward himself, not whether his thinking or behavior would impress a society which considered black people little better than animals. DuBois' words in this regard should never be forgotten: "Everything Negroes did was wrong. If they fought for freedom, they were beasts; if they did not fight, they were born slaves. If they cowered on the plantation, they loved slavery; if they ran away, they were lazy loafers. If they sang, they were silly; if they scowled, they were impudent. . . . And they were funny, funny—ridiculous baboons, aping men." DuBois, *Reconstruction*, p. 125.

⁵⁰ Ralph Ellison offers illuminating insight into the group experience of the slave: "Any people who could endure all of that brutalization and keep together, who could undergo such dismemberment and resuscitate itself, and endure until it could take the initiative in achieving its own freedom is obviously more than the sum of its brutalization. Seen in this perspective, theirs has been one of the great human experiences and one of the great triumphs of the human spirit in modern times, in fact, in the history of the world." Ellison, "A Very Stern Discipline," p. 84.

⁵¹ Elkins sets forth this argument in *Slavery*, p. 84.

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continually bombarded by devastating, atomizing forces which denuded them of meaningful Africanisms while destroying any and all impulses toward creativity. One historian, for example, has been tempted to wonder how it was ever possible that “*all this (West African) native resourcefulness and vitality have been brought to such a point of utter stultification in America.*”⁵² (Italics added.) This sadly misguided view is, of course, not grounded in any recognition or understanding of the Afro-American dimension of American culture. In any event, there is a great need for students of American slavery to attempt what Gilberto Freyre tried to do for Brazilian civilization—an effort at discovering the contributions of slaves toward the shaping of the Brazilian national character.⁵³ When such a study has been made of the American slave we shall probably discover that, though he did not rival his Brazilian brother in staging bloody revolutions, the quality and place of art in his life compared favorably. Now this suggests that the humanity of people can be asserted through means other than open and widespread rebellion, a consideration that has not been appreciated in violence-prone America. We would do well to recall the words of F. S. C. Northrop who has observed:

During the pre-Civil War period shipowners and southern landowners brought to the United States a considerable body of people with a color of skin and cultural values different from those of its other inhabitants. . . . Their values are more emotive, esthetic and intuitive . . . (These) characteristics can become an asset for our culture. For these are values with respect to which Anglo-American culture is weak.⁵⁴

These values were expressed on the highest level in the folklore of slaves. Through their folklore black slaves affirmed their humanity and left a lasting imprint on American culture. No study of the institutional aspects of American slavery can

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵³ Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956). Originally published by Jose Olympio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

⁵⁴ F. S. C. Northrop, *The Meeting of East and West* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1952), pp. 159-60.

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be complete, nor can the larger dimensions of slave personality and style be adequately explored, as long as historians continue to avoid that realm in which, as DuBois has said, "the soul of the black slave spoke to man."⁵⁵

In its nearly two and one half centuries of existence, the grim system of American slavery doubtless broke the spirits of uncounted numbers of slaves. Nevertheless, if we look through the prism of folklore, we can see others transcending their plight, appreciating the tragic irony of their condition, then seizing upon and putting to use those aspects of their experience which sustain in the present and renew in the future. We can see them opposing their own angle of vision to that of their oppressor, fashioning their own techniques of defense and aggression in accordance with their own reading of reality and doing those things well enough to avoid having their sense of humanity destroyed.

Slave folklore, then, affirms the existence of a large number of vital, tough-minded human beings who, though severely limited and abused by slavery, had found a way both to endure and preserve their humanity in the face of insuperable odds. What they learned about handling misfortune was not only a major factor in their survival as a people, but many of the lessons learned and esthetic standards established would be used by future generations of Afro-Americans in coping with a hostile world. What a splendid affirmation of the hopes and dreams of their slave ancestors that some of the songs being sung in antebellum days are the ones Afro-Americans are singing in the freedom movement today: "Michael, row the boat ashore"; "Just like a tree planted by the water, I shall not be moved."

⁵⁵ DuBois, *Souls*, p. 378. Kenneth M. Stampp in his *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), employs to a limited extent some of the materials of slave folklore. Willie Lee Rose, in *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964), makes brief but highly informed use of folk material.