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Creating community in the American Civil Rights Movement: singing spirituals and freedom songs

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
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Thesis

**CREATING COMMUNITY IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:
SINGING SPIRITUALS AND FREEDOM SONGS**

by

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DEDICATION

To all the children, women, and men who lost their lives and their health
in the pursuit of American desegregation and
to all those who sang spirituals and freedom songs while they worked
for a multiracial community in America.

With special appreciation for Congressman John Lewis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any worthwhile academic work is the result of a constellation of efforts by many more people than the author of record. As I press on to finish this project, I pause to remember the contributions of many mentors, colleagues and friends. They are the evidence of God's grace in my life. My manuscript is richer for their presence. Any limitations are my sole responsibility.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the crucial role of spirituals and freedom songs during the American Civil Rights movement from 1955-1968. Singing this music and speaking their lyrics affirmed African Americans' humanity, inspired hope for justice, and nurtured community development. When they sang, activists experienced "egalitarian resonance"-- spontaneous community among singers and listeners crossing race, age, gender, and class differences. These moments modeled the ideal American, multiracial community. In the absence of a 24/7 news cycle, freedom songs instantly provided a grassroots history of the movement.

Both artistic expression and vocal protest, spirituals testified to the resilience of the human spirit. Created by African American slaves, spirituals expressed human psychological, emotional, and physical suffering. During twentieth-century segregation, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Howard Thurman wrote about spirituals and racial oppression. They understood spirituals expressed hope for justice despite despair. During the Civil Rights Movement, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted spirituals and freedom songs, linking past suffering with present

persecution. Forming part of nonviolent protest, spirituals offered hope for an all-inclusive, "beloved community."

Between 1955 and 1968, freedom songs chronicled events and persons, orally recording the movement as it happened. Protesters sang long-established spirituals and newly-created freedom songs composed while working to open public facilities and to expand the franchise to all persons. Singing together in mass meetings solidified the resolve of participants and community members. When the movement spread from a regional to national phenomenon, freedom songs began showing other music influences including blues, rock and roll, and folk rock.

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**CREATING COMMUNITY IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:
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“For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,
and our oppressors called for mirth:
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
How shall we sing the LORD’S song upon an alien soil?”

Psalm 137: 3-4.

“There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

African American Spiritual

I. Introduction

This thesis is about voices, collective and individual, singing; it is about what singing means in the pursuit of justice and community. Set in the mid-twentieth century, it looks back at the African Diaspora songs of exile: entitled "slave songs" in the 1867 anthology by William Francis Allen; called "sorrow songs" by W.E.B. DuBois at the beginning of the twentieth century; more commonly known as "spirituals" by the 1920s and thereafter. Songs of longing and loneliness. Songs of resilience and hope. Songs layered with meanings for individuals and for groups.

Then, in the mid-twentieth century crucible of nonviolent protest, some "sorrow songs" were transformed into "freedom songs"-- affirmations of identity, autonomy, and justice in the mouths, throats, and hearts of a new generation leading its elders. Built on the layered meanings and tunes of the spirituals, newly adapted and spontaneously created freedom songs established a common bond among singers. In a “war” where non-violence was the strategic imperative of the Civil Rights Movement leaders and trained followers, spirituals and freedom songs were non-violent "weapons." They affirmed the

identity of African Americans, offered hope to the persecuted, and enacted the communal ideal of a peaceful society where all people would be mutual participants regardless of race. That ethical community--a "common ground" as Howard Thurman saw it or "the beloved community" as Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned--continues to be a work in progress, a goal not yet fully achieved in twenty-first century America. Yet, the voices of the past, singing and telling their stories, when studied, when *heard*, may help another generation bring these dis-United States into "a more perfect union."

II. Creating identity, hope and community

This thesis uses a cultural orientation grounded in ethical concepts and historical experiences to examine community formation through affirmation of human identity for African Americans and hope for a multiracial America.¹ At the core of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement was the necessity of establishing the humanity of African Americans not only for white Americans but also for black Americans. "I AM Somebody" became the chant for black school children and adults. During an earlier time, hope had buoyed slaves in the depths of their dehumanized lives. Hope had stirred the intellectuals and artists of the Harlem Renaissance era. Hope drove the twentieth century activists to look forward in anticipation of a different social reality as they put their lives on the line to challenge segregation. With a sense of individual integrity energized by a vision not yet realized, African Americans led the work to create an environment of equal respect and opportunity. A community of equals evaluated by character traits not physical traits had long existed within the black community before the

¹Walter Earl Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparison of the Idea of Community in Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), xii.

Civil Rights era. With a sense of individual integrity energized by a vision not yet realized, African Americans (and initially a few whites) worked at the mid-century to create an environment of equal respect and opportunity. Extending the sense of community outward from the black community and building a multiracial community in America was the penultimate goal for Civil Rights activists.

A. Identity

The construct of identity has carried great weight for the ethical treatment of the individual in relationship with others. Martin Buber's construct of the "I-Thou" model of interaction figures here, where both "I" and "Thou" must be recognized for the relationship to be grounded ethically. "I" and "Thou" are each persons in relationship, given to each other but not defined or limited by each other.² In situations where the human identity of either party is negated or demonized, no ethical relationship can exist. While social or economic factors may differentiate individuals, the primacy of recognizing each other as equally and essentially human distinguishes the ethical relationship. Each participant in the relationship needs a core understanding of self, a foundation of personhood that grounds the individual and makes relationship with another (and others) possible.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois explained the difficulty of achieving a true sense of one's self as a black man in segregated America, "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other [white] world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Ronald Gregor Smith, trans.(Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1947), 11.

always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.”³ Instead of being grounded in one's self, Du Bois explains the shifting sands of dual perspectives that constantly require second-guessing about one's value as a person. While Buber's "I-Thou" paradigm was desirable, it was severely limited in the first years of the twentieth century, as Du Bois observed. Both African Americans' individual uncertainty about self-worth and the system of racial segregation that denied African Americans' humanity curtailed the possibility for "I" and "Thou" relationships.

Noting a shift in the mid-1920s, James Weldon Johnson addressed a change in the ways American society treated African American artists, musicians, and writers. "America is beginning to see the Negro in a new light, or rather, to see something new in the Negro. It is beginning to see in him the divine spark which may glow merely for the fanning."⁴ This divine spark is evocative of Buber's idea about the "I-Thou" relationship. What is telling, however, is Johnson's ultimate assessment. After detailing the breakthrough of black talent as soloists for major orchestras, as published authors and poets in leading publications, and as concert performers in major venues, Johnson shares this insight: "And this change of attitude with regard to the Negro which is taking place is directly related to the Negro's *change of attitude with regard to himself*. It is new, and it is tremendously significant [*italics mine*]."⁵ Having a strong sense of self was as crucial for African American advancement in American society as recognizing the value of white

³ W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1903 reprint 1989), 3.

⁴ James Weldon Johnson, Preface to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 50.

⁵ Ibid.

Americans. Although Buber's paradigm had yet to be articulated, Johnson offers a comparable understanding of the self and others for black Americans of the 1920s.

In his book *Deep River*, Howard Thurman also confronted the problem of relationships between white Americans and black Americans during segregation in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. "The Christian ethic has not been sufficiently effective in the life of the Caucasian or the institutions he controls to compel him to treat the Negro as a fellow human being."⁶ By denying the humanity of African Americans, white Americans did not engage in an "I-Thou" relationship with their fellow citizens. Thurman emphatically made his position clear: "The Christian ethic and segregation must be forever at war with each other."⁷ For Thurman, the consequences of the objectified interaction inherent in racial segregation meant that "there can be no hope until both the Negro and the Caucasian lift the level of their relationship to the highest point of moral and religious responsibility."⁸ Thurman does not explicitly invoke Buber here, but the compatibility of their perspectives comes through. When humans of whatever race have a healthy understanding of themselves and are open to others regardless of race, there is hope.

Du Bois, Johnson, and Thurman all affirmed the humanity of African Americans. These three African American intellectuals understood that a strong sense of self was priceless in and of itself. Du Bois clearly presented the debilitating effects of segregation

⁶ Howard Thurman. *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975) (1990 reprint) 49-50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*

and white racism for African American self perception. In the midst of Harlem's "flowering" Johnson could project an optimistic outlook since he was buoyed by the affirming environment of the largest black city in the world at the time. By the late 1930s, Thurman would have seen the waning influence of Harlem's Renaissance for the vast majority of African Americans under the crushing economic forces of the Great Depression. A strong sense of self was essential to an ethical relationship with others.

B. Hope

Howard Thurman expressed his deeply held conviction of hope in his book, *The Growing Edge*. Thurman articulated his commitment to hope, not as a simple-minded outlook, but as a vision tempered by experience. In his meditation, Thurman reminds his audience that singular tragic events or even periods of desperation give way ultimately to a sense of "vitality...nestling deep within." The core of his belief: "*No expression of life exhausts life*" he applies to human history as well.⁹ Even the slaves refused to be limited by their circumstances, enduring the brutality of their lives "until at last they came out on the other side, saluting the fulfillment of their hopes and their faith."¹⁰ Thurman's understanding of hope can be seen in later intellectuals' work as well.

In his discussion of progressivism, Christopher Lasch also eschews a definition of hope that suggests a mindlessly giddy outlook. Hope is *not* superficial optimism of the "pie-in-the-sky" variety, blindly holding to a romantic notion of how people act and how the world operates. Instead, Lasch links hope with justice which entails a sense of the

⁹ Ibid., 177.

¹⁰ Ibid., 178.

future when "wrongs will be made right" in concordance with an underlying order of human relationship. At the center of hope is "a deep-seated trust in life" despite the scoffing of skeptics. Lasch attributes the power of hope to its derivation from memories "in which the experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge it." Lasch sees the hopeful as seasoned veterans of disappointment. "[S]ubsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge" their hope. Although prepared for the worst, their tenacity of hope is fed with "the knowledge that the future holds further disappointment" thereby demonstrating "the continuing need for hope."¹¹

Hope can be seen as "a genuine anticipation of the future."¹² As the "driving force of all human relations" individuals with hope have "a tenacity of vision" whereby they "dare to see beyond the present and to work toward the envisioned future with all its challenges and ambiguities."¹³ The moral dimension of hope is its ability to enable people to "bring about change and transformation."¹⁴ Hope is especially relevant in the Civil Rights Movement when considered in the light of James Gustafson's sense that "Hope is carried by freedom."¹⁵ A belief in the fluidity of life and its outcomes and in the

¹¹ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*. (New York: Norton, 1991), 80-81.

¹² Walter Earl Fluker. *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 77.

¹³ Fluker, *Ethical Leadership* 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁵ James Gustafson. *Christ and the Moral Life*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 250 as quoted in Fluker, *Ethical Leadership* 77.

possibility of changing patterns that seem immutable is the foundation of the genuine anticipation of the future.¹⁶

The spirituals exude hope from their very essence as noted by Du Bois, Johnson, and Thurman. For Du Bois, spirituals authentically expressed “a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope.”¹⁷ Johnson considered the spirituals to be based on the “principles of primitive, communal Christianity” as they voiced its “cardinal virtues...patience— forbearance—love—faith—and hope.”¹⁸ Howard Thurman saw spirituals as both a source of hope and an expression of self-respect, combining a healthy appreciation for one's self and a positive expectation for change and deliverance.¹⁹

Martin Luther King, Jr. placed himself within the intellectual tradition of Du Bois, Johnson, and Thurman as he conveyed his understanding of the spirituals. In his interview for *Playboy* magazine, King, Jr. explained that “songs are the *soul* of a movement...Since slavery, the Negro has sung throughout his struggle in America. *Steal Away* and *Go Down, Moses*, were the songs of faith and inspiration which were sung on the plantations.”²⁰ The spirituals, grounded in past experience yet genuinely anticipating the future despite the intervening experience of depersonalization, expressed hope and played a vital role in creating community during the Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁶ Ibid., 77.

¹⁷ Du Bois, 134.

¹⁸ Johnson, 20.

¹⁹ Thurman. "General Introduction" *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual*, n.p.

²⁰ “*Playboy* Interview: Martin Luther King, Jr.” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edited by James Melvin Washington. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 348.

C. Community

Whole academic disciplines are devoted to community studies with approaches including the social sciences and the humanities. Conflation of meanings and “common knowledge” complicate the search for clarity about what community means, downplaying the “multi-dimensional levels and varieties of experiences” that community entails.²¹ This thesis examines community from the perspectives of moral and ethical inquiry, anthropological theory, and musical performance practice as it investigates the role of spirituals and freedom songs in the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement for African Americans.

Community has moral and ethical dimensions addressed by a number of philosophers. The Buber translator Ronald Gregor Smith crystallized Buber's approach to the self and others: "Community consists in the relation of persons."²² Essentially, once each individual is confirmed as a human being, he or she may interact with others in mutually affirmative ways. Peter J. Paris puts this human relationship in ethical terms: “[m]orality pertains to the quality of life lived in human community, and ethics is its science.”²³ In Paris’s social ethical view, the individual and the community are intrinsically connected: “personhood is established only in the context of a community of persons” and “community is constituted when persons choose to come together to create,

²¹ Walter Earl Fluker. *They Looked for a City*, xi.

²² Ronald Gregor Smith, “Introduction” in Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, vii.

²³ Peter Paris. “Moral Development for African-American Leadership” in Walter Earl Fluker. *The Stones that the Builders Rejected: The Development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition*. (New York: Continuum, 1998), 23.

preserve, and enhance the conditions that make possible their common life.”²⁴ The nature of personhood and community is so symbiotic that dividing them destroys them. Paris shares this perspective with Paul Tillich who identifies the ongoing interaction between person-community as an ontological relationship “expressive of Being itself.”²⁵ Walter Fluker also links the individual with the group in his ethical leadership model where “community refers to *wholeness, integration, and harmony*.”²⁶ In community, individuals are “freely assuming responsibility for one another.” He extends community to a more broadly conceived “reverence for life.”²⁷ While the understanding of the individual and community may differ somewhat among Buber, Paris, and Fluker, they all hold that community involves relationship among individuals who mutually respect each other.

According to Victor Turner’s anthropological theory, *communitas* is “a communion among equals.” Unlike the physical place associated with the word “community” *communitas* emphasizes the relationship among people. Turner extends his conceptual framework with “spontaneous *communitas*,” a short-lived sense of community that emerges outside of social organization and planning. When people feel a spiritual sense that things have changed forever because of a momentary sensation, they experience spontaneous *communitas*.²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 24.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Fluker. *Ethical Leadership* 130.

²⁷ Ibid., 129.

²⁸ Victor Turner. “Communitas: Model and Process” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Paperbacks, Cornell University Press, 1969), 138.

Spontaneous *communitas* contains added power because of its liminality. Positioned between organized cultural structures and the chaos of no structure, spontaneous *communitas* transcends organization and chaos. Those who experience this community within liminality express a memorable affinity with each other that they carry with them even when they return to the conventional social structures.

Applying the concept of spontaneous *communitas* to musical performance practice, I use the term "egalitarian resonance." Egalitarian resonance is the shared experience of singing or listening to music together that creates a mutual respect and appreciation; they feel that their time together has been spent in a meaningful way. Because it is a variant of spontaneous *communitas*, egalitarian resonance exhibits a similar transcendence, crossing boundaries of race, class, age, and gender. When "egalitarian resonance" is remembered by the people who experienced it, it also crosses the boundaries of time. Egalitarian resonance could be fleeting, but when it happens repeatedly or when moments of egalitarian resonance are recalled over time, egalitarian resonance can be especially powerful.²⁹

In a related way, Thurman's sense of "the sound of the genuine" places the aural experience in relation to the individual and the community. Thurman identifies "something within every person that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine within herself...something in everybody that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in

²⁹ Cheryl C. Boots. *Singing for Equality: Hymns in the American Antislavery and Indian Rights Movements, 1640-1855*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2013), 7.

other people."³⁰ Just as egalitarian resonance includes singing and listening, Thurman also values both actions as "the basis for the creative encounter with one's own self and with the other."³¹

D. Identity and community for African Americans prior to the Civil War

In America, first slavery and then segregation negated the identity of Blacks as humans. To go against the tide of nearly 350 years of anti-African bias required great determination and bravery on the part of the Civil Rights activists in the 1950s. Earlier advocates for human equality among people of all races had bucked the same powerful tide of dehumanization. For example, Phyllis Wheatley stands as one of the heroic African ancestors who lived in eighteenth century America. In her poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" she proclaims Blacks are people who yearn for freedom as well as their white contemporaries in colonial British North America who chaff at political oppression.³² Benjamin Banneker's correspondence with Thomas Jefferson demonstrates the intellectual achievements of a black man, simultaneously contradicting Jefferson's speculations about Blacks' limited intelligence in his *Notes on the States of Virginia* and confirming Jefferson's quintessential proclamation that all people are created equally entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."³³ Antebellum American abolitionists including David Walker, Maria W. Stewart, William

³⁰ Thurman, "The Sound of the Genuine" baccalaureate address, Spelman College as quoted in Fluker *Ethical Leadership*, 75.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Boots, 59-60.

³³ Ibid., 74-75.

Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and William Wells Brown affirmed the humanity of African Americans as they struggled to create an ethical American society. Buffeted by the opposing current of popular opinion that African Americans were, at best, not fully human, the advocates for a multiracial American society used all the persuasive elements available to them including the power of music to assert and affirm the identity of persons of African descent.³⁴

III. Cultural Histories of Spirituals: DuBois, Johnson, Thurman

The songs of the slaves had attracted the attention of many cultural commentators in the nineteenth century including Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe. At the conclusion of the Civil War, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and others worried that indigenous music might "disappear" in the light of emancipation and went to some lengths to write down the tunes and words. In performance, The Jubilee Singers of Fisk University toured the United States and Europe between 1871 and 1875 to raise money for their fledgling alma mater and by doing so, expanded the audience for African American music.³⁵ Moving beyond cataloging and performing, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Howard Thurman took prominent roles interpreting the spirituals as cultural expressions by persons of African descent. Their work provided the intellectual grounding that influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.'s use of spirituals in his speeches and sermons. Civil Rights activists then drew on the singing tradition of the slaves and their oppressed descendents to express their hope for community.

³⁴ Ibid., 8-10.

³⁵ Johnson, "Preface" *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 16.

A. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois

W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* embraced the “sorrow songs,” the term he used for African American music we now call spirituals. They were “the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope.”³⁶ Rather than disparage the production of unlettered people, as did those who parodied and ridiculed black music, Du Bois lifted up the “plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences” as “the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.” Although spirituals originated in “the African forests” Du Bois tracked the American manifestation as an art form modified over time and “under the stress of law and whip” sorrow songs became the musical language for an oppressed people.³⁷

Du Bois’s culminating chapter, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” explicates the musical epigrams he inserted at the beginning of each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. He provides a history of slave songs and credits the Fisk Jubilee Singers for singing “the slave songs so deeply into the world’s heart that it can never wholly forget them again.”³⁸ He grapples with the meaning of the songs and finds them “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” in short, “the voice of exile.”³⁹ Despite this unhappiness and disappointment, Du Bois claims “Through all

³⁶ Du Bois 134.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 178.

³⁹ Ibid., 180-181.

the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things...sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.”⁴⁰ Du Bois argues that the sorrow songs are valid and vital expressions of human beings despite their inhuman treatment as slaves in America. Sorrow songs affirm their identity in much the same way that the exiled Hebrew people confirmed theirs.

B. The Rev. James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson

At about the time Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*, The Rev. James Weldon Johnson expressed his appreciation for the spirituals and their unknown authors in a poem published in the *Century Magazine*.

O BLACK AND UNKNOWN BARDS

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
 How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
 How, in your darkness, did you come to know
 The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
 Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
 Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
 Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
 Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
 As “Steal away to Jesus”? On its strains
 His spirit must have nightly floated free,
 Though still about his hands he felt his chains,
 Who heard great “Jordan roll”? Whose starward eye
 Saw chariot “swing low”? And who was he
 That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
 “Nobody knows de trouble I see”?

⁴⁰ Ibid., 186.

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
 Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
 And find within its deadened heart to sing
 These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
 How did it catch that subtle undertone,
 That note in music heard not with the ears?
 How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
 Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears?

Not that great German master in his dream
 Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
 At the creation, ever heard a theme
 Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars,
 How like a mighty trumpet call they stir
 The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
 Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
 That helped make history when time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
 That from degraded rest and servile toil
 The fiery spirit of the seer should call
 These simple children of the sun and soil.
 O black slave singers, gone forgot, unfamed,
 You—you alone, of all the long, long line
 Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
 Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
 No chant of bloody war, no exulting paeon
 Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
 You touched in chord with music empyrean.
 You sang far better than you knew; the songs
 That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
 Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:
 You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.⁴¹

⁴¹ Johnson, 11-12.

In this tribute, Johnson affirms the humanity of the anonymous slaves who composed the spirituals—people who sang despite their menial state and whose words remain a testament to their existence despite their anonymity. He names songs that were and continue to be known hundreds of years later: “Steal away to Jesus”, “[Roll] Jordan roll”, “[S]wing low [Sweet Chariot]”, “Nobody knows de trouble I see” and “Go down, Moses.” He names them “songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope” echoing Du Bois’s preferred term for what Johnson and later generations call spirituals. Johnson’s final line conveys his insistence that if the Negro had “refused or failed to adopt Christianity...there would have been no Negro Spirituals.”⁴² The amalgamation of Christian belief with Africans' oppression yielded this distinctive musical expression.

Twenty years later, during the Harlem Renaissance, “O Black and Unknown Bards” opened *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* written by Johnson and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson. It was the first of two books compiled by the Johnsons; *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* came out the following year in 1926. Together they shouldered the task of confirming the origins and legitimacy of spirituals as Negro art. James Weldon wrote the prefaces for both books while J. Rosamond arranged nearly all of the music scores.

While Johnson observed that earlier generations of Blacks had "revolted against everything connected with slavery" especially immediately after the Civil War, by the mid 1920s he credited a "reawakening of the Negro to the value and beauty of the Spirituals" that established "an entirely new phase of race consciousness. It marked a

⁴² Ibid., 20.

change in the attitude of the Negro himself toward his own art material; the turning of his gaze inward upon his own cultural resources."⁴³ His phrase "race consciousness" indicates a growing awareness among black intellectuals that the spirituals expressed an affirmative identity for people of African descent.

In the face of white scholars who denied Blacks' authorship of spirituals, Johnson maintained spirituals were profound art and signified the capability of Blacks to create cultural products. Spirituals "ran parallel with African songs" structurally, particularly in the early ones' call and response format.⁴⁴ The American spirituals then developed beyond their African origins in their expanded harmonic composition and increasingly complex forms.⁴⁵ In addition to a detailed discourse of the spirituals' musical and verbal qualities, Johnson provided an extensive catalog of performers, teachers, and writers who actively promoted spirituals as music appreciated throughout the United States and around the world. Following his densely informative, 40-page "Preface," Johnson and his brother compiled 61 spirituals with complete lyrics and full accompaniments. J. Rosamond Johnson arranged 56 of the piano scores. *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* offered another 61 spirituals with J. Rosamond Johnson again shouldering most of the musical arrangement responsibilities.

Like W.E.B. Du Bois before them, James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson shared their profound appreciation for the spirituals as bearers of hope for the people who sang them in the darkest days of enslavement. By publishing these songs and

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23, 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 26-27.

lyrics, they affirmed the personhood of the creators who lived in dehumanizing conditions and who resisted slavery's power through music. The act of creating music and composing lyrics bore witness to both individual and group relationship. Authentic individuals in community created spirituals that expressed their hope for a future that would not be poisoned by racism.

C. The Rev. Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman wrote two short monographs about spirituals, *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. Through these works he sought to “explore the ground of hope and self-respect in the idiom of the Spirituals.” While he acknowledged the protest dimension of the spirituals, he chose not to focus on it.⁴⁶ Instead his compilation of a series of chapel addresses he had delivered at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges in 1929-30 accentuated the timelessness of the spirituals' religious significance. He also shared his deeply personal response to the songs of the slaves.

At the outset, Thurman included an event from his senior year in Morehouse College which illustrates the contested ground of the spirituals. A group of white visitors from an administrative board attended chapel at Morehouse College when he was a student. The students were cued to sing the spirituals; however, they would not do so, despite repeated attempts to prompt their singing. Later, they explained their deliberate disobedience: “We refuse to sing our songs to delight and amuse white people. The songs are ours and a part of the source of our own inspiration transmitted to us by our

⁴⁶ Thurman “Introduction” in *Deep River*, n.p.

forefathers.”⁴⁷ Here, the black students felt the spirituals would not be authentically received by their auditors, unappreciated except as a comic novelty. In that setting of paternalism and depreciation, the spirituals ought to remain unsung. The spirituals were legitimate expressions of black identity, not trivial amusements. In this incident, students recognized their self worth as young black men and the worth of the spirituals as cultural expressions.

Thurman picks up on the theme of self worth during the penultimate pages of *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. By discussing his eschatology, he reveals his understanding of heaven based on the language of the spirituals. Heaven was “intensely personal” particularly because it existed as a place (not a concept), and particularly “a place where the slave was counted in.”⁴⁸ Thurman legitimates the humanity of the slaves. Tangible images in spirituals offered a “concreteness to the fulfillment of all earth’s aspirations and longings.”⁴⁹ Significantly for the slave first and then for oppressed Blacks of subsequent generations, heaven would mean “no proscription, no segregation, no separateness, no slave-row, but complete freedom of movement—the most psychologically dramatic of all manifestations of freedom.” Thurman reconstitutes the ruptured community with the assurance that “Family ties are restored, friends and particularly loved ones are reunited.” The communal ideal revolves around the individual, however. In that regard, the most precious thing of all was the fact that personal identity was not lost but heightened. . . .this is the kind of universe that cannot

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Thurman, *The Negro Speaks* 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 48.

deny ultimately the demands of love and longing.⁵⁰ The individual and the community comprise the life to come even as they are the desire of the life that is here and now.

Thurman speaks to the sense of longing and fulfillment that underscores much of the spirituals' language. He also addresses the concept of community that can be found where the individual counts and the reunion of loved ones brings them together in restored mutual relationship. In this case the symbiotic relationship between individual and community had been severed to the detriment of both, but heaven would restore the symbiotic equilibrium.

Whatever may be the pressures to which one is subjected, the snares, the buffetings, one must not for a moment think that there is not an ultimate value always at stake. It is this ultimate value at stake in all experience that is the final incentive to decency, to courage and hope.⁵¹

Pointing to the "ultimate value" underlying human experience, Thurman encourages the individual to behave decently despite oppression. That individual response will require personal fortitude, but ultimately it will foster a genuine anticipation of the future.

Thurman's poem, *The Growing Edge*, articulates his commitment to hope even though there may be no perceptible evidence to support it. He begins with the natural world of plants and trees.

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;
All around us life is dying and life is being born.
The fruit ripens on the tree;
The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth

⁵⁰ Ibid., 50-51.

⁵¹ Ibid., 54.

Against the time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green
fruit.
Such is the growing edge!⁵²

Natural imagery is common in Thurman's writing and preaching. In it he makes his connection with the larger world, the greater universe. He turns his attention to the human experience for the remainder of the poem, drawing a parallel between the darkness of vegetative dormancy and the dark days of human struggle.

It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung,
The one more thing to try when all else has failed,
The upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.
This is the basis of hope in moments of despair,
The incentive to carry on when times are out of joint
And men have lost their reason; the source of confidence
When worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.
The birth of a child--life's most dramatic answer to death--
This is the Growing Edge incarnate.
Look well to the growing edge!⁵³

With these lines, Thurman acknowledges the exhaustion and despair of oppressed people. At the same time, he expresses his conviction that history's trajectory arcs upward. He assures his audience that God continues to work in human experience despite the loss of dreams. Growth emerges from darkness and even death.

Hope, the “genuine anticipation of the future”⁵⁴ not only grounds the formation of community along with integrity and empathy, it is infused in the spirituals as Thurman understands them and in the “sorrow songs” as Du Bois experienced them. Hope would also play out as part of the spontaneous community experienced during the Civil Rights

⁵² Ibid., 180.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Fluker, *Ethical Leadership*, 77.

movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others. Egalitarian resonance breaks down boundaries and levels distinctions, creating the symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community that engenders integrity, a sense of wholeness for the individual, and empathy among individuals.

IV. The Ethical Leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Following in the tradition of earlier African American intellectual leaders, Martin Luther King, Jr. also fostered a healthy sense of self among his parishioners, Civil Rights activists, and audience members. Encouraging black Americans to stand up against the forces of white racism, King pointed to the future with an assurance that God's justice would be enacted in concert with the principles of America's founders. When that day came, "the beloved community," or God's Kingdom, would become a reality. In his sermons and speeches, King often used spirituals to drive his message into his listeners' hearts.

A. Affirming Individual Identity

In his sermon, "Paul's Letter to American Christians" Martin Luther King, Jr. draws on Buber's model of relationship to criticize racial segregation.

Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ. It substitutes an "I" – "it" relationship for the "I" – "thou" relationship. The segregator relegates the segregated to the status of a thing rather than elevate him to the status of a person. The underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Paul's Letter to American Christians" in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*. Edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran. (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 31-32.

In his commentary on this sermon, C. T. Vivian observed that "Paul's Letter to American Christians" was one of King's earliest sermons that ultimately became widely known. King delivered it at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama on November 4, 1956 in the midst of the bus boycott. King explicates Buber's paradigm in light of racism's dehumanizing power and rejects racism on the basis of its contradiction with the bedrock of Christian principles.

Not long after King had established his critique of segregation on ethical grounds, in an article published in *Christian Century* shortly after the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had been formed in January of 1957, he presented his commitment to nonviolent activism. Leading up to his explanation of an alternative strategy for protesting injustice, King presented a brief overview of the history of people of African descent in America. He observed that "[t]hroughout the era of slavery the Negro was treated in inhuman fashion" and that after Emancipation, "the Negro still confronted oppression and inequality." That experience took its toll, so that "[l]iving under those conditions, many Negroes lost faith in themselves." However, over the course of the first decades of the twentieth century a "myriad of factors came together" which caused Blacks to "reevaluate" themselves "individually and as a group." "[H]e came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all His children."⁵⁶ This early statement articulates King's sensitivity to the long term effects of racial oppression in America. Just as James Weldon Johnson in the 1920s had

⁵⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" in *A Testament of Hope* 5-6. Washington's editorial notes on the text credit Glenn E. Smiley and Bayard Rustin with "encouragement and editorial assistance" in the production of this article, 5.

underscored the importance of a change of self-perception for African Americans, so King determined that African Americans must counteract the negative effects of slavery and segregation by asserting their self worth.

B. ANTICIPATING A JUST FUTURE

Most people readily associate the image of the American dream with the speech Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 at the culmination of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Certainly a dream indicates a genuine anticipation of the future, hope for an unachieved ideal. Hope infused King's rhetoric long before that halcyon day in the District of Columbia. His commencement address at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania on June 6, 1961, "The American Dream," expressed both his vision for justice and his affirmation of Blacks. "God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and in the creation of a society where all men can live together as brothers, where every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality."⁵⁷ King concludes his call to action at the end of the speech with the same words from the spiritual that rang across the Capital Mall: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"⁵⁸

Martin Luther King, Jr. wove his sense of a transformed future throughout his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" published on April 16, 1963. Near the conclusion, he imagines the activists of the present—James Meredith, the Montgomery bus boycotters, and the "sit-inners" at lunch counters—as the heroes of the future. "One day the South

⁵⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. "The American Dream" in *A Testament of Hope*, 215.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 216. "Free at Last" see Appendix.

will know that ... these disinherited children of God... were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream, and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage."⁵⁹ By imagining a future where Civil Rights activists would be seen as positive contributors to social change, not as "outside agitators" or "troublemakers," King refashions materials from the present into an alternative narrative. He creates a future for beleaguered Civil Rights activists worth anticipating. Late in the "Letter" King continues to instill a sense of hope.

He concludes his open letter with a poetic benediction:

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of their scintillating beauty.⁶⁰

Using imagery of the natural world, King offers a trajectory from shroudedness to revelation. The current "dark clouds" and "deep fog" cannot be denied, but they can be temporary once fear no longer overwhelms the people where they live together, once racial prejudice is dispelled. Then the "radiant stars" representing "love and brotherhood" can be seen as beautiful in themselves and also as guides for the future.

King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" chronicles his anticipation of the future in two ways. First, by imagining an alternative characterization of present day activists, casting them in admirable roles within the social memory of America. Then, by

⁵⁹ King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in *A Testament of Hope*, 301-302.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 302.

invoking an extended pastoral metaphor of peace, communication, and mutual respect, King articulated his hope for the incarnation of “the beloved community.”

C. CREATING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

King’s understanding of community developed from the agar of his experience growing up in the southern United States, nurtured by his family, enmeshed with the black church, and always contending with the oppression of racial segregation. Lewis V. Baldwin discusses the powerful influence of Southern culture for King, including food as well as music. The epicenter for King’s “sense of place” was Atlanta, Georgia, and specifically the black community there. Living on Auburn Avenue, King knew “a world virtually sealed off from the white world.” Although marginalized by white society, the African Americans living together “had their own language, customs, traditions, and ways of thinking and living”—in other words, their own culture. “[F]amily, church and neighborhood were linked together in a chain of interdependence and mutual need.”⁶¹

While the black community and black church offered sustaining cultural support, racial oppression revealed its ugliness even to children of tender years. King’s heart-wrenching revelation in his “Autobiography of Religious Development” shows how racism impacted him as a six-year-old child when he was separated from his white playmate.⁶² As a young adult, the memory of his friend’s father refusing to allow them to maintain their friendship burned deeply. Racism penetrated the protective shield of family and community, stabbing young children with its poisonous spear.

⁶¹ Baldwin, *Balm in Gilead*, 30.

⁶² Martin Luther King, Jr. “An Autobiography of Religious Development” [12 September-22 November 1950]. Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers, Mugar Library, Boston University. Box 106, folder 22. n.p.

For King, “the beloved community” was central to his life and work.⁶³ A phrase that comes from the writings of “personalism” philosophers, notably Josiah Royce and R.H. Lotze, “beloved community” is tied to a theological understanding of the Kingdom of God.⁶⁴ While some historians mute the theological dimension of Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel, his *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912), and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) articulate his ethic of individual piety and service on behalf of the community.⁶⁵ In his essay “Pilgrimage to Non-Violence” King acknowledged the influence Rauschenbusch had on his development as a pastor and Civil Rights leader.⁶⁶ Rauschenbusch and King shared “The Kingdom of God” as a theological keystone. King described it as “a society in which men and women live...controlled by the law of love.” When people join together voluntarily, caring for each other, assuming responsibility for each other, and treating each other as children of God, they participate in a beloved community.⁶⁷

“[T]he black church tradition” thoroughly leavened King’s concept of “beloved community” while Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel and the “personalism” philosophy

⁶³ Lewis V. Baldwin. *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 168.

⁶⁴ Fluker, *They Looked*, 110.

⁶⁵ Richard Wightman Fox and James Kloppenberg, eds. *A Companion to American Thought*. Oxford UK and Cambridge US: Blackwell Publishers, 1995, 569.

⁶⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Pilgrimage to Non-violence," 474. Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Papers Project. www.mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu (accessed April 12, 2014).

⁶⁷ Fluker, *They Looked*, 110-111.

that King imbibed at Boston University School of Theology highly flavored it.⁶⁸ Because the black church had struggled long and hard for its own liberation (even as it supported the liberation of all oppressed people), it “provided the source and the social context in which [King] worked out his conception of community and the method for its actualization.”⁶⁹ The black community and the black church had both held to the importance of forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope—three themes that suffuse King’s writings and efforts on behalf of the beloved community.⁷⁰

Although grounded in his experience of the black church and black community, King’s beloved community was not without its intellectual and theoretical influences. The philosophical/ theological impact of Tillich and others merged in King’s thought and action. Having studied Tillich as a graduate student, King drew on his ideas of love, power, and justice which have garnered considerable attention in relation to King’s nonviolent activism. In relation to community, however, King apparently melded the ontological nature of community as expressed in Tillich with King’s experience of the black church community, resulting in his “beloved community” with both temporal and metaphysical qualities. “The ‘beloved community’ was the Christian social eschatological ideal which served as the ground and the norm for ethical judgment.”⁷¹ Similar to Paris’s melding of individual and community, King saw “human community

⁶⁸ Ibid., 112-113.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

ordered by love (*agape*)” at the center of his worldview with “persons, God, and the world” radiating outward from the core of being.⁷² King’s understanding of community plays out in the multivalent expression of music not only in his speeches and sermons but also in his lived experience along with the Civil Rights activists.

V. Spirituals in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Sermons and Speeches

African American spirituals surrounded Martin Luther King, Jr. from his earliest childhood. Whether part of his musical diet at home, where his musician mother played the piano and the family sang together, or in the Ebenezer Baptist Church where his father preached and young Martin heard and sang “Baptist music” as his father called it, King was deeply immersed in music. This aural texturing included “the great hymns of the Christian church” which would have been sung in Protestant churches regardless of denomination as well as the “black gospel songs” and spirituals common to the Black church experience. King sang as a boy at school and in the church; later as a young man at Morehouse College he performed in “the Glee Club and the Atlanta University-Morehouse-Spelman Chorus.”⁷³

It is readily apparent that King drew upon his musical roots in his sermons and speeches, weaving brief allusions or more extended quotations into his oratory, often repeating lines and thereby inviting responses from his audience. However, a closer, more focused examination of the music he called upon gives added depth to our understanding of Martin Luther King, Jr. as an ethical leader of the twentieth-century

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Baldwin, *Balm in Gilead*, 32. As Fluker notes, the Glee Club and Chorus were communities built on making music where King developed long term friendships. Walter E. Fluker, Personal correspondence, December 15, 2013.

Civil Rights movement. King knew that spirituals bore witness to the humanity of people of African descent despite their dehumanizing treatment as slaves. During the Civil Rights Movement, spirituals affirmed the humanity of African Americans resisting and fighting racial segregation. Singing and hearing spirituals gave encouragement and hope to his audience and to those who sang together. By embedding spirituals in his sermons and speeches, King linked what happened in church with what happened on the streets. He thereby tapped the power in spirituals to develop and nurture community—his “beloved community”—that crossed lines of gender, race, class, and age.

The spirituals that King brings into his speeches and sermons work on different levels and in different ways at different times. Living in beloved community is the ultimate aim of the ethical life. To live in community requires individual integrity and empathetic respect for each person.⁷⁴ Spirituals are one of the ways that African Americans validate their ancestors' past in a white racist culture that does not validate either them or their history. Spirituals offer comfort for the oppressed. Spirituals bring hope, that “genuine belief in the future”, for listeners and singers. In his sermons and speeches spirituals develop, strengthen, and affirm the black community. Spirituals also transcend their origins to create, nurture, and uphold an American community of people that includes everyone regardless of race, class, age, or gender.

As we look in more detail at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons and speeches, it is worth noting that King preached many of his sermons multiple times, just as he delivered many of his speeches to many audiences. His work days usually lasted twenty hours. One

⁷⁴ Fluker, *Ethical Leadership*, 129.

estimate of his annual travel is approximately 325,000 miles per annum. His demand as a speaker meant he made as many as 450 speeches each year.⁷⁵ Because of his fluid delivery style, often improvising and responding to the particular audience or situation as was typical of African American preachers who influenced him, there are often different versions of his spoken words. He also edited published accounts of his sermons and speeches. Nevertheless, with this caveat, some initial forays into King's use of spirituals within his sermons and speeches reveals his affirmation of Blacks' personhood and his hope-filled vision of a just future as he worked for "the beloved community."

King linked music in the face of oppression with the early communities in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The roots of oppression extended back to the Israelites. As the epigram from the Psalms for this thesis demonstrates, singing in a strange land as a beleaguered hostage demanded unimaginable strength of character. In a similar vein, King spoke about the early Christian Church and its reliance on music. His speech "Why We Must Go To Washington" attributed civil disobedient practices to the early Christians. When they faced the lion's den or the chopping block, "they went there with the songs of Zion on their lips, and in their souls, because they had discovered that there was something so true, and so precious, that they had to follow it."⁷⁶ In the face of violent attacks, early Christians forged their identity as followers of Jesus. In the face of official discrimination, the early Christians possessed a sense of hope that King admired. King saw that music bolstered the spirit of the early Christians, drawing them together

⁷⁵ King, Jr., *Testament of Hope*, 555.

⁷⁶ King, Jr., "Why We Must Go to Washington" as quoted in Baldwin *Balm in Gilead* 203 fn 124.

communally in pursuit of the “true” and “precious” despite their suffering.

Empathetically, they understood the dangers each one faced and drew together through egalitarian resonance to sing and face death.

Not only did the early Christians face oppression with songs on their lips and in their hearts, the American slaves also called upon music to sustain their individual personhood despite overwhelming forces around them. In "Discerning the Signs of History" delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church on November 15, 1964, King spoke about the power of song for the slave. The slave “would sing sometimes, when he thought about the fact that he had to go out in the fields and work with no shoes. He thought about the fact that he had to face the sizzling heat and the rawhide whip of the overseer, and the long rows of cotton, in his bare feet.”⁷⁷ Physical deprivation, attacks of nature, and assaults by humans all conspired against the slave on a daily basis. Yet, despite the powers that railed against him, “he also thought about the fact that one day he would have some shoes, and he could sing, 'I got shoes, You got shoes, All God’s chillun got shoes. When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes and start a-walkin’ all over God’s heaven.’”⁷⁸ Just as Thurman posited that the physical reality of heaven would reinvigorate the oppressed, King heard the slave song as an affirmation of the human spirit and of the role of religion in human life.⁷⁹ Egalitarian resonance in this scenario transcends time as King evokes the archetypal slave song in the presence of his Sunday

⁷⁷ King, Jr. "Discerning the Signs of History" King, 4-5, as quoted in Baldwin 227.

⁷⁸ "All God's Chillun Got Wings" in *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 71-73.

⁷⁹ King, Jr. “Discerning the Signs of History” 4-5, as quoted in Baldwin 227.

morning congregation. His parishioners had sung that song filled with their own hopes of metaphorical shoes turned into jobs, houses, water fountains, or schools. Thousands of literal walking shoes had transformed the Montgomery bus system, why not sing and hope for more to make a heaven of earth?

One of King's eloquent treatments of spirituals can be found in his 1957 sermon "A Knock at Midnight;" it was repeated at other times including a June 1967 worship service at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.⁸⁰ As he brought hope to a congregation facing metaphorical midnight at the personal, local, and national levels, King assured his listeners that "Our eternal message of hope is that dawn will come." Then he turned to "slave fore-parents" who experienced their own midnights of "the rawhide whip" and "the auction block where families were torn asunder."⁸¹ For them, midnight was mediated by the song:

Oh, nobody knows de trouble I've seen,
 Glory Hallelujah!
 Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down,
 Oh yes, Lord,
 Sometimes I'm almost to de groun',
 Oh yes, Lord,
 Oh, nobody knows de trouble I've seen,
 Glory Hallelujah!⁸²

The encouragement found in this spiritual comes from a shared experience of troubles that is borne not just by the individual but also by the community. When King invoked a sense of hope entwined through lyrics of remembered singing he created instances of

⁸⁰ Moss, Otis T. "Introduction to 'A Knock at Midnight'" in *A Knock at Midnight*, 61.

⁸¹ King, Jr. "A Knock at Midnight" in *A Knock at Midnight*, 75.

⁸² "Nobody Knows De Trouble I See" in *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 140-141.

egalitarian resonance, the power of music--remembered in this case--to instill spontaneous community.

King, Jr. acknowledged that the slaves were “[e]ncompassed by a staggering midnight,” yet they held on to “believing that morning would come.” Clinging to hope amid despair led them to sing “I’m so glad trouble don’t last away.”⁸³ The hour is midnight, but King assures his audience that the slaves’ “positive belief in the dawn was the growing edge of hope that kept slaves faithful amid the most barren and tragic circumstances.”⁸⁴ King picks up Howard Thurman's phrase, "the growing edge of hope" in his pastiche of oratory commonly used among black pastors.⁸⁵ By referencing Thurman's conviction of persistent hope, King demonstrates his own determination not to be bound by the status quo. He invites his listeners also to persevere.

These examples of spirituals embedded in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s spoken words show how he nurtured the identity of black persons, encouraged their anticipation of the future, and reinforced their community. In "Discerning the Signs of History," "A Knock at Midnight", and "The American Dream" King knew that his listeners would have sung "All God's Chillun Got Wings", "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See" and "Free at Last." He and his audience knew these songs carried within them the affirmation of their humanity, the confirmation of their hope, and the substantiation of their communal experience. Living on the margins of segregated American society, they understood the

⁸³ King, Jr. "A Knock at Midnight" in *A Knock at Midnight*, 76.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956).

power of music's egalitarian resonance. King reminded them of what they knew through his words and these spirituals.

VI. Spirituals and Freedom Songs

While spirituals were the musical legacy of centuries of oppression, "freedom songs" were their equally intricate progeny. Like the songs of the slaves, they were multivalent in their complex web of meanings and associations. Some freedom songs show a nearly word-for-word affinity with their parent spiritual, having only a few straightforward substitutions. Other freedom songs' lyrics deviated substantially from their forebears while retaining the musical genetic signature of their predecessor. Some newly composed freedom songs were based on the spirituals' structure such as the "call and response" byplay between leader and respondents or the melodic character of other ethnic and national traditions. Over time, freedom songs became tied to the popular culture of the American nation when activists modified songs they heard on the radio to fit their circumstances within the Civil Rights movement. Freedom songs were evidence of the activists' resilience in the face of physical, emotional, and psychological violence. Freedom songs affirmed the humanity of the activists and captured the grassroots history of the movement, expressing hope for a future of justice, a community of peaceful interaction for all people.

One example of the spontaneous creation of freedom songs came from Bernice Johnson Reagon who played a prominent role in the music of the movement. A member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Reagon actively engaged with the musical dimension of the Civil Rights movement as a performer, music leader, and later

as a cultural historian. She recalled a watershed moment at Albany, Georgia. One of the speakers called on her to sing a song and she began singing the spiritual "Over My Head I See Trouble in the Air." Then, as she sang she realized "By the time it got to where 'trouble' was supposed to be, I didn't see any trouble, so I put 'freedom' in there. That was the first time I had the awareness that these songs were mine and I could use them for what I needed."⁸⁶ Reagon was one of many who adapted spirituals and to address the demands of the Civil Rights movement.

Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the importance of the spirituals as the predecessors of the freedom songs. In *Why We Can't Wait*, King wrote about the movement in Birmingham and connected spirituals of the past with the freedom songs of the movement, some based on old tunes and others newly crafted. He affirmed the way that singing spirituals in the black churches was vitally important to the sense of community shared by the Birmingham activists. Singing grounded their hopeful commitment to the protest at hand.

In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang—the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement. I have heard people talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the movement are as inspired by their words. "Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom" is a sentence that needs no music to make its point.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Bernice Johnson Reagon as quoted by Guy and Candie Carawan "Preface to the 1992 Edition" *Sing for Freedom*, viii. "Over My Head" in *Songs of Zion*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 167. "Over My Head [I see freedom in the air]" in *Sing for Freedom*, 68.

⁸⁷ King, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait*, 48. "Woke Up This Morning With My Mind on Freedom" in Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*, 73.

King Jr.'s reference to "the sorrow songs" implies his knowledge of W.E.B. Du Bois and *The Souls of Black Folk*. More than one kind of song was available to the slaves, but whatever the format, the songs validate their spiritual and emotional selves. King, Jr. also addressed the strong bond that developed among singers who confronted racial violence armed with their mutual determination.

I have stood in a meeting with hundreds of youngsters and joined in while they sang "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round." It is not just a song; it is a resolve. A few minutes later, I have seen those same youngsters refuse to turn around before a pugnacious Bull Connor in command of men armed with power hoses. These songs find us together, give us courage together, help us to march together."⁸⁸

The way the songs bonded the individuals into a communal group is evidence of egalitarian resonance. Togetherness implies a leveling of hierarchy, a spirit of mutuality, and a commitment to action that includes individual integrity and recognition of the genuineness in others. Such is the stuff of thriving community.

Given his own musical history, Martin Luther King, Jr. writes about the power of music across time and place. Validating the humanity of the slave and of the Civil Rights workers despite the ridicule and condemnation flung upon them, singing songs of the past and songs of the present sustained the spirit of those on the front lines of the Civil Rights conflict and enacted the community they hoped would eventually be built in the United States.

The headline for *New York Times* reporter Robert Shelton's 1962 article "Songs a Weapon in Rights Battle," points to the battleground mentality of the Civil Rights

⁸⁸ King, Jr. "Why We Can't Wait," 48. "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round" Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*, 56-57.

movement and simultaneously acknowledges the nonviolent approach of King, Jr. and the SCLC. Shelton catalogued the diversity of the music: "spirituals, hymns, and gospel songs." Both old songs and the newly-written "freedom songs" were sung in all parts of the movement, at "mass meetings, demonstrations, prayer vigils,...[on] Freedom Rides, in jails and before sit-ins."⁸⁹ Similarly, in their "Introduction" to *We Shall Overcome*, a compilation of Civil Rights movement songs published in 1963 for SNCC, Guy and Candie Carawan describe "a singing spirit that moves the hearts of all who hear" the music of the movement.⁹⁰ Linking protest actions with music they note all the places where activists sang: "at mass meetings, prayer vigils, demonstrations, before freedom rides and sit-ins, in paddy wagons and jails, at conferences, workshops, and informal gatherings."⁹¹ Freedom songs were a part of everyday life for the activists and their supporters, like the singers of spirituals before them.

Freedom songs met diverse needs of the Civil Rights activists, as did the spirituals during earlier days of oppression and during the movement. Freedom songs were sung: "to bolster spirits, to gain new courage and to increase the sense of unity. The singing sometimes disarms jail guards, policemen, bystanders, and mobs of their hostilities."⁹² This analysis harkens back to the sense of hope and creation of community that Du Bois,

⁸⁹ Robert Shelton, "Songs a Weapon in Rights Battle" *New York Times*, 20 August 1962, 1. www.nytimes.com/leal/19620820songsweapon.pdf. (Accessed 25 April 2014).

⁹⁰ Guy and Candie Carawan, "Introduction" *We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement in Sing for Freedom*, 5.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

the Johnsons, Thurman, and King all connected with spirituals. By drawing in their antagonists--guards, policemen, and mobs--or at least pacifying them, singers of freedom songs enacted a nascent "beloved community." The power of egalitarian resonance pulsed through the words and music for singers and for listeners.

At the forefront of the protests, African American students led the actions confronting "segregated lunch counters...restaurants, libraries, museums, art galleries, churches, courtrooms, parks, beaches, swimming pools, laundromats, employment, transportation and voter registration." Many of these activists were members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).⁹³ While *We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement* includes musical notation for many songs, the music varied from place to place and from singers to singers, continually changing as demanded by current events and spontaneous creative response.⁹⁴

In contrast to the spirituals whose words showed the patina of time by being cast in universal language applicable to many different situations, freedom songs specifically recorded the historical importance of the movement from the grassroots perspective. Freedom songs validated the nonviolent work undertaken by activists and commemorated the sacrifices of the people who lost their lives in the struggle for human rights. Adaptations of spirituals with contemporarily relevant lyrics and creation of new songs in the spiritual and ballad tradition put names and places into a specific context, and at the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 6.

same time, spread the word about injustice and violence far beyond where the songs and lyrics originated.

VII. Freedom songs as grassroots history

Robert Shelton's article refers to freedom songs composed or adapted by protestors. He noted their "bold new words" addressed the specifics of the movement.⁹⁵ When they named local and national government officials, such as Bull Connor, Governor Wallace, Mr. Kennedy (Robert or John), Mayor Boutwell of Birmingham, and Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, Civil Rights activists created an oral history of the movement, following in the footsteps of folk cultures before them. They presented their perspective from the bottom looking up at leaders who brutalized them or who failed to prevent others from doing so. In contrast to the "official record" of arrests and incarceration, activists provided their version of what happened during marches, sit-ins, and other desegregation actions. By doing so, they called for justice. Freedom Songs that chronicled the injustice of government officials include "Bull Connor's Jail" sung to the tune of "Down in the Valley", "Aint Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" using a traditional tune, and "Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly" sung to the tune of "Oh Mary, Oh Martha."⁹⁶

Freedom songs also provided geographical reference points: cities like Birmingham, Jackson, Nashville, and Montgomery, and other sites of action--Woolworth counters, Parchman Penitentiary, and Trailways buses. "Ballad of the Student Sit-ins" by

⁹⁵ Shelton, 1.

⁹⁶ Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*, 92, 56-59.

Guy Carawan, Eve Merriam, and Norman Curtis refers to Mobile, Nashville, Denver, and Washington, D.C. as sites of lunch counter activism.⁹⁷ When the traditional spiritual "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table" included the verse "I'm gonna sit at Woolworth's lunch counter" it brought the history of oppression into the context of the current conflict. By providing tangible locations, the Freedom Songs recalled not only what protestors did but where they pitched their nonviolent battles. Freedom Songs literally put the Civil Rights movement on the map, giving activists a tangible record unedited by members of "the Establishment," recognized authorities who had in many cases shown they could not be trusted.

Furthermore, freedom songs memorialized those who lost their lives either by standing up for freedom or by dying as innocent victims. Richard Farina, a professional writer and performer, commemorated Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson. His ballad "Birmingham Sunday" expressed anguish at the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963.⁹⁸ Guy Carawan's adaptation of "Hard Travelin'" by Woody Guthrie included "Poor Jimmy Travis almost dyin."⁹⁹ More typical of the adapted spiritual was Don West's tribute to William L. Moore. A white postal worker in Baltimore who had been born in Mississippi, Moore was shot as he walked U.S. Highway 11 near Gadsden, Alabama. Enroute to Jackson, Mississippi, he intended to make his case for civil rights there. "Ballad for Bill Moore"

⁹⁷ Carawan *Sing for Freedom*, 34-35. "Ballad of the Student Sit-ins" Ibid.

⁹⁸ Carawan *Sing For Freedom* 110-111.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 93.

sung to the tune of "You've Got to Walk that Lonesome Valley" grew out of the efforts of SNCC and CORE members who later continued his journey.¹⁰⁰ At least two songs remember the death of Herbert Lee who lived in Amite, Mississippi. He had helped SNCC organizers meet local people as part of their voter registration drive. State Congressman Eugene Hurst shot and killed Lee, but through witness intimidation and fabricated evidence, an all-white coroner's jury exonerated Hurst.¹⁰¹ These Freedom Songs validated the individuals who died. Songs of the martyrs for Civil Rights kept their presence as part of the community woven into the ongoing struggle. Motivating the activists who knew them as well as those who only knew them in song, commemorative Freedom Songs provided hope for a future where their personal sacrifice would have meaning and worth.

The cultural work of freedom songs dovetailed with their antecedents, the spirituals. Both types of musical expression emerged from the crucible of oppression, expressing deep human need and longing. Unlike the hundreds and thousands of African Americans who "disappeared" during slavery and after Emancipation, the twentieth century activists made the record clear. Naming names and citing places, the Civil Rights singers used oral history to capture their present day experience with the hope that in the future they might be able to look back from a place of communal justice and peace.

When Civil Rights activists wrote freedom songs based on old melodies from other cultures and secular sources, they broadened the movement beyond African

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 83-87.

American traditions. Marilyn Eisenberg, a Freedom Rider who hailed from California, based her parodies on songs including "Yankee Doodle," "On Top of Old Smokey," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Frere Jacques," "Streets of Laredo" and even "Dixie."¹⁰²

Oh, we're riding South and we're integrated
 New South 'bout to be created;
 Look ahead! Look ahead!
 Look ahead, Dixieland!
 No more racist rule by Anglo Saxon;
 Black and white, we ride on to Jackson;
 Look ahead!
 Look ahead!
 Look ahead, Dixieland!
 We're riding forth through Dixie, today, hurray!
 For liberty and dignity
 We'll integrate all Dixie;
 Hurray! Hurray!
 We'll soon be free in Dixie"¹⁰³

By singing the tune for "Dixie" with alternate words, Eisenberg cleverly undercuts the power of the song most associated with Southern white supremacy. Her alternate words destabilize the monolithic association of "Dixie" and re-appropriates the tune to subvert its original meaning, looking ahead to integration instead of looking back at segregation and slavery. In these cases music transcends cultural boundaries when it taps into songs from other traditions and draws on familiar and patriotic tunes.

VIII. "We Shall Overcome"

Considered by many to be the musical lifeblood of the Civil Rights movement, "We Shall Overcome" emerged virtually organically from diverse

¹⁰² Ibid., 49-52.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 51-52.

sources. The first seven notes closely approximate one version of a spiritual recorded immediately after the Civil War, "Many Thousand Go."¹⁰⁴ Some of the ancestry for "We Shall Overcome" can be tied to Charles Albert Tindley and A.R. Shockly's gospel song "I'll Overcome Someday."¹⁰⁵ Pete Seeger credited Zilphia Horton for her part, "She was the person who first sang 'We Shall Overcome' to me."¹⁰⁶ She had heard it at the Highlander Folk School where Seeger visited and met Martin Luther King, Jr. for the first time. Seeger recalled an account in a 1907 United Mine Workers journal that said 'At our strike meeting last year, we started every meeting with a prayer and singing that good old song "We Will Overcome."¹⁰⁷ It also has been associated with the Baptist hymn "I'll Be Alright."¹⁰⁸ Spencer notes that added verses to freedom songs, including "We Shall Overcome" "generated a reservoir of courage, energy capable of propelling the group" toward its goals.¹⁰⁹ Seeger chronicled the song's evolution being influenced by Guy Carawan's experience learning gospel songs at a black church.

Guy Carawan was at the founding convention of SNCC... and somebody shouted, "Guy, teach us all 'We Shall Overcome!'" and that's where they

¹⁰⁴ *Slave Songs of the United States, The Classic 1867 Anthology*. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, editors. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1995, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Julian Bond, "Foreword" in Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*, x.

¹⁰⁶ Pete Seeger interview with Kris Wood, *History News Network*. <http://hnn.us/article/151053> (Accessed 31 January 2014), np.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Jon Michael Spencer. *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). 84.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

invented the idea of crossing your hands in front of you. Your right hand holds the left hand of the person to your left and your left hand holds the right hand of the person to your right and your shoulders touch and your bodies sway. You're dancing as well as singing, you're moving your body when you're singing. It becomes a great mass thing.¹¹⁰

The popularity of “We Shall Overcome” raised it to the status of “unofficial anthem” within the movement and engaged marchers of all ages, races, and sexes. While the slave songs continued to inspire the protesters, as King frequently acknowledged, “We Shall Overcome” also captured the imagination of its listeners and hearers. King, Jr. connected “We Shall Overcome” with the Civil Rights marchers and the slaves who sang before them.

We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that “We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday.”¹¹¹

Hope in the form of a song also arose phoenix-like from the ashes of tragedy. After the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in September 1963, King was moved by the resilience of the people who had seen four innocent black girls killed on a Sunday morning just 18 days after the peaceful triumph of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. “We Shall Overcome” wafted through the masses who had gathered to grieve.¹¹² In an interview, King acknowledged the power of the music. “Tears came into

¹¹⁰ Pete Seeger, *History News Network*, n.p.

¹¹¹ King, Jr. “Why We Can't Wait,” 48.

¹¹² *Eyes on the Prize*, Episode 3: “Ain't Scared of Your Jails (1960-61)” directed by Orlando Bagwell (Blackside Productions, February 4, 1987) DVD (PBS, 2006).

my eyes that at such a tragic moment, my race still could sing its hope and faith.”¹¹³ In the depths of despair, when the sanctity of a house of worship had been violated and even more egregiously, when innocent lives had been obliterated, King heard hope. The ideas of James Gustafson come to mind, where human freedom transmits a view of the horizon ahead and refuses to be stunted by a sense of fate or pre-determination.¹¹⁴ The people in the funeral procession for those four little girls refused to abandon their hope.

"We Shall Overcome" not only stirred the masses, it also comforted the individual. In a personal account from the book, *Letters from Mississippi*, one Civil Rights activist mused about the role of music in the movement.

The reflections of the letter writer speaks to the power of Freedom Songs. Besides the songs' capacity "to dissipate the fear" on the front lines of desegregation, they created a sense of solidarity. "[W]hen they are sung in unison, or sung silently by oneself, they take on new meaning, beyond words or rhythm." The correspondent attests to the communal dimension of singing with others. Moving beyond the temporal, the writer explained: "There is almost a religious quality about some of these songs, having little to do with the usual concept of a god. It has to do with the miracle that youth has organized to fight hatred and ignorance. It has to do with the holiness of the dignity of man."¹¹⁵ Implied in these words is the sense of recognizing the humanity of all, the perspective necessary for the ethical relationship between "I" and "Thou."

¹¹³ Martin Luther King, Jr. as quoted in Baldwin, 202.

¹¹⁴ James Gustafson in Fluker *Ethical Leadership* 77.

¹¹⁵ *Letters from Mississippi* as quoted in Carawan, 175.

Finally, the activist returns to a verse from "We Shall Overcome" to drive home the music's power. "The god that makes such miracles is the god I do believe in when we sing 'God is on our side.' I know I am on that god's side, and I do hope he is on ours."¹¹⁶ Within this missive, individual integrity and hope are linked by egalitarian resonance, enacting a "beloved community" that the activists are working to replicate within American society. The lyrics of "We Shall Overcome" brought together the individual "I" and the group with hope for a miraculous future.

As observers and historians of the Civil Rights Movement have noted, singing happened in different contexts. Mass meetings were held before and during nonviolent actions where speeches, informal accounts, and "business reports" flowed down from the podium, but the music flowed up from the crowd, enveloping all the people present whether they were active in the front lines or supporting from the sidelines. Two of the most dangerous sites for Civil Rights activists were the prisons and the marches. Although they would seem completely dissimilar, jails and highways put protesters into vulnerable positions and also were sites of tedious boredom. Singing in jails and on the march crossed distances and provided encouragement to continue the struggle for racial equality.

IX. Spirituals and Freedom Songs at Mass Meetings

In both the Albany movement of 1962 and the Selma voting rights campaign of 1965, observers and participants alike identified the ability of music to create a sense of

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

community among singers and listeners. These times of egalitarian resonance bridged the differences between citizens and activists as well as young people and their elders.

While the Albany movement in 1962 fell short of some definitions of success for several reasons--internal conflict between the SCLC and SNCC, goals that were too vague and broadly conceived, and less than optimal planning-- what worked in Albany was the coalescence of the black church and the black community as facilitated by singing. In her doctoral dissertation, Bernice Johnson Reagon chronicled the “frequent and widespread singing of spirituals and other freedom songs” that became the hallmark of the Albany campaign. People sang “during mass meetings, public demonstrations, and while demonstrators stood in crowded jails.” Their song list included “Sometimes I Feel Like My Time Ain’t Long”, “This Little Light of Mine” and “Swing Low Sweet Chariot Let Me Ride.”¹¹⁷ Reagon characterized the Albany action as “a singing movement” where “traditional song-leaders” modified the music that organizers offered, thereby creating music that spoke to contemporary events even as it witnessed to the struggles of the past. With song as “a basic and common language” divisions were bridged between “middle class Black college students” who came to Albany as change agents and the older adults who had been living with racism in Albany and its rural environs for years.¹¹⁸ As Reagon presents this case study, singing crosses boundaries of age, class, education, and urban-rural differences. Whether the Albany movement is characterized in terms of

¹¹⁷ Carawan, 21.

¹¹⁸ Bernice Johnson Reagon 132-138 as quoted by Baldwin, 197.

"success" or "failure", singing together brought the significant benefits of identity, hope, and community to the Civil Rights workers and the local residents.

Three years later, the voting rights campaign at Selma, Alabama brought Martin Luther King, Jr. there and revealed another instance of singing among the Civil Rights activists that created egalitarian resonance. On March 21, 1965 King spoke at Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama before a throbbing crowd of “men, women, children, rich and poor, black and white, and Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.”¹¹⁹ The campaign for voting rights had called this body into the structure that would become a center for meetings and training in the daunting task of facing down entrenched racist individuals and officials. The audience was arguably the most diverse since the March on Washington in 1963. The spirituals “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round” expressed their determination. Charles E. Fager described the scene in his book, *Selma, 1965*: “The worn brown benches were packed with people clapping and swaying to the music, which grew louder and more enthusiastic as the crowd grew steadily larger.”¹²⁰

Singing together at Brown Chapel erased the differences within the diverse gathering. Egalitarian resonance happened as hundreds of people sang together, responded to the music together, and attained a sense of mutual support and common direction. Singing during the Albany Movement dispelled potential distrust between "outsiders" and "locals." These two examples of singing in mass meetings reveal the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 205.

¹²⁰ Charles E. Fager, *Selma, 1965* as quoted in Ibid., 205.

ways that egalitarian resonance forged the purpose of diverse populations into a common purpose confronting racial segregation and oppression.

X. Singing Freedom Songs in Jails

For the Civil Rights activists, being arrested and taken to jail was a type of initiation. Many were college students who had grown up thinking that breaking the law was something other people did, or was a result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now, to actively confront the legal system and to become a convict went against everything they had been taught and believed. Nevertheless, they understood that the process of changing segregation involved this new, and daunting, experience. Singing in jails established the protestors' identity as human beings who had been incarcerated because of unjust laws. Lyrics of the Freedom Songs offered hope for a future where people would live together harmoniously, even as they chronicled a present fraught with violence and oppression. Despite physical separation, Civil Rights activists sang in jails and penitentiaries as a unifying act, their liminal status as convicts gave the egalitarian resonance of their music added potency, creating their own community.

Candie Anderson Carawan described singing in the Nashville jail in February 1960 during the earliest days of the movement. As one of two white female students, authorities removed her to a cell with her other white comrade while across the hall, sixty young men were crowded into the same size space. Since visual contact was limited, they realized they had another communication resource--singing. "The contact which became more real [than seeing] then was vocal. Never had I heard such singing. Spirituals, pop tunes, hymns, and even slurpy old love songs all became so powerful. The men sang to

the women and the girls down the hall answered them. They shouted over to us to make sure we were joining in. Some songs that the kids had written or revised came out-- notably some rock-and-roll protests composed by four young Baptist preachers. Calypso songs and Ray Charles numbers made us dance in our room quarters and then all of us were singing spirituals--'Amen-Freedom'.¹²¹ Incarcerated for eight hours for this first arrest, she says the students sang most of the time.

Besides describing the protestors singing in jail, Anderson Carawan notes the response of others. City policemen made a few song requests. When the students returned a few days later for violating their bond and protesting again, the jail wardens "welcomed us back" she observes. "We were a change from the Saturday night drunk who rarely sang."¹²²

Bob Zellner, a white student like Candie Anderson Carawan, entered the movement as an exchange student in Nashville and became active with SNCC in other sites across the South. At Talladega, Alabama where 200 students marched to protest "police brutality and collusion with the mob which beat demonstrators", Zellner described the confrontation with "forty city, county, and state policemen with tear gas grenades, billy sticks and a fire truck." Despite the order to return to campus, the students remained steadfast. They "quietly began singing 'We Shall Not be Moved' an adapted traditional song."¹²³

¹²¹ Candie Anderson Carawan in *Sing For Freedom*, 17.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Bob Zellner in Ibid., 19.

In East Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Bob Zellner and Chuck McDew were charged with "vagrancy and criminal anarchy." Because Zellner was white and McDew was African American, they were separated. After four days in "an open cell block with 65 other white prisoners" who had "sharpened spoons and razor blades" and who threatened to "eventually castrate me and pin me to my mattress" Zellner was removed and "pushed into" a solitary confinement cell. Little did he know that McDew was also in solitary. When they discovered they were incarcerated in adjacent cells, they sang. "As the police pounded on the door threatening to whip us we sang 'Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Freedom.' Even after they turned the heaters on and blasted us with unbearable heat for seven days, we continued to sing 'We'll walk hand in hand...'"¹²⁴

While Zellner reported the fierce antagonism of white prisoners, Freedom Rider Frederick Leonard recounted his time in Parchman Penitentiary when the communal alliance with black prisoners was tested by white authorities. With little to do in prison, "We only had one book, the Bible" he smiled, the activists sang to pass the time. "We could hear the women on the other side. They'd sing to us and we'd sing to them." Guards tried to squelch their music, yelling at them to "shut up" and finally threatening "If you don't shut up, we'll take your mattresses." Undaunted, the protesters continued to sing, "Freedom songs. 'Freedom's comin' and it won't be long'" even inventing verses in their songs about their mattresses. Following through on their threats, the guards took the mattresses for a night and returned them the next day. When the singing erupted again, the guards confiscated the mattresses from the culprits. But Leonard decided not to

¹²⁴ Ibid., 82.

relinquish his mattress. Holding onto his mattress, he was dragged out into the cell block. "I was holding onto my mattress and I wouldn't turn it loose." Faced with his insubordination, the guards called on "Pee Wee", one of the hardened, African American convicts to beat Leonard until he let go. "They said, 'Pee Wee! Get him! Pee Wee came down on my head. Whomp! Whomp!'" But Leonard saw that even as Pee Wee, the burly tough guy, struck him, "Pee Wee was crying. He was crying!" Leonard still had his mattress. "You remember when your parents used to whip you and they'd say 'It's gonna hurt me more than it hurts you?' Well, it hurt Pee Wee more than it hurt me."¹²⁵ The songs had bridged the gap between the young students and the long term prisoners. White guards exerted their authority over Pee Wee physically, but his heart was with the Civil Rights activists.

In 1961, James Farmer, head of the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE), announced that CORE would test the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) and its implementation of federal legislation that outlawed racial segregation on interstate travel. On May 4, 1961 two groups of "Freedom Riders" set out on a Greyhound and Trailways bus from Washington, D.C. heading south to New Orleans, LA. While the travelers made their way through the upper South, they were unharmed. But in Anniston and Birmingham Alabama, the non-violent protestors encountered violent white mobs uncontrolled by local authorities. One bus was firebombed outside Anniston. The other bus also was attacked. CORE withdrew its leadership of the Freedom Rides but the students of the Nashville Student Movement picked up the banner and continued the

¹²⁵*Eyes on the Prize*, "Episode 3."

rides. Succeeding waves of student riders took buses South and were eventually jailed in Jackson, Mississippi for violating state segregation laws. According to the Southern Regional Council Report (1961) over 360 people were imprisoned in support of the first wave of Freedom Riders and integrated interstate travel. Attorney General Robert Kennedy requested the ICC to issue regulations for compliance with the federal law for integrated interstate transportation which eventually happened in September, 1961.¹²⁶

During his jail time, Farmer recalled a night when the black prisoners kept in different cell blocks upstairs and downstairs began singing. It began with an anonymous voice calling out 'sing your freedom song.' Farmer reported, "And the Freedom Riders sang. We sang old folk songs and gospel songs to which new words had been written, telling of the Freedom Ride and its purpose." Freedom songs connected the singers with the past as well as the present. They grounded the activists in history, affirming their participation in the human story. Farmer continued, "Then the downstairs prisoners, whom the jailers had said were our enemies, sang for us. The girl Freedom Riders in another wing of the jail, joined in the Freedom Ride songs."¹²⁷ The singers experienced egalitarian resonance that transcended the physical space between them. Music also made allies of the other prisoners, co-participants in a spontaneously-formed community of people marginalized by society.

Music also had the capacity to cross lines between jailer and the jailed. Californian Freedom Rider Marilyn Eisenberg actively chronicled her experience in

¹²⁶ Farmer in Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*, 38.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

Parchman Penitentiary after being arrested in Jackson, Mississippi. The prison matron initially treated the prisoners roughly. "But some of the girls, in the true nonviolent spirit, saw her as a human being and not as a symbol of authority and oppression. Little by little they began to speak to her...then we began to joke with her and have longer and longer conversations. Before I left Parchman, she was singing for us on our make-believe radio programs and was often heard humming our freedom songs."¹²⁸ Egalitarian resonance even put prisoners and wardens on a level playing field.

XI. Singing at Lunch Counter Sit-ins

As a member and leader of the Nashville Student Movement, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, long before he was elected a U.S. Representative, John Lewis had a presence in integration efforts throughout the south from 1955 to 1966. In Nashville, Lewis participated in actions to desegregate lunch counters and restaurants, movie theaters, and bus stations. He was one of the original members of the Freedom Riders who rode buses from Washington, D.C. headed toward New Orleans, challenging state segregation laws in defiance of federal legislation that authorized racially integrated interstate travel. He was one of the featured speakers at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He faced state law enforcement officers at the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma where they fractured his skull. Despite his injury, he continued to walk to Montgomery with thousands of others who demanded fair and equal treatment for all. He met with Presidents and with

¹²⁸ Marilyn Eisenberg, *Ibid.*, 49.

sharecroppers, with college students and manual laborers, working determinedly behind the scenes particularly with SNCC's efforts to register voters. Arrested more than forty times, Lewis witnessed the movement extensively in ways that few living people can still recount.¹²⁹

During a recent interview, Congressman Lewis recalled the ways activists used music during lunch counter integration efforts in Nashville. Singing was not part of the activists' actions while they sat at the lunch counter. Bowing his head and cupping his hands on the table in front of him, Lewis solemnly reenacted the scene as he explained, "At the lunch counter we would read a book, or" and he lifted his eyes "we would look straight ahead. We didn't sing at the lunch counter." Then he stood and walked over to his desk where he looked through a stack of framed photographs and pulled out one of himself being carried by two policemen toward a paddy wagon. "I'm not singing here," he said. "But, once we were in the paddy wagon--when we were in the paddy wagon, we made it *rock!* And the people out here on the street," he went on as he pointed out the protestors in the background, "they were singing, too!"¹³⁰ The arrested protesters and their fellow demonstrators shared a sense of mutual support and affirmation as they rocked the paddy wagon with songs. Whereas being arrested usually meant shame and degradation, the sit-

¹²⁹ John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind, a Memoir of the Movement*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

¹³⁰ John Lewis, interview with the author, Washington, D.C., March 5, 2014.

inners turned the tables and made their arrest a badge of honor. Singing emphatically dissipated fear and galvanized their collective determination.

Singing was particularly important in the mass meetings where activists gathered before embarking on their planned action. Lewis recounted the ways that music played a part. "If we thought that something was going to happen, that people were going to be arrested or that something was going to happen, we sang 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken' holding hands" and Lewis put his arms down to his sides and turned his hands out. "Not just once, but over and over." Lifting his arms and crossing them in front of him, he continued "At the end of the meeting we sang 'We Shall Overcome' holding hands like this."¹³¹

In these instances that John Lewis remembers, singing gave hope and reassurance to protestors as they were being hauled off to the police station. But before they had stepped out into the front lines, protestors sang as part of a community. Injury and death were real threats. The words of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" affirm connections that hold people together in life and in death. Repeating the lyrics made an indelible imprint on Lewis and presumably on the others with whom he sang. The protestors shared egalitarian resonance with the others at the mass meeting, many of whom attended to show their support even if they would not be directly involved in the planned event. "We Shall Overcome" confirmed their communal resolve, not only in the words, but also in the distinctive physical linking of hands in a "chain"--different from the way singers held their

¹³¹ Ibid.

hands to sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." Physical touch and singing together enacted "the beloved community" that the activists hoped to create for themselves and succeeding generations.

XII. Singing on the March

Civil Rights marches came in all shapes and sizes. Protesters walked picket lines protesting Jim Crow facilities in stores. Others marched because of unfair hiring practices. Still others made long-distance walks along highways like the June 1966 "March Against Fear" from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. And, the most famous "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" presented a monumental gathering from across the nation.

Freedom songs were an integral part of Civil Rights marches. In his memoir, John Lewis recalled one of the marching songs: "Go where the spirit say go. Do what the spirit say do."¹³² In Selma, Lewis described the uneventful days of marching, when protesters "silently walked a picket line for hours on end, or sang freedom songs from dawn to dusk" when nothing "news-worthy" happened. "The patience and persistence it took to endure those countless hours of weary boredom in stifling heat or bone-chilling cold, in driving rain and wet, slushy snow, is as admirable as the bravery it took to face the billy clubs of those deputies."¹³³ This singing escaped the nation's eyes, but figured prominently in the daily labors of Civil Rights activists.

¹³² Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 294.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 309.

The freedom song, "Legend of Danville," described the actions of marchers in Danville, Virginia who confronted "segregated public facilities, discrimination in employment, schools which were integrated in a token manner, and poor conditions generally in the Negro neighborhoods."¹³⁴ The verses describe the daily marches in May and June 1963. "From Bibleway Church to the courthouse/Some people marched to be free." Protesters "marched two abreast" and contended with "water from the firehose," being "hit with the billy sticks," and gasping when "They used the tear gas bombs."¹³⁵ These words set to music chronicled the experience for those who faced the violence directly and for those who heard about Danville second-hand. The words and song extended their protest beyond Virginia and created a community among marchers.

Another marching site, St. Augustine, Florida, saw massive brutality during marches for integrating public accommodations. Dorothy Cotton of the SCLC reported on the role of singing: "We marched regularly at night. We kept being ordered not to march especially at night because it was so dangerous. We sang every night before we went out to get up our courage."¹³⁶ Besides motivating marchers to return to dangerous territory, the freedom songs also reminded activists of their non-violent response to the bricks and chains of the KKK. "After we were attacked we'd come back to the church, and somehow always we'd come back bleeding, and singing 'I love everybody...' It was

¹³⁴ Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*, 120-121.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³⁶ Dorothy Cotton in *Ibid.*, 115.

hard."¹³⁷ "I Love Everybody" was one of the adapted spirituals and figured prominently in Pat Watters' account of one night march in St. Augustine."As the procession of whites with Confederate flags and big American flags, and their own signs...went by, the Negroes sang their song: 'I Love Everybody.'...An old Negro man and woman stood, arm in arm, staring at the white procession with eyes of loathing pain. 'I love everybody in my heart'...they sang."¹³⁸ The African American protestors' compassion--even in the face of violence--showed their humanity in the face of inhuman brutality by white aggressors.

Freedom songs helped pass the time during long, tedious marches, bonding singers as they labored in anonymity. Freedom songs renewed the courageous spirit of marchers who faced the unknown. Freedom songs affirmed the integrity of African American people in the face of intimidation and violence. The lyrics restated nonviolent response as the ethical confrontation to racism.

XIII. Freedom Songs after The March on Washington

In 1968 Guy and Candie Carawan published their second book about the music of the movement. *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Songs of the Freedom Movement* continued their earlier work of publishing songs of the movement after the March on Washington in 1963. They placed songs in context with a particular non-violent action--whether "Birmingham, St. Augustine, Danville, Atlanta, Americus" or as part of a larger sweep, such as the Mississippi Summer of 1964.¹³⁹ As they note in the "Introduction,"

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Pat Watters in Ibid.,115-116.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 103.

old songs were adapted, new songs were created, and great variety was infused when a thousand Northerners joined in the Mississippi Summer Project. Once the summer was over, freedom songs were diffused throughout the country when those northerners returned home.

After he had been discharged from the Army, Charles Sherrod, SNCC activist in Albany wrote a lyric that affirmed nonviolence. "Nothing but a Soldier" says in part:

We don't need the H-bomb,
Rockets do not serve,
We have got nonviolence,
Packs more power for every nerve.¹⁴⁰

Sherrod's freedom song came from the post-March on Washington movement and was published in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*. His verses described the fire-hoses, dogs, and cow-prods turned against non-violent protestors and his determination to neither strike back nor to "be your slave."¹⁴¹ His song iterated the commitment to nonviolence in the face of attacks by white police supposedly "protecting" the public from the protesters.

Yet, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* reflects the growing disillusionment of many activists with the nonviolent approach to civil disobedience particularly after the 1966 Mississippi March. Many of the post 1966 songs "are based on rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues rather than spiritual and gospel songs."¹⁴² The Civil Rights Movement had moved from a regional to a national phenomenon and the music of protest reflected both the scope and the age of its activists.

¹⁴⁰ Sherrod in *Ibid.*, 138-139.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 104.

XIV. Conclusion

This thesis's foray into spirituals and freedom songs of the twentieth-century Civil Rights movement has begun to investigate the ways that this music affirmed the personhood of African Americans, kept hope alive, and nurtured community development. By supporting individual integrity and encouraging empathy for the other, spirituals helped to create an atmosphere conducive for the growth of a healthy community, the "balm in Gilead/ to make the wounded whole." Most significantly, spirituals wafted on wings of hope that is vital to communal life. Egalitarian resonance, a brief sense of common experience, occurred as people sang, transcending barriers of race, class, age, and gender when activists sang together or listened to singing. Through the very act of singing together, Civil Rights demonstrators modeled the interracial community they longed to see in American society.

W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, J. Rosamond Johnson, and Howard Thurman recognized the importance of healthy sense of self as first step in creating relationship with others, analogous to the "I" and "Thou" configuration articulated by Martin Buber. After the dehumanization of slavery, racial segregation in the twentieth century continued to oppress people of African descent psychologically, emotionally, as well as physically. Yet, Du Bois, Johnson, and Thurman held on to a view of the future that would ultimately bring justice; realistic pragmatism leavened their hopefulness without dispelling it. All three of these intellectual leaders recognized the potency of spirituals to express their ancestors' hope in the face of injustice and despair. Spirituals

bore witness to the resilience of the human spirit as both artistic expression and voice of protest.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the shoulders of these intellectual forefathers as he developed his ethical leadership. In his pursuit of "the beloved community", King, Jr. wove references to spirituals into his rhetoric, imbuing in the hope they bore as markers of slaves' authentic humanity. At the grassroots level, Civil Rights activists modified spirituals into freedom songs that addressed the needs and experiences of people on the front lines of the fight for freedom. As the battle moved from southern regional conflicts to the national theater, freedom songs absorbed influences from other musical sources including blues, rock and roll, Motown, and folk rock. In their lyrics that captured the names and places of Civil Rights activism, the protesters created an historical record in the face of institutional oppression and suppression.

The implications of this study are two-fold. First, studying music in relation to a social movement provokes thinking about social change in our society today. Community-building is crucial for creating ethical social change through small group action in contact with a larger group. Ethical leaders must find "language" that crosses borders of difference—class, race, gender, sex, age, race, and nationality. In the twenty-first century, that alternative "language" may or may not be music. But finding a mechanism to generate hope and make it available for all will be an essential mission to establish a genuine community.

This study also has relevance for a more nuanced understanding of the history of the movement for human rights. By 1968 the Civil Rights movement had changed, and so had its music. With the Black Power thrust in SNCC under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael surging toward the forefront and the increasingly violent riots in major cities, the Civil Rights Movement fragmented. In the absence of its charismatic spokesman following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference continued to function - the Poor People's March did happen - although SCLC's national visibility diminished significantly. In fact, King, Jr. had pointed the way toward the next impetus for change, the Vietnam War, which would become the subsequent wave of social protest with its own musical soundtrack that gathered national attention. But what happened with the spirituals and freedom songs?

Academics like James Cone and others have interrogated music's role in the history of African American people in the United States. Mainline Protestant denominations have published spirituals and freedom songs in their songbooks and hymnals, absorbing the music and its message into the religious life of millions of Americans. Inter-faith gatherings have included spirituals with Jewish folk songs, pointing to their common experience of exile and oppression now forged into mutual support and understanding. Yet, these efforts do not reflect what more can be learned.

The potential to expand on this work for future study are rich and diverse. Most pressing is the question: what do the spirituals and freedom songs now mean to the people who were the Civil Rights movement from 1955-1968? Many of their voices are silent now. The numbers who are still alive are decreasing daily. Interviews with Civil

Rights activists today may shed light on the long term effects of the egalitarian resonance they experienced as they walked, sat, and rode for universal human rights. In addition, more study should include a further investigation of the women who led the movement and who continue to be actively involved in creating the "beloved community" that was the Civil Rights Movement's goal.

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