

The Third Culture—A Conversation About Truth And Reconciliation: An African Americanist’s Reflection On The “Two Cultures” Debate In Post-Modern Society

Josephine R.B. Wright, Professor of Music and The Josephine Lincoln Morris Professor of Black Studies, and Chair, Department of Africana Studies, The College of Wooster

Abstract

C. P. Snow launched the "Two Cultures" debate in 1959 during the Cold War era. While lamenting a widening gulf in communication between scientists and literary theorists, he championed the supremacy of scientific inquiry over canonical Western European literary traditions of his day. Globalization has forced many academics in the United States to (re)think how they prepare students today for leadership in a world overwhelmingly populated by peoples of non-European ancestry. At stake in this debate is the political contention over culture--specifically, whose culture is more valued than others and whose culture will be privileged in contemporary society. Such a topic should command greater attention within the academy, if we as educators hope to promote better understanding by students of diverse peoples and cultures around the world.

One marker of globalization has been the widespread exportation of African-American music from the United States, a phenomenon documented as early as the antebellum period. Most black American musical traditions before 1960 evolved historically within a defined social-political framework of racial oppression, and any attempt to isolate the music from these realities obfuscates its connection to a collective history that all Americans at some level share. (Re)examination and "interrogation" of accessible historical documents (often selectively suppressed in standard American textbooks) help promote a "Third Culture." Such inquiry lays bare the irony/ contradiction of excluding widely exported repertoires of music, arguably the principal representations of what is uniquely "American," from Western canonical traditions. This paper examines from such historical perspective two of black America's gifts to the world: the Negro spiritual and the blues.

Introduction

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¹Richard Crawford, *A History of America's Musical Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 424-27.

² C.P. Snow coined the term "Third Culture" in the revised 2d ed. of *Two Cultures* (1963), as did John Brockman in *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), to describe a small group of modern scientists and literary theorists who attempted to bridge the gulf in communication between each other in the late twentieth century. By appropriating this term, Snow and Brockman continued, in my opinion, an elitist argument that elevated scientific research and theoretical inquiry to the status of "pure" intellectual endeavors, totally devoid of any possibility that social bias might taint or influence their outcomes.

A much older, third intellectual tradition existed among African-American scholars long before Snow and Brockman--commencing in the eighteenth century with Benjamin Banneker, and continuing in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with Martin Delany, Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B. Du Bois (to name a few). These intellectuals understood from historical perspective that most "scientific" and "theoretical" writing of their day on the Negro emanated from a defined context of European-American hegemony (see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* [New York: W.W. Norton, 1977]), and they challenged it whenever possible.

Modern audiences, particularly young people, vaguely associate Negro spirituals with songs of the slaves and the blues with folk ballads created by impoverished blacks in the Jim Crow South. Few grasp, however, the social histories and conditions under which each genre evolved or the deeper, intrinsic meanings these songs held for their creators. As oral traditions, Negro spirituals and the blues mirrored the lives and immediate concerns of common black folk in the United States³— spirituals reflecting their antebellum experiences of slavery and the blues their post-Civil War experiences as emancipated men and women adjusting to freedom in an increasingly hostile and racially-divided America.⁴

Due to the broad scope of this topic, as well as time limitations, my paper examines selected primary sources that shed light on the historical origins of the Negro spiritual and the blues. It explores the contexts in which these repertoires evolved as well as the meanings of these songs for the untutored folk who created them--individuals rendered voiceless and seemingly irrelevant in C.P. Snow's "Two Cultures" debate.

Negro Spirituals

Although authenticity of Negro spirituals as a genuine genre of slave music should seem self-evident (at least it was for numerous northern European-American missionaries and Union Army soldiers who first heard them in the South during the American Civil War),⁵ lingering controversy over slave authorship of the spirituals has

³Anthropologist Franz Boas (1848-1942) introduced the theory of "folklore as a mirror of culture" in his article "On Certain Songs of the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 1 (April-June 1888): 49-64.

⁴See James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁵ Editors William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison published the first anthology containing Negro spirituals, entitled *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson,

muddled slave song scholarship since the Fisk University Jubilee Singers first unveiled them to world audiences in the 1870s.⁶ Among notable critics who have expressed skepticism were Richard Wallaschek, who summarily dismissed them as crude imitations of European hymns that slaves adopted for their own use;⁷ George Pullen Jackson, who relied upon extensive analyses of texts and melodies to demonstrate similarities between slave spirituals and camp-meeting revival hymns sung by rural white southerners;⁸ and most recently Ronald Radano, who focused upon gaps in the historical record of African-American music before 1750 to advance an interpretative theory that Negro spirituals evolved “within a sociodiscursive complex in which Europeans, Africans, and heterodox Euro-African populations engaged and interacted.”⁹ Such hybridity theories,

1867). This collection is available as an e-text in the University of North Carolina’s digital collection, “Documenting the American South.”

⁶The Jubilee Singers of Fisk University (founded 1866 at Nashville, Tennessee) began performing locally in 1867. In 1871 they expanded their concertizing nationally, and by 1872 they embarked on their first concert tour of Europe, introducing slave spirituals to world audiences for the first time (Eileen Southern, Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982], 132-33).

An excellent summary and analysis of this controversy appears in African American Music: An Introduction, eds. Mellonnee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11-12. Burnim and Maultsby explain that scholars who have questioned slave authenticity based their arguments upon transcriptions of spirituals that amount to nothing more than skeletal outlines of the texts and music of these songs. Ignoring the importance of improvisation in black oral tradition, these scholars reached conclusions inherently flawed due to reliance upon “minimalist musical sketches” (12).

⁷ Primitive Music: An Inquiry into the Origin and Development of Music, Songs, Instruments, Dances, and Pantomimes of Savage Races (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893, 60; cited by Henry E. Krehbiel, Afro-American Folksongs 4th ed. (New York: G. Schirmer, 1914), 1, and by Cone, Spirituals and the Blues, 10.

⁸ White and Negro Spirituals: Their Life Span and Kinship. Tracing 200 Years of Untrammled Song Making and Singing among Our Country Folk (New York: J.J. Austin, 1944).

⁹ Ronald Radano, Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 95. Here Radano resurrects arguments set forth in the mid-twentieth century by American historians Ulrich B. Phillips, Stanley M. Elkins, and Richard Hofstadter, who advanced the theory (without conclusive evidence) that Europeans discouraged African cultural retentions among slaves throughout the eighteenth century to such an extent that none survived. Radano further suggests that scholars take “the missing record” of primary sources for African-American music in North American prior to 1750 literally and assume that no Africanisms were retained in colonial American slave culture (58-59).

Continuation of such interpretative theories about traditional African-American culture well into the twenty-first century ignores pioneering research that has taken place in this field. Consult, for example, Joseph E. Holloway, ed., Africanisms in American Culture

particularly those that assume a white-to-black transmission, dehumanize American slaves once again, this time denying them even autonomy over creation of their own expressive culture.¹⁰

From all accounts, only a relatively small number of blacks were converted to Christianity at any given time during their enslavement in North America. As early as 1680, for example, Anglican missionary Morgan Godwyn, a graduate of Christ Church (Oxford, 1664), reported that many slaves in colonial Virginia clung to African religious practices and beliefs, despite missionary efforts to convert them.¹¹ Similar observations resonated about African slaves singing, dancing, and drumming during the 1739 Stono Rebellion, the first major slave uprising in colonial South Carolina.¹² Approximately a century later, the Rev. Dr. Charles Colcock Jones, a nationally renown Presbyterian cleric, also reported that a small percentage of slaves participated in Christian worship.¹³

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, comps., African American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600s-1920: An Annotated Bibliography of Literature, Collections, and Artworks (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990); and Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, Images: Iconography of Music in African-American Culture, 1779s-1920s (New York: Garland Publ., 2000).

¹⁰ “Expressive culture” is defined here as oral traditions in the black performing arts—e.g., music, dance, story telling, folk drama, religious rituals and folk sermons (see Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, comps., African American Traditions, xxi; and Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, Images, xvii).

¹¹ Godwyn served as a missionary to slaves in Virginia from 1666-1670, then return to Great Britain, where he published Negro’s [sic] and Indian’s Advocate for Their Admission into the Church (1680; reprinted Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, ,2003).

¹² See letter from James Oglethrope (Savannah, Georgia) to Harman Vereist, 9 October 1739, printed in “Account of the Negroe [sic] Insurrection in Southern Carolina,” The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia . . . , comp. Allen D. Candler, 22, pt. 2 (Atlanta, Ga.: P. Byrd, 1913), 234. Alexander Hewatt likewise commented about the drumming, singing, and dancing of slaves in his 1779 account of the Stono Rebellion, stating: [The slaves] “are to this day as great strangers to Christianity, and as much under the influence of Pagan darkness, idolatry and superstition, as they were at their first arrival from Africa” (An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia, 2 [London: Printed for Alexander Donaldson, 1779]. 72-73, 103; reprinted, Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Co.). Hewatt’s history is available as an e-text in the digital collection, Project Gutenberg.

¹³ See Religious Instruction of the Negroes in United States (Savannah, Ga.: Thomas Purse, 1842), 64 (available as e-text in “Documenting the American South”).

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During the colonial period Christian slaves worshipped in churches along side their masters, segregated for the most part in the gallery. Some participated in clandestine nocturnal prayer meetings in defiance of their masters, as noted during the mid-1770s by John Marrant, a free-black.¹⁴ When slave plantation churches emerged ca. 1780, some (where permitted) sought solace in these congregations, which were presided over by slave preachers under supervision of white clergy or deacons.¹⁵ At formal services, they sang the Protestant hymns and psalms of their masters. In private devotionals, with no whites present, they sang religious songs of their own composition, variously called hymns, plantation songs, “sperichils,”¹⁶ sorrow songs,¹⁷ or hallelujah songs.¹⁸

Some slave holders in the rural South forbade slaves from participating in Christian worship and even discouraged them from singing mournful songs, such as dirges or laments, which might impede the efficiency of their work. British actress Frances Anne Kemble documented that practice, for example, in her travel narrative of life on St. Simons and Butler Islands, Georgia, during 1838-39:

Many of the masters and overseers prohibit melancholy
tunes or words, and encourage nothing but cheerful

¹⁴See Narrative of the Lord's Dealings with John Marrant, A Black (now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia), Born in New-York, in North America (London: R. Hawes, 1785), 32-33. During the mid-1770s, Marrant (1755-1791) worked under contract as a carpenter on a plantation near Charleston, South Carolina. He described in his Narrative a secret night prayer meeting of slaves near Charleston that the slave master and his agents raided: “All they caught, men, women, and children, were strip'd naked and tied, their feet to a stake, their hands to the arm of a tree, and so severely flogged that the blood ran from their backs and sides to the floor, to make them promise they would leave off praying” (quoted by John Saillant, “‘Wipe Away All Tears from Their Eyes’: John Marrant’s Theology in the Black Atlantic, 1785-1808,” in the on-line Journal of Millennial Studies 1, issue 2 (Winter 1999) [www.mille.org/journal.html]).

¹⁵See Milton C. Sernett, ed., African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness 2d ed. (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

¹⁶The editors of Slave Songs of the United States (1867), ii, first introduced this term.

¹⁷See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Sorrow Songs,” in The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 154-64.

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music and senseless words, deprecating the effect of sadder strains upon the slaves, whose peculiar musical sensibility might be expected to make them especially excitable by any songs of a plaintive character . . . having reference to their particular hardships.¹⁹

Detection or suspicion of violating any rules imposed by white authority meant corporal punishment, sometimes death, for the slaves.²⁰

Thus, within this context emerged a distinctive black religious experience among Christian slaves in colonial and antebellum North America. Superimposing African beliefs and practices upon Christian theology of a decidedly Protestant persuasion,²¹ African Americans evolved their own brand of black folk religion, which in turn generated a voluminous body of sacred songs flowing out of oral expression. In the sacred songs they improvised, they recorded through text and music the history of their

¹⁸Rev. Charles Colcock Jones referred to slaves singing “chants, and catches, and hallelujah songs of their own composition” in Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States, 265-66.

¹⁹Frances Anne Kemble, Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1863), 162-63 (available as an e-text in Project Gutenberg). Kemble visited these Sea Island plantations during her marriage to slave holder Pierce Butler (of Philadelphia), who owned them. She further wrote about slave life and culture on the Sea Islands in Records of Later Life (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1882) and Further Records: 1848-1883. A Series of Letters by Frances Anne Kemble, Forming a Sequel to Records of a Girlhood and Records of Later Life (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1890).

²⁰Fugitive slave Moses Grandy (b. ca. 1786?) reported, for example, that slaves were flogged for singing and praying on the plantation where he lived in Camden County, North Carolina. He described one clandestine night prayer meeting conducted by his brother-in-law Isaac, a slave preacher, which the slave owner raided, capturing many slaves who attended, severely beating them, and forcing them to inform on others. Three were shot, two killed, others wounded, and Isaac, for preaching, was “flogged . . . and his back pickled” (see Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave [London: C. Gilpin, 1843], 56-57 (available as an e-text in “Documenting the American South”).

²¹See W.E. B. Du Bois, The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University, Atlanta University Publications, no 3 (1903), 5 (available as an e-text in “Documenting the American South”). See also Holloway, Africanisms in American Culture, 34-118.

captivity and oppression in North America.²² These songs, performed most often in communal settings, reflected a shared group experience of the slaves, rather than the singularly personal experience expressed by solitary blues singers.²³

Negro spirituals may be classified in four distinct categories of sacred slave songs:

1. Praise spirituals sung at private devotionals;
2. Shout spirituals (also called jubilee or hallelujah songs) sung to accompany the Shout (or “Holy Dance”);
3. Freedom songs;
4. Sorrow songs.

Since laws throughout the American South generally prohibited teaching slaves to read or write by 1800,²⁴ slaves derived the major source of theology for their spirituals from fragmented texts of favorite hymns, which they refashioned and improvised into new songs in accordance with black oral tradition. According to the evidence, that probably occurred in the case of praise spirituals and shout spirituals.²⁵ But inspiration and

²²The late Eileen Southern and I identified over 1,100 concordances of texts and music of sacred songs (mostly spirituals) sung by slaves in African American Traditions, 323-38. That list continues to expand as more intensive study of the slave narrative literature ensues. According to Marion Wilson Starling, more than 6,000 extant slave narratives were compiled/ or published in North America and Great Britain between 1703 and 1936-38 (see The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History [Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981], 1).

²³ Cone, Spirituals and the Blues, 99.

²⁴Most southern colonies (and later states) passed laws banning the teaching of slaves to read and write. According to A. Leon Higginbotham, South Carolina introduced the first restrictive law of this type in 1740, followed by Georgia in 1750 (see In the Matter of Color. Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period [New York: Oxford University Press, 1978], 199, 258).

²⁵ John Fanning Watson, an early nineteenth-century historian of regional Pennsylvanian history, criticized dissident black Methodists in Philadelphia for this practice in his monograph, Methodist Error, or Friendly Advice to Those Methodists Who Indulge in Extravagant Religious Emotions and Bodily Exercises (Trenton, N. J.: D. and E. Fenton), 1819, 28-31 (excerpts reprinted by Eileen Southern in Readings in Black

theology for the sorrow songs and freedom songs came from the Africans' bitter experiences with chattel slavery in North America, not from European-American hymnody or psalmody. Both the sorrow songs and freedom songs would later play important roles in African-American social and cultural history in the twentieth century--the sorrow songs serving as important antecedents of the blues, and freedom songs functioning as protest songs of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. Given their close association with the blues, sorrow songs merit closer scrutiny.

The Sorrow Songs.—In 1855 abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), then himself a fugitive slave, described in his narrative a species of slave song “mostly of a plaintive cast . . . that told a tale of grief and sorrow.”²⁶ According to Douglass:

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meanings of those rude, and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle, so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones, loud, long, and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. . . .²⁷

Other African-American narratives report slaves improvising and singing laments and dirges to console themselves in times of despair—e.g., at funerals, while chained in

American Music, 2d ed. [New York: W.W. Norton, 1983], 62-64}. Fugitive slave John Andrew Jackson (b. 1814) also described this practice in his narrative, The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1862), 37-39 (available as an e-text in “Documenting the American South”).

²⁶ My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 98 (available as an e-text in “Documenting the American South”).

coffles en route to the slave market, imprisoned in dungeons at slave markets, or at traumatic farewells before transport to unknown places further South. Such scenes recur throughout several generations of slave narratives, dating from the early 1700s and culminating with the WPA Slave Narrative Collection compiled between 1936-1938.²⁸ Persistence of memory over more than 300 years strongly suggests that an origin for the Negro spiritual might lie within this inter-generational body of slave narratives.

Abolitionist William Wells Brown (1815-1884), a fugitive slave in 1847, described scenes of slaves transported to the New Orleans slave market by a Negro speculator and referred to the songs they sang along the way.²⁹ Similarly, ex-slave Sally Williams (b. ca. 1796) told of her own horrific experience of being sold, imprisoned in a slave pen at Fayetteville, North Carolina, and left to await transport to a new owner in Alabama. When joined briefly in her holding cell by a few slave friends, one improvised the following parting song in minor key:

Sister, far'well, I bid ye adieu,
I'm sorry to leave ye, I lub ye so well;
But now you are going to what I dunno;
When ye get to yer station, pray for poor me.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 99.

²⁸The WPA Narratives are now available on line in digital format and are housed at the Library of Congress. Greater accessibility to them in the late twentieth century facilitated enabled scholars to compare them with earlier published slave narratives. According to Starling, scholars who have examined the WPA collection found similar themes in these oral narratives that were articulated in published slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "sustain[ing] the compelling truth of the earlier slave narratives" (*The Slave Narrative: It's Place in American History*, xi).

²⁹Brown's slave owner, who was actually his white half-brother, contracted him to a Negro speculator for one year, during which time Brown helped the trader transport slaves to the New Orleans slave market (see *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* [Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1847], 51; available as an e-text in "Documenting the American South").

³⁰ Isaac Williams, *Aunt Sally, or, the Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narratyve of the Slave Life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams* (Cincinnati:

Recollections of such inhumane treatment lingered vividly in the minds of ex-slaves interviewed for the WPA Slave Narrative Project long after freedom came. Eliza Williams (of Alabama) recalled for her interviewer a couplet from the plantation song, “The speculator bought my wife and child and carried her clear away.”³¹ Catherine Scales (of North Carolina) told of witnessing a slave mother being sold away from her three children, ages six, eight, and ten. According to Scales:

She sang a song juss fe day tuh hub off. She put
her three children between her knees. She sung:
“Lord, be with us. Remembuh me,
remembuh me, O Lord, remembuh me. . . .”³²

Mournful sorrow songs likewise permeated the air at slave funerals, especially on occasions when slave masters allowed slaves to bury their dead without close scrutiny.

Essex Henry (b. ca. 1853) recounted one of those occasions for his interviewer:

All de way ter de graveyard dey sings “Swing Low, Sweet
Chariot,” “De Promised Lan’,” “De Road ter Jordan,” an’
“Ole Time Religion.” Hit’s a good thing dat none of de
white folkses ain’t went to de funerals case iffen dey had
de . . . [slaves] can’t sing deir hymns. Does you know dat dey

American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1858), 111 (available as an e-text in “Documenting the American South”).

³¹ Library of Congress, “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer’s Project, 1936-1938, Arkansas Narratives,” II, pt. 7, 52 .

³² Ibid., “North Carolina Narratives,” 11, pt. 2, p. 248-49.

warn't no 'ligion 'lowed on dat plantation. . . . We sometime
had prayermeetin' anyhow in de cabins[,] but we'd turn
down de big pot front of de door ter ketch de noise.³³

Sorrow songs also provided slaves outlets for releasing years of pent up anguish and grief. Laura Clark (b. ca. 1859), another ex-slave, reflected upon her life of servitude in the State of Alabama, and added her own trope:

I sets cross de road here from dat church over yonder
and can't go in 'ca'se I'm cripple' and blin', but I heers
um singin':

A motherless chile sees a hard time,

Oh, Lord, he'p her on de road.

Er sister will do de bes' she kin,

Dis is a hard world, Lord, fer a motherless chile.

And I jes' bursts out cryin'. . . .³⁴

The Folk Blues

Clark's spiritual contained lyrics shared by some blues texts. The earliest spiritual with Motherless Child in its title was "O, Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,"

³³ Ibid., Essex Henry, "Ex-Slave Story, North Carolina Narratives" 11, pt. 1, p. 395-96 .

³⁴ Ibid., Laura Clark, "Chillun in Ev'y Grabeyard [sic], Alabama Narratives" 1, 73.

collected during the 1880s³⁵ “Blind” Willie Johnson (ca. 1902-ca.1947) recorded in 1927 the earliest folk blues containing this orphaned-child trope, Motherless Children Have a Hard Time.³⁶ On that disc he articulated in secular setting themes affirmed in Clark’s closely-related spiritual:

Motherless children have a hard time, . .

When mother’s dead.

They’ll not have anywhere to go,

Wanderin’ around from door to door. . . .

Nobody on earth can take your mother’s place,

When mother is dead, Lord³⁷

Unlike the Negro spiritual, enormous lacunae exist in primary documentation of the early history of folk blues. By the time ethnographers took notice, the blues already existed as an established oral tradition in rural black communities throughout the South.³⁸

A few primary resources do survive, however, in scattered, unlikely formats that help us pinpoint a probable date of origin for folk blues between the late 1860s and 1890s.

The earliest clue is artwork by the Swiss artist Frank Buchser (1828-1890), who visited the United States between 1866-1871 and executed several paintings illustrating Reconstruction-era America, including genre scenes of black folk life in Virginia.³⁹ One of Buchser’s Negro genre scenes, the “Guitar Player (1867),” depicted a solitary black

³⁵ See William W. Barton, “Hymns of the Slave and Freedmen,” New Magazine England, new series 19, no. 5 (January 1899): 609-10. Barton, a Congregational minister and relative of Clara Barton, collected this slave song while teaching in Tennessee between 1880-1887.

³⁶ Columbia Records 14323-D (1927).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See Paul Oliver, “Blues Research: Problems and Possibilities,” Journal of Musicology 2, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 377-90.

male playing a flat-top acoustic guitar—perhaps the earliest pictorial record of a prototype for the African-American blues-guitarists.⁴⁰ The flat-top acoustic guitar, the preferred instrument of many early bluesmen, had just begun gaining popularity in the United States around the mid-1800s, and Buchser's "Guitar Player (1867)" captured on canvas evidence of the instrument's use in African-American oral tradition by the late 1860s.⁴¹

Greek-born Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), the American writer, generated another clue to the blues' origin in the 1870s, while working as a reporter in Cincinnati between 1874 and 1877. During these years he wrote a series of several short stories about black folk life and culture along the Ohio River for the local press.⁴² He included in one fictional story, "Levee Life," lyrics of a black roustabout song called Limber Jim, Shiloh, which contained multiple verses, including one that would survive (with slight modifications) in folk blues tradition well into the twentieth century:

Some folks says that a rebel can't steal,
I found twenty in my corn-fiel',
Sich pullin' of shucks an' tearin' of corn!—
Nebber saw the like since I was born. . . .⁴³

³⁹Rudolph P. Byrd, Frank Buchser: A Swiss Artist in America, 1866-1871 (Athens: University of Georgia Museum, 1996).

⁴⁰Southern-Wright, Images, 165. Buchser's painting is reproduced in Images, 259, fig 251.

⁴¹At least one African-American slave narrative reported use of the guitar by slaves in antebellum Louisiana (see Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, Mary Reynolds, Ex-Slave Stories, Texas Narratives," 16, pt. 3, 240). Reynolds is cited by David Rubin in his article "Guitar," Encyclopedia of the Blues, ed. Edward Komara (New York: Routledge, 2006), 385.

⁴²These stories were reprinted in An American Miscellany, ed. Albert Mordell (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1924) and in Lafcadio Hearn, Children of the Levee, ed. O.W. Frost ([Lexington]: University of Kentucky Press, 1957).

⁴³First published in the Cincinnati Commercial, 17 March 1876.

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In 1898, another reporter, Julian Ralph (1853-1903), included an expanded and slightly modified version of those lyrics in a serialized novel he wrote for Harper's New Monthly Magazine, assigning the song to a black character, in this instance the chamber maid:⁴⁴

Some folks say dat a preacher can't lie,
Oh, I's a seeking,
One of 'em told me he heard a angel fly,
Oh, I's a-seekin',
Said he was lookin' for him in my bag of meal:
The good Lord knows the preacher won't steal,
Seekin' de promuss land.

Folks do say dat a preacher won't steal,
Oh, I's a-seekin',
But I cotched one of 'em in my cornfiel',
Oh, I's a-seekin',
He said he was a-prayin' whar no one was nigh:
The good Lord knows dat a preacher won't lie,
Seekin' de promuss land.

⁴⁴See Julian Ralph, "An Angel in a Web: Chapter XII—Through a Break in a Web," Harper's New Monthly Magazine 97, no. 582 (November 1898): 952. Ralph had traveled throughout the southern United States during the 1890s and apparently had some contact with blacks, based upon three earlier travel memoirs he published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine. In "The Old Way to Dixie," Harper's New Monthly Magazine 86, no. 512 (January 1893), [165]-84, he described scenes along the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri, to New Orleans, including references to the songs of black roustabouts and music of local black musicians encountered along the way. William T. Smedley (1858-1920), who illustrated this article, supplied a pen and ink sketch of an African-American guitarist for the title page [165].

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Three years later, during 1901-1902, archeologist Charles Peabody (1867-1939) collected songs of African-American workmen from Clarksdale, Mississippi, who helped excavate local Native American burial mounds. He later published specimens of these songs in an article, entitled “Notes on Negro Music,” which blues historians now consider the earliest compilation of the blues.⁴⁵ One song transcribed by Peabody in that article elaborated on the preacher-theft theme published a few years earlier by Julian Ralph:

Some folks say preachers won't steal;
But I found two in my cornfield,
One with a shovel and t' other with a hoe,
A-diggin' up my taters row by row.⁴⁶

Actual recording of preacher-theft blues songs commenced in 1931 with Joe McCoy's Preachers Blues, issued in Chicago, Illinois, by Vocalian records:⁴⁷

Some folks say: a preacher won't steal
I caught three: in my cornfield
One had a yellow: one had a brown
Now some folks say: that a preacher won't steal. . . .

⁴⁵See Charles Peabody, “Notes on Negro Music,” Journal of American Folk-Lore 16, no. 62 (July 1903): 148-52 (reprinted, The Black Perspective in Music 4, special issue, no. 2 [July 1976]: 133-37); see also Robert Gordon, Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).

⁴⁶Charles Peabody, “Notes on Negro Music,” 149. Another variant of this song, “Some folks say a nigro [sic] wont steal,” was also collected from blacks in Mississippi during 1909 (see E[ber] C[arl] Perrow, “Songs and Rhymes from the South, Part III,” Journal of American Folk-lore 28, no. 108 [April-June 1913]: 135).

⁴⁷Text transcribed by Michael Taft, Blues Lyric Poetry (New York: Garland Publ., 1983), 181.

One year later, Jab Jones (pseudonym “Poor Jab”) recorded another version of a preacher-theft blues, Come Along Little Children (“Now some folks say: a preacher won’t steal”), in 1932 for Champion records⁴⁸

Thus, circumstantial evidence suggests that the folk blues evolved in the rural South around the Reconstruction era, or shortly thereafter. Those formative years overlapped a period in American history when freedmen experienced neo-forms of slavery meted out by former slave holders who sought to deny them rights guaranteed by the Thirteenth and Fourteen Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Early blues musicians were transient, largely illiterate, singers and guitarists who traveled about the rural South and Southeast after the Civil War. They plied their skills on street corners, in bars, railroad stations, honky-tonk cafes, and brothels; performed at dances or other social venues; played in logging and mining camps; or sang in fields or on the levees. Although most remained anonymous, a few emerged from the masses with recollections of when they first heard the blues as a distinct musical form. Jazz trumpeter Willie “Bunk” Johnson (ca. 1889-1949) alleged, for example, that he heard the blues around 1895-96 while performing in New Orleans dance bands.⁴⁹ Singer “Ma” Rainey (1886-1939) claimed she heard the blues for the first time in 1902 while touring with a

⁴⁸Text transcribed by Michael Taft, Talking to Myself: Blues Lyrics, 1921-1942 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 483.

⁴⁹Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds., Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It (New York: Dover Publ., 1955), 7-8, 36.

Barry Kernfeld casts doubt on the validity of this claim due to numerous inconsistencies Johnson gave for his date of birth. Scholars now believe Johnson was born in 1889 (see The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994], 617).

vaudeville company in Missouri;⁵⁰ and W. C. Handy (1873-1958) wrote that he first encountered the blues in 1903 while directing a band at Clarksdale, Mississippi.⁵¹

Early folk blues scholarship between ca. 1903-1917 consisted mainly of collecting song texts and music, along with descriptive commentary about the contexts in which the songs were sung.⁵² Few oral narratives or biographies of early blues men and women were attempted in those formative years. The recording history of folk blues did not commence until 1924 with Daddy Stovepipe's Sundown Blues⁵³ and Papa" Charlie Jackson's Lawdy Lawdy Blues.⁵⁴ Further, recognition of the blues as a serious field of scholarly inquiry did not begin in earnest until the late 1950s and 60s, when most of the early folk blues pioneers were dead.

Thus, for almost a century the folk blues functioned as secular laments of rural southern blacks, expressing largely in isolation themes of woe over hard times, hopelessness, unrequited love, poverty, racial discrimination, even dissatisfaction with living on the fringes of American society.⁵⁵ In that sense, they continued traditions of the sorrow songs, functioning in modern times as "secular spirituals" (to appropriate James

⁵⁰ Paul Oliver, Story of the Blues (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997, 1969), 68.

⁵¹ Abbe Niles, "The Story of the Blues," in Blues: An Anthology, Complete Words and Music of 53 Great Songs, ed. W.C. Handy, foreword to 1949 ed. (1949, reprinted New York: Collier Books, 1979), 24-25.

⁵² In addition to Charles Peabody (see above n. 45), other early blues collectors included Howard W. Odum, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negro: Parts 1-2," Journal of American Folk-Lore 24 (July-September, October-December 1911): 255-93. 351-96 (revised and reissued in collaboration with Guy B. Johnson as Negro Workaday Songs [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1926]); and John Avery Lomax, "Self-Pity in Negro Folk-Songs," Nation 105 (9 August 1917): 141-51.

⁵³ Gennett records 5459; see Jeff Todd Titon, Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis 2d ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 301, n. 47.

⁵⁴ Paramount records 12219, recorded August 1924.

⁵⁵ See Sterling A. Brown, "The Blues," in Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes, eds. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (New York: Dryden Press, 1941), 426; Cone, Spiritual and the Blues, 97; and LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1963), 142.

Cone's term) that allowed blues singers to soliloquize "through ritual, pattern, and form" personal life experiences in all their numerous manifestations.⁵⁶

Three interviews conducted by Paul Oliver ca. 1960 underscored the personal connections folk blues singers made between their personal lives and the lyrics they sang. Sam Pierce, a Texan, related to Oliver, for example, his first encounter with racial violence in the Jim Crow South:

"They Burned Him."--When I was a boy I lived in Texas, and it was pretty rugged. I'll never forget the first song I heard to remember. A man had been lynched near my home in a town called Robinson, Texas. . . . [T]hey made a parody of this song[,] and the words were something like this:

I never have, and I never will
Pick no more cotton in Robinsonville,
Tell me how long will I have to wait,
Can I get you now or must I hesitate?⁵⁷

Singer-guitarist Willie B. Thomas,⁵⁸ from Louisiana, recalled the great Depression and explained how widespread unemployment among African-American men affected their relationships with black women in the 1930s:

You see, a woman could get a job . . . , but a man
couldn't hardly get it. Want a little money, had to get it

⁵⁶ Cone, *Story of the Blues*, 105.

⁵⁷ Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues* (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), 34-35.

from her. . . . And it gave a man the blues: he's been the boss all the time and now the Depression come and she's washin' at white folk's yard. And she's cooking there[,] and she can get a little money[;] but she's feedin' him, . . . So if he wants a little money to go out to gamble, or play the fortune wheel, nachually [sic] he says[:] 'I'm broke, and I ain't got a dime.' And she says, 'Well you ought to have somthin'—I give you two bits last week!'"

Mamma, why do you treat your daddy mean" (three times)

You the meanes' woman I most ever seen. . . .⁵⁹

Finally, Muddy Waters (Mckinley Morganfield, 1915-1980) described how the blues helped cushion the blows of his impoverished childhood in the Mississippi Delta:

Rolling Fork, Mississippi, was where I was born at. . . .

My daddy was a farmer . . . We had a li'l—oh, two-room shack

. . . . Mamma died when I was 'bout three[,] and my grandmammy

carr'd me up to Clarksdale . . . where I was raised. I went to school[,]

but they didn't give you too much schoolin' because just as soon as

you was big enough you get to workin' in the fields. . . . Every man

would be hollerin[,] . . . course I'd holler too. You might call them blues[,]

but they was just made-up things. . . . I can't remember much of what I

⁵⁸ The late Harry Oster discovered Willie Brown in Louisiana in 1959 and produced an album featuring him, entitled Butch Cage and Willie B. Thomas: Old Time Black Southern String Band Music, Arhoolie Productions, Inc., CD 9045.

was singin' . . . 'ceptin I do remember I was always singin',
[“]I cain't [sic] be satisfied, I be all troubled in mind.[“] Seems to me
like I was always singin' that, because I was always singin' jest the
way I felt, and maybe I didn't exactly know it, but I jest didn't like
the way things were down there—in Mississippi.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Why then dredge up such a historical past and revisit such horrific events associated with the origins of Negro spirituals, those historical songs created by American slaves more than 200 years ago, and the blues, those articulated, half-utterances improvised by rural southern blacks at least a century ago? What room is there in Snow's "Two Cultures" discourse for these two legacies, arguably the most celebrated repertoires of indigenous folk music created in North America and heard all around the world today? For more than a century, these songs have hovered like sentinels, both at home and abroad, keeping alive memories of a historical past that many Americans prefer to forget. Despite major progress made in the United States over the last fifty years in eliminating vestiges of de jure segregation and racism, black and white Americans continue to live today generally in racially divided worlds. How can that racial divide be bridged? How can a people move forward without recognizing and acknowledging a historical past collectively shared by all, no matter how painful and uncomfortable it might be? Truthfulness and honesty about the past should ideally allow room for reconciliation with the past, encourage humility among major power brokers on the present world stage, and promote respect by them for diverse peoples and cultures in

⁵⁹ Oliver, Conversation with the Blues, 51.

the globally dependent world we now live in. Therein lies the crux of my argument for expansion of this discourse to embrace a “Third Culture” debate.

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⁶⁰ Ibid., 29-30.

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