


Spatial Dialectics: Intimations of Freedom in Antebellum Slave Song

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how music provided the U.S. plantation-slaves with a space in which the hegemony of the White ruling class could be subverted, adapted, and resisted. Consistent with the beliefs of slave religion, which saw the material and the spiritual as part of an intrinsic unity, I identify two tendencies in slave song: freedom as material practice and freedom as the “aesthetic imagination.” I argue that the tensions between these two spheres provided a crucial intimation of a life without slavery.

Keywords

music and resistance, intimations of freedom, spatial dialectics, slave song, spirituals, slavery

Introduction

Following George P. Rawick’s 1968 article on “The Historical Roots of Black Liberation,” academic studies on the antebellum south have developed a more nuanced outlook on slave psychology. “Unless the slave is simultaneously Sambo and revolutionary,” Rawick (2010) writes, “[h]e can only be a wooden man, a theoretical abstraction” (pp. 31-32). Within the liberal academy, this dia*lectical understanding of slave consciousness effectively

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broke the back of the simplistic Sambo-Revolutionary dichotomy, giving way to a plethora of treatises that examine the ways that slaves mediated the tension between passivity and insurrection (see Blassingame, 1979; Genovese, 1974; Levine, 1977; Stuckey, 1987). However, studies that examine the role played by music in articulating the concept of freedom have frequently reproduced this problematic binary. With those who see slave song as teaching freedom in the afterlife in one camp, and those who see it as a material call to arms in the other, this dichotomy ill befits Rawick's multifaceted analysis.

While much has been written, which professes to understand the central role of slave religion in maintaining resistance on the plantation, few have put forward a sociological analysis of music that takes these beliefs seriously. One of the defining characteristics of slave religion was the way in which it conceived of the spiritual and the material as part of an indivisible unity (Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987; Levine, 1977; Stuckey, 1987). In this article, I argue that the symbiotic relationship between these two spheres directly informed the slave's understanding of freedom, so that the experience and the imagination of freedom both enabled and presupposed one another. Therefore, consistent with the beliefs of slave religion, I identify two tendencies in slave song: freedom as material practice and freedom as the "aesthetic imagination" (Marcuse, 1955/1998, p. 178). I argue that the tensions between these two spheres provided a crucial intimation of a life without slavery.

This article has two main sections. The first section, "Slavery Without Submission: Spatial Dialectics," gives an account of the brutal conditions rural slaves were forced to endure and the ways that these conditions were subverted and resisted. After examining some of the key literature on slave resistance, in particular, those works built upon the slave narratives of the 1930s Federal Writer's Project (Blassingame, 1979; Genovese, 1974; Rawick, 1972a; Stuckey, 1987), the role played by the spiritual and the material in mediating this struggle is considered. In articulating the conflicted forces at work on the plantation, I draw upon Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. By utilizing the concept of "space," I articulate the simultaneously physical and psychological dimensions of power and resistance. In the second section, "Slave Music," which is the most substantial section of the article, I address the music itself. First, I examine ways in which double-meanings (metonymy) in slave songs provided the oppressed with the experiential foundations of a life beyond slavery. Through the collective sharing of political frustration in song, slaves were able to carve out a sense of material freedom, albeit limited. I then consider the articulation of the non-conceptual in slave song and the way that this developed what Marcuse (1979) has referred to as the "rebellious subjectivity" (p. 7). Consciousness of emancipation is

thus treated as the dialectical counterpart to experiential freedom.¹ Finally, I provide an examination of the use of slave song in urban settings. Following the work of Richard C. Wade (1964), I argue that the relative freedom of urban life meant that insurrectionary ideas could be more easily developed into political action. In the antebellum urban South, this problem was “ameliorated” by prohibiting the singing of spirituals and the eventual retraction of slave labor from cities.

One of the central issues I foreground in this article is the relationship between music and freedom—more specifically, how music came to provide intimations of freedom for slaves living in the United States. While such a study must, I believe, be rooted, first of all, in an empirical science such as sociology, I also use a philosophical-interpretive approach in order to penetrate the more elusive political content of the music. For the purposes of this analysis, I consider the creative benefits of such a speculative approach to outweigh the possible drawbacks. This article, therefore, not only provides a positive (empirical) sociology of music and resistance but also a critical theory of music and resistance. In particular, I build upon the insights of Paul Gilroy (1993) and Herbert Marcuse (1979) in relation to the development of an emancipatory aesthetic.

Slavery Without Submission: Spatial Dialectics

In this section, I consider the tension between oppression and resistance on the plantation. I begin by looking at the measures taken by plantation owners to exercise control over slaves and how the slave’s unitary conception of the material and the spiritual provided the tools to resist this oppression. After considering some of the literature on this topic, I conclude by drawing upon the work of the French critical theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991), in particular, on the “dialectics of space” (Singleton, 2001). In doing this, I aim to express an understanding of resistance that is consistent with the beliefs of slave religion, thus providing an empirical grounding for the study of music and resistance that follows in the section “Slave Music.”

Contrary to popular belief, the practice of racial segregation in the south had little purchase prior to the Civil War.² Indeed, Woodward (1974) argues that for a social structure built on involuntary labor, where human beings could be bought or sold as objects of exchange, it was necessary to maintain a “distasteful” level of intimacy between the races (p. 12). For Rawick (1972a), the logic of this racial coexistence can be located in the semi-feudal relations of production peculiar to the South:

Slavery was itself a form of social control over the Black population and, consequently, Southern racism could in fact afford to be “softer” than Northern

racism. Accordingly, Southern whites had . . . much more daily social contact with blacks than did . . . Northern whites. (p. 140)

In the South, a rigid hierarchy was built into the structure of society and did not need enforcement through segregation.

Slave owners were intensely wary of the threat of slave rebellion, despite its relative rarity (Rucker, 2006). The memory of Denmark Vesey's foiled 1822 revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, and the insurrection led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, 1831, did not sit comfortably in the minds of the planter class. Thus, the southern oligarchs went to considerable lengths to destroy traditional centers of community and to inhibit the development of a racial/class consciousness among the slaves. Even that most sacred bond between parent and child came under attack. In his moving autobiography, Frederick Douglass describes seeing his mother only 4 or 5 times in his life after being separated from her as an infant—a common custom in the antebellum South. Each of these reunions was stolen under the cover of darkness, when his mother would brave the 12-mile hike to see her son, and each reunion would end with Douglass (1845/2003) waking to find his mother gone, having returned to work. Separated from her parents by some 42 miles, the story of ex-slave Silvia Chisolm is even bleaker: "I been eight year old when dey took me. Took me from me mother an' father here on de Pipe Creek place down to Black Swamp . . . I never see my mother or my father anymore" (Rawick, 1972b, p. 199). The distances separating each plantation, coupled with a working week so structured as to permit only the most modest of journeys, greatly facilitated the destruction of familial bonds and obstructed the formation of inter-plantation community. For many, the plantation was quite literally their universe. Insurrection could, therefore, be controlled through the rational management of time and space.

Slavery derived much of its immense hegemonic power precisely through its socially integrative qualities—a fact that also gave credence to the bizarre myth of racial harmony in the South (propagated mainly by southern landowners). However, rather than surrendering passively to the controls of the White plantations owners, slaves sought to subvert these regulatory mechanisms. Although earlier analyses of slavery tended to rely heavily upon the infantilizing accounts of southern slave holders, the often prejudiced transcriptions of folk collectors, or the very exceptional accounts of escaped slaves, since the late 1960s and early 1970s, slave testimonies have become crucially important for academic studies hoping to understand the nature of slave resistance. One of the earliest of these studies was Rawick's critical review of the slave narratives collected by the 1930s Federal Writers' Project, *From Sundown to Sunup*, in which he considers the role played by "daily

resistance” on the plantation—the small but often very effective ways in which slaves exercised power. For Rawick (1972a), slaves negotiated the tension between a fear of submission and a fear of death: Having never known the loss of humanity that comes through submission, he argues, the slave could never choose to resist; without the fear of violent suppression, the slave could not become passive. In his 1972 book, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, John Blassingame is similarly critical of the “infantilization thesis.” Unlike Rawick, however, Blassingame (1979) argues that the Sambo existed primarily in the minds of Whites—on the one hand, to justify White paternalism, and on the other, to dispel the fear that they felt toward slaves: “Like a man whistling in the dark to bolster his courage, the white man *had* to portray the slave as Sambo” (p. 230).

Published in 1974, Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* also places “the dialectic of accommodation and resistance” at the center of his study. However, while Rawick stresses the very human fear that underpinned this tension, Genovese (1974) highlights the way that slaves exploited this tension for their own gain, defining paternalism on their own terms and, therefore, rejecting the submission of will that slave society presupposed. Thus, for Genovese, “the slaves transformed their acquiescence in paternalism into a rejection of slavery itself” (p. 658). Indeed, the influence of this school of thinking has been long-lasting, with Sterling Stuckey’s (1987) study, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, also focusing on the ways that slaves used Christianity and White cultural practices as a façade—a mask worn to conceal the African face of their beliefs (also see Jones, 1999; Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987; Levine, 1977; Rucker, 2006).

Informing each of these studies is a revisionist interpretation of history that considers slaves as complex and intentional human beings.³ By accepting that slaves exercised a degree of personal autonomy in the direction of their own lives, the aforementioned literature reorients the discussion on slave culture from narratives of degradation and impoverishment to those of subversion and resistance. Slave culture thus provides the tools for its own transcendence.

In conceptualizing music as a form of resistance, studies have frequently drawn attention to its symbiotic relationship with religion and everyday life. For slaves, religious rituals were not confined to the walls of the church nor was the dominant function of art its existence as a commodity or as source of aesthetic pleasure. Throughout slavery, art expressed the ideals of religion, religion was rooted firmly in the practices of everyday existence, and life itself was inseparable from art. Indeed, Francis Bebey (1975) writes that “the objective of African music is . . . to translate everyday experiences into living

sound . . . to depict life, nature, or the supernatural” (p. 115). This integrated experience of music, religion, and life stood in contrast to the comparatively atomistic experience of the White masters—religion in the church, music by musicians, art by artists, and so on. Consequently, while the official church could be colonized, the less formal aspects of spirituality (such as could be found in music) could not. Indeed, for Stuckey (1987), “this quality of African religion, its uniting of seeming opposites, was perhaps the principle reason it was considered savage by whites” but also the reason that “opposition to African religion . . . was limited in effectiveness” (p. 24).

In addition to providing a means of resistance, the “uniting of seeming opposites” in slave culture also directly informed the slave’s conception of freedom—a fact that has too often been overlooked in studies of slave song. Although music has been correctly identified as a call to freedom for slaves, the ensuing debate has frequently been dichotomized between those who underline the material and those who emphasize the spiritual basis of this salvation. However, deriving a concept of freedom directly out of slave religion would seem to indicate a view of emancipation that deals with the spiritual and the material as part of a unity, and not, as much of the literature implicitly suggests, in terms of an opposition. As Lawrence-McIntyre (1987) states,

Africans [did] not suffer from the European tendency to dichotomize reality . . . A balance of wholeness and complexity in the African ethos encompasses the both, and not the either/or perspective in the Puritan Manichaeism that prevailed to a great extent during the antebellum period. (p. 393)⁴

In examining music as a form of resistance, I find Lefebvre’s (1991) work on *The Production of Space* illuminating, particularly in terms of what has been called the “dialectics of space.” According to Lefebvre, the manipulation of space, in its “perceived” (“le perçu”) and “conceived” (“le conçu”) forms, provides a vital tool in creating and maintaining social domination: “(social) space,” he writes,

is a (social) product . . . the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action . . . in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26)

However, it was Lefebvre’s (1991) contention that a third category, the “lived space” (“le vécu”) of everyday life, could be used both to transcend and refigure the balance of the former: “the violence of power is answered by the violence of subversion” (p. 23).

As well as clarifying the ways in which social control is always contested, I find that, as a concept, “space” is better able to transcend the problematic binary between the material and the spiritual, and thus puts us in a better position to articulate the forms of resistance specific to slave culture. In the sense that I use it, to control “space” is as much about spiritual forms of domination as it is about the physical exercise of power. Thus, in the following section, I examine two concepts of freedom in slave song, one material and one spiritual. It is in the tensions between these spaces that slaves were able to elaborate an existence that transcended the horrors of slavery.

Slave Music

Freedom as material practice. The music of rural slave culture was as diverse and contradictory as the experience of slavery itself. Lawrence Levine (1977) writes that “there were songs of in-group and out-group satire, songs of nostalgia, nonsense songs, children’s songs, lullabies, songs of play and work and love” (p. 15). Early slave songs were frequently marked by explicit anger at their situation, but over the years, slaves were forced to abandon their native tongues and thus develop new strategies for sustaining resistance. Double-meanings played a central role in much slave music, providing a means by which slaves could criticize their social “superiors” without fear of reproach (Floyd, 1995, p. 55).⁵

Although satire was a valuable tool for concealing meaning, frustration with the social hierarchy sometimes found more direct expression behind the back of the master, as a South Carolinian ex-slave, Elijah Green, recalls singing

Master gone away

But darkies stay at home,

The year of jubilee is come

An’ freedom will begun. (Rawick, 1972b, p. 197)

Social criticism could also take a more playful tone. In one case, a White slave owner named Master Clarence, after asking permission to observe a “juber dance,” found himself the subject of the singer’s—a young girl named Clotilda—vocal exhortations:

Marser Clarry, ’pon er time,

Want ter hear Clotildy rhyme;

One good turn disserb unnudder,

Lemme see him dance de Juber. (Hungerford, 1859, p. 198)

Although by many standards, these song-texts may appear tame, Levine (1977) writes that

to state that black song constituted a form of black protest and resistance does not mean that it necessarily led to or even called for any tangible and specific actions, but rather that it served as a mechanism by which Negroes could be relatively candid in a society that rarely accorded them that privilege. (p. 240)

In a society that forcibly repressed even the most modest acts of disobedience, the construction of a social space in which discontent could be articulated, or the social hierarchy blurred, was no small achievement.

Of all slave songs, the spiritual was undoubtedly the most common. According to Douglass (1881),

they told a tale of woe . . . they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed 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. (p. 26)

Some years later, Du Bois (1905) was to echo this sentiment, writing that “they are 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” (p. 253). Many writers have remarked on the transcendent qualities of slave song, drawing attention to the symbiotic relationship between the spiritual and religion.

The central role played by religion in constructing a forum for social criticism is generally accepted even among its most ardent critics. Radical Black journalist, Robert L. Allen (1970), writes that the church “performed an essential function in maintaining social cohesion in black communities through decades of travail and suffering” (p. 12). Ellis Cashmore (1997) goes a step further in defining this freedom against the severe restrictions endured on the plantation: “Religion,” he observes, “was one of the few areas available in which blacks could unite and express themselves: its uniqueness lay in its supplication to Christian deities while abjuring orthodox Christian constraint” (p. 24). There is, as Cashmore suggests, a material dimension to the ecclesiastical rituals of the church—that within the walls of the church, the

slaves could escape the brutal realities of plantation life and cast off the burden of repression. Leroi Jones (1999) follows this to its logical conclusion, writing that “the Negro church, as it was begun, was the only place where the Negro could release emotions that slavery would naturally tend to curtail. *The Negro went to church literally to be free . . .*” (p. 48, emphasis added).

The relation between the Black preacher and the congregation was of great significance in the history of slavery. Levine (1977) notes the tension between the preacher and the congregation in the Black church, which always threatened “to transform observers into participants.” Rawick (1972a), on the other hand, compares this relationship to that between the elder and the community in a West African village, in which the elder’s relationship with the unknown is “manifested through his relationship with his people” (p. 38). Indeed, such mutuality was not confined exclusively to the walls of the church. The southern Black clergy frequently played a direct role in organizing slave revolt. In Richmond, 1800, a rebellion organized by an enslaved blacksmith and preacher named Gabriel Prosser was narrowly averted after information of the plan was discovered; in 1822, Charleston, South Carolina, Denmark Vesey, closely assisted by a Black preacher, was executed after plans of an insurrection were leaked; and in 1831, Nat Turner, a Virginian slave and self-styled Baptist preacher, suffered the same fate after enacting a slave insurrection that resulted in the death of more than 50 Whites and 100 Blacks.

The association between an independent Black religion and slave uprisings ultimately resulted in the repression of official Black-only churches, with Virginia, in the wake of Nat Turner’s Rebellion, notably passing a law requiring the presence of a White minister in previously all-Black congregations. Increasingly, the pulpit of the “official” Black church came to be dominated by the interests of southern Whites, with Black preachers forced to teach accommodation to racism through stories such as the Curse of Ham.⁶ However, the attempt to control the religious space of the slaves would not prove entirely successful for two reasons. First, White control of official Black churches did not abolish discontent but rather pushed it underground into secret religious meetings—known as “invisible churches.” Laurie Maffly-Kipp (2013) writes that

part church, part psychological refuge, and part organizing point for occasional acts of outright rebellion . . . these meetings provided one of the few ways for enslaved African Americans to express and enact their hopes for a better future.

Second and most significant, “neither the slaves nor their African forbears ever drew modernity’s clear line between the sacred and the secular” (Levine,

1977, p. 30). Stuckey's (1987) account of *Slave Culture* represents, perhaps, the most comprehensive study of the relationship between religion and resistance to date, arguing that Christianity was a mask that enabled slaves to practice their African religion openly.

The suffusion of religious ideals in the activities of everyday life to a great extent immunized Black religion from White colonization, preserving the sacred as a potential space of resistance. Consequently, it should come as little surprise that spirituals were sung primarily as rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social songs, rather than exclusively within the church. However, through the use of metonymy (substituting associated words to ostensibly alter the semantic content), spirituals acted as a form of religious education, able to speak simultaneously of material and spiritual freedom. "Steal Away to Jesus" is illustrative of this, the chorus sounding in somber tones:

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!

Steal away, steal away home, I ain't got long to stay here.

My Lord he calls me. He calls me by the thunder.

The trumpets sound within my soul.

I ain't got long to stay here (Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987, p. 390).

Charshee Lawrence-McIntyre (1987) writes that this "old time favorite . . . used Jesus' name to mask an open and obvious invitation to the slaves to steal away to freedom" (p. 390). Similarly emblematic is a song titled "Deep River," where the "Promised Land" may equally be construed as heaven, the emancipated North, or even Africa:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan.

Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.

O, chillun, O, don't you want to go to that gospel feast

That promised land, that land where all is peace.

Walk into heaven, take my seat, and cast my crown at Jesus' feet.

Lord, I want to cross over into campground (Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987, p. 393).

According to Edna Edet (1976), while some slave owners understood the alternative meaning of spirituals, and therefore “forbade slaves to worship openly or to sing songs unless authorized white people observed,” most either did not see or “preferred to see the slave’s deception as reality”—accepting the “preferable meaning” of the text (p. 38). Lawrence-McIntyre (1987) concurs, writing that most “masters felt that the singing of spirituals reflected the slaves’ inner sense of well-being, and they placed comparatively few restrictions on their use” (p. 389). Throughout the history of slavery, the tendency of White Christianity to rationalize the sacred and the secular into two mutually opposed realms was exploited by the slaves to conceal the emancipatory element of spirituals. Indeed, the articulation of religious ideals was not only confined to spirituals but also found expression in instrumental music—as ex-slave Andy Brice remarks, “What church I b’long to? None. Dat fiddle draws down from hebben all de sermons dat I understan’. I sings de hymns in de way I praise and glorify de lord” (Rawick, 1972a, p. 77). In providing a forum for the venting of political frustrations, slave music, in particular spirituals, introduced into the sphere of everyday life a crucial experience of freedom. If the slaves were forced to adapt to the linguistic space of their masters, it would be in a form responsive to the demands of their own condition. This lived experience of freedom (“*le vecu*”) directly informed the ability of slaves to think freedom.

In a violently repressive social order, the ability to carve out a space in which freedom could become manifest as anything resembling a material fact was no mean feat. However, it would be a mistake to view the Janus-face of the spirituals simply in terms of a concrete reality. In maintaining the experience of freedom amid a world of brutal repression, the slaves simultaneously constructed a *consciousness* of freedom, the autonomy of which could be said to transcend the very structure of slavery.

Freedom as the aesthetic imagination. *Time* is a central theme in slave song, whether in the identification with other historically oppressed groups, such as the Jews (see, for example, “Go Down Moses” and “Michael Row the Boat Ashore”), or in simply *remembering* the lost. From the former,

Go down Moses,

Way down in Egypt land,

Tell old Pharaoh,

Let my people go . . .

And the latter,

William Rino sold Henry Silvers;

Hilo! Hilo!

Sold him to de Gorgy trader;

Hilo! Hilo!

His wife she cried, and children bawled;

Hilo! Hilo!

Sold him to de Gorgy trader;

Hilo! Hilo!

Denied even the most basic of civil liberties, slaves were frequently forced to find ways of *thinking* beyond slavery. Indeed, one of the interesting features of spirituals is the way in which they reconceptualized conventional notions of time in order to transcend the oppressive regime of the external world. Levine (1977) writes that

denied the possibility of achieving an adjustment to the external world of the antebellum South, the slaves created a new world by . . . extend[ing] the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond. (pp. 32-33)

That temporal space became such a rich source of ideological power speaks volumes about the extent to which physical space was subject to the rationalizing power of the White plantation owners. Slaves looked to the past to see how a future without slavery could exist.

According to Paul Gilroy, part of the attractiveness of music to the cultural expression of slaves lies in its capacity for articulating the non-conceptual. For Gilroy (1993), because of “the complicity of racial terror with reason” (p. 73), a certain ambivalence toward the project of modernity has been a hallmark of antebellum Black consciousness. The privileged conception of language and writing as the “preeminent expression of human consciousness” typical of Western “civilised society” was not, therefore, typical of slaves (Gilroy, 1993, p. 74). That the non-conceptual was so important to slave

culture was not simply a matter of being denied access to literacy, often on pain of death (although this was undoubtedly a part of it); rather, according to Gilroy, language loses something of its referentiality when rationalism walks hand in hand with terror and brutality. Thus, Gilroy (1993) writes, “the power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language” (p. 74).

Modernity, for Gilroy, is a shared but heterogeneous cultural formation, dominated by European rationalism but giving form to all sorts of local countercultures. What Gilroy refers to as the “Black Atlantic” is one example of a counterculture, internally diverse and externally distinct—bound up with the larger meta-culture of modernity. However, Gilroy’s conception of ambivalence toward modernity should not straightforwardly be associated with a flight from rationalism. Indeed, when “concepts” are deployed in the service of inhumanity, the non-conceptual may become a highly rational and truth-bearing pursuit. In the opening passage of *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse (1979) highlights one of the prevailing claims of Marxist aesthetics: “in a situation where the miserable reality can be changed only through radical political praxis, the concern with aesthetics demands justification” (p. 1). Noting the element of “despair” in this concern (which laments the “retreat into a world of fiction” as simple false consciousness), Marcuse highlights the ways in which this world of fiction may, in fact, be more “truthful” than the given reality. Although the world of art is “unreal” in the ordinary sense of the word, he writes,

It is unreal not because it is less, but because it is more as well as qualitatively “other” than the established reality. As fictitious world, as illusion (*Schein*), it contains more truth than does everyday reality . . . [because] the latter is mystified in its institutions and relationships, which make necessity into choice, and alienation into self-realization. Only in the “illusory world” do things appear as what they are and what they can be. (p. 54)

When reality denies the material realization of the beautiful, art may become the sublimated repository for these desires. For Marcuse (1979), however, this sublimation is no mere diversion of consciousness (false consciousness) but simultaneously a mechanism for the production of *revolutionary* consciousness: “The transcendence of immediate reality shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity” (p. 7). To put this in Gilroy’s terms, when the prevailing rationality would seem to be oriented toward irrational purposes, concepts lose much of their meaning—thus, the non-conceptual opens up as a space in which truth can be glimpsed, albeit fleetingly.

According to Malcolm Miles (2012), far from simply acting as an opiate, art can function as an oblique route to real social change. Music, in this case, is the sublimated form of politics, imagining the world not as it is but as it might be.⁷ Indeed, a view of the non-conceptual specifically geared toward slave religion demands a conceptualization in which the non-conceptual can be grasped as a form of *otherness* without being a form of *otherworldliness*: As Lawrence-McIntyre (1987) writes, “a totally metaphysical trip to some other world rested completely outside of the material reality of their ontology” (p. 389). In looking to the non-conceptual, slaves did not turn away from the world but sought the means to alter their world through a form of reason not weighted down by the shackles of slavery. The ability of slaves to experience freedom on the plantations was very much contingent upon their being able to think freedom (“le conçu”).

The confinement of transcendence, whether material or spiritual, to an aesthetic realm must be seen as a necessary corollary to a political reality that served the opposite purpose. One might say, therefore, that the inseparability of music, religion, and everyday life served as a means by which slaves could preserve and enact their beautiful humanity until the day when more favorable political conditions would enable them to use this humanity to overthrow their oppressors—indeed, such conditions would only ever become possible providing the slaves found a way of maintaining a space in which this sense of dignity could be preserved. However, when objective conditions conspired to loosen the death-grip of the slave owner, the radical potential of slave songs became increasingly evident, as intimations of freedom moved dangerously close to freedom’s actualization. It is with this in mind that I consider the relationship between slavery and the city.

Slavery and the city. While rural slaves were cast adrift upon plantations and placed under the near constant supervision of their masters, urban living afforded slaves a degree of material and intellectual freedom (Berlin, 1981; Blassingame, 1976). From running away to the North, to stealing food, tools, or money, from willful destruction of property, to intentionally shoddy work, slaves found a multitude of ways to resist the seemingly omnipresent slave system (T. W. Allen, 1994/2012; Harding, 1980; Wade, 1964). In the cities, however, this kind of defiant behavior proved considerably more difficult to police, let alone the more serious problems associated with actual insurrection. Indeed, the city posed a serious threat to the reproduction of the slave system, casting shadows over the master’s gaze and blurring the line between freedom and bondage (Woodward, 1974).

Attempts were made to mitigate these problems, with Washington, in 1850, notably passing a series of laws that greatly restricted the movement of

urban slaves. Washington slaves were frequently confined to small prison-like compounds or "areas," adjacent to the slave owners' house. These cramped living-quarters were constructed so as to facilitate servitude and obedience, and for those who dared to venture outside without appropriate papers, the penalties were swift and brutal.⁸

Examining Douglass's (1845/2003) autobiography, it is clear that the paranoia of the urban slave owners was not without good cause: "A city slave is almost a freedman, compared with the slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation" (p. 12). One of the chief ways in which urban slaves were able to achieve something approximating freedom was through the practice of hiring their own time as workers. Indeed, the material and psychological benefits of city-living for slaves were so significant that Blassingame (1976) has argued that New Orleans slaves "emerged from bondage with relatively few psychological scars" (p. 8).

Despite the reservations of the White community, saloons "dispensing African-American music and alcohol abounded in New Orleans in the antebellum years" (Ellison, 1993, p. 289). These saloons were believed, by the local White slave owners, to be a threat to the social order and a hotbed for the construction of abolitionist plots. Mary Ellison (1993) documents one New Orleans journalist reporting, in 1854, that "mobs and caucuses of our slaves nightly assemble at their orgies, to inflame the brains with copious libations, and preach rebellions against their white masters" (p. 289). Officially, the only place in which New Orleans slaves were permitted to congregate in large numbers was the church (under supervision, of course); however, with, among other things, the higher relative population density typical of urban life, the ability of the White ruling class to regulate and enforce such laws presented persistent difficulties.

White repression of the church was a staple of urban slavery. According to Blassingame (1976), "in their own churches the slaves could pour out all of their anguish, socialize with their friends, and find some release for their pent-up emotions" (p. 6). The White community, for their part, were deeply anxious about such free expression, fearing that the emotional tumult would spill out onto the street.⁹ In 1846, the New Orleans police arrested 12 slaves in a makeshift church and charged that they,

as well as other colored persons, have been in the habit of repairing to this place for the purpose of joining in singing hymns and cantiques which was followed by sermons, the subject of which was of the most inflammatory character. (Wade, 1964, p. 84)

This paranoia was undoubtedly fueled by the occasional uncloaking of the spirituals' veiled references to freedom:

Broders, don't you hear the horn?

Yes, Lord, I hear the horn;

The horn sounds in jubilee. (Ellison, 1993, pp. 289-290)

More likely, however, the White population was becoming increasingly aware of the blurred line between calls for salvation in heaven and on earth. Indeed, many preachers who came to New Orleans throughout the antebellum period were arrested as abolitionists, with one journalist for the *New Orleans Bee* writing that "psalm singing chaps are abolitionists in disguise" (quoted in Ellison, 1993, p. 289). Indeed, in her revealingly titled *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, Dena J. Epstein argues that "in the minds of many southern whites, black preachers and distinctive black religious singing were a potential cover for insurrectionary activities" (Epstein, 1977, p. 229), both off and on the plantations.¹⁰

By 1860, there were more free Blacks in the South than in the North—250,787 as against 238,268. New Orleans in the 1850s provides significant evidence of better employability prospects for southern rather than northern Blacks, with Brady (1991) writing that "New Orleans was exceptional among Southern cities because of the number of free men of color who were professional artists in the city and because of the degree of their acceptance by the white community" (p. 5).¹¹ Lester Sullivan (1988) adds that "the city had one of the largest free black populations in the country, North or South, and by far the wealthiest" (p. 52). Although the legal freedom enjoyed by a minority of southern Blacks may have been illusory, with Blacks being required to carry identification papers with them at all times to prove that they were not slaves, being prohibited from forming or joining trade unions, legally denied the vote, being subjected to special taxes, and being denied the right to consort with slaves, the position of many free southern Blacks within the labor force was nevertheless highly valued (Foner, 1976; Sullivan, 1988). Indeed, by comparison with their rural counterparts, the elevated standard of living that most urban slaves enjoyed was anything but illusory.

As Woodward (1974) has pointed out, it is important to bear in mind that "urban life was a small and untypical aspect of the culture of the Old South" (p. 13). The city did not prove conducive to the perpetuation of the slave system. Thus, Foner (1976) states that "the fear that urban surroundings would weaken their hold over slaves caused many slave-owners to restrict the

use of bondsmen in cities" (p. 8). Accordingly, in 1820, slaves constituted more than 20% of the 10 largest slave-holding cities, whereas in 1860, they accounted for less than 10% (Woodward, 1974). The maintenance of the slave system rested in large part on the power of the White ruling class to curb the participation of Blacks in the vagaries of urban life. Why the metonymic devices of slave song should have been the cause of anxiety in the cities and yet were generally tolerated in rural slave communities illustrates both the precarious situation of urban slavery and the radical potential of these songs.

Conclusion

The central argument I have made in this article is, put somewhat aphoristically, that the ability of slaves to imagine freedom ("le conçu") was contingent upon their being able to experience freedom and that the slave's capacity to experience freedom ("le vécu") was conditional upon their being able to imagine it. Thus, in examining forms of resistance in slave song, I have identified two intersecting tendencies (as ideal-types): freedom as material practice and freedom as the aesthetic imagination. I have argued that such an analysis is consistent with the beliefs of slave religion, which, unlike the rationalizing logic of the White masters, saw the material and the spiritual as part of an indivisible unity.

The extreme regulatory system of plantation life meant that slaves were effectively cut off from normal avenues of social protest and political expression. References to freedom were, therefore, *necessarily* articulated in ways that concealed the material meaning from plantation owners. I have argued that the indivisibility accorded to the spiritual and the material in slave religion provided slaves with the metonymic tools necessary to air discontent without fear of reprisal, constituting a space of material freedom. Whether through satire, the blurring of the boundaries between master and slave, or through the free speech enabled by metonymy, music provided a vital means through which material freedom could become enjoined with the practices of everyday life.

In addition to this, I have shown how slave song frequently reconceptualized conventional notions of time in order to transcend the narrow boundaries of slavery. This turn toward history has not, however, been regarded as a retreat from the present but rather as a means of imagining how the present could be otherwise. Related to this is the ambivalence of slaves toward the concept of modernity. The complicity of extreme racial terror with reason meant that slaves frequently turned toward the non-conceptual, of which music provided an exemplary form, as a source of resistance. Because of the

indivisibility of the spiritual and the actual, the non-conceptual in this case is not taken to be a flight from reality but rather a valuable source from which creative reimaginings of the material context could be drawn: the non-conceptual as a critique, not a rejection, of modernity. (It is worth noting in addition to this that although it seems safe to assume that this integrated experience of life predated its function as a form of resistance, this is not to say that it was deployed without conscious intent; rather, I believe it is more likely a case of working with the materials to hand.)

While references to freedom in slave song on the plantations were largely associated with a longing for the afterlife, in the city, these songs were linked with outright insurrection and in many cases were prohibited. Evidence for the incompatibility of the slave system with urban environments is apparent in the progressive retraction of slave labor from the cities. It has been argued throughout that the objective spatial controls provided by life on the plantation forced resistance into more sublimated forms, whereas in the city, the imagination of freedom came dangerously close to freedom's actualization.

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Notes

1. By conceptualizing the relationship between the material and the spiritual in these terms—as processual, mutually constitutive, perpetually negotiated, dialectical, and so on—this study is situated, broadly speaking, within the Hegelian-Marxist tradition of Theodor Adorno (1970/2004) and Herbert Marcuse (1955/1998).
2. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he observed how racial prejudice appeared to be worse in the North than in South, and, paradoxically, was most severe in those states that had never known slavery (Foner, 1976).
3. For more recent authors who continue in this vein, see T. W. Allen (1994/2012), Blackburn (2011), and Roediger (2008).
4. Evidence for both views is readily available in the literature. When asked about her religious beliefs, Anne Bell, a South Carolina ex-slave, is emphatic: “I ask you if dere ain’t a heaven, what’s colored folks got to look forward to? They can’t git anywhere down here” (Rawick, 1972b, p. 53). Others, such as Texan

- born Millie Ann Smith, describe how “We slips off and have prayer but daren’t ’low the white folks know it and sometime we hums ’ligious songs low like when we’s workin’. It was our way of prayin’ to be free, but the white folks didn’t know it” (Rawick, 1972c, p. 43).
5. Harriet Brent Jacobs recorded slaves singing over Christmas, satirizing tight-fisted masters: “Poor Massa, so dey say; Down in de Heel, so dey say; Got no money, so de say; Not one shillin, so de say; God A’mighty bress you, so dey say” (Levine, 1977, p. 12).
 6. As David Roediger (2008) notes, such stories were a way of “promising to save souls, though not bodies” (p. 46).
 7. There is a very obvious problem in applying Marcuse’s aesthetic theory to the music of 19th-century slave culture. The concept of “otherness,” which Marcuse attributes to art, is predicated upon a historical separation of art and life and the subsequent development of an “autonomous” form of art. Slave music, on the other hand, derives much of its critical capacity precisely through its engagement with the immediate reality. I do not propose to resolve this antinomy here, which itself would require a lengthy study; rather, I suggest that though slave music was very much a part of life, it also simultaneously looked beyond that life, into the realm of the non-conceptual. As Gilroy’s analysis of the non-conceptual in slave music seems to imply, the contradiction between Marcuse’s aesthetics and the peculiarities of prerationalized (in the Weberian sense) cultural artifacts indicates a deficiency and thus a possible basis for a critique of Marcuse’s works.
 8. One Washington ex-slave remembers how in the 1850s, many houses “had high brick walls, the tops finished with broken glass” (Davis, 1998, p. 91). Such practices were common in southern cities (see Wade, 1964).
 9. According to a New Orleans newspaper editor in 1839, “for years we have being trying to induce our authorities to put down that greatest of all public nuisances and den for hatching plots against their masters” (Wade, 1964, p. 83).
 10. Clearly not all slave rebellions took place in the city—indeed, Epstein also notes how slave songs were sometimes associated with insurrection on the plantation (229).
 11. It is worth noting that Blacks frequently occupied an esteemed position in music entertainment in the South, with more serious forms reserved for Whites; however, in New Orleans, it is clear that this racial division of artistic labor was not enforced with the same rigor as in other cities. It is also worth noting that, although it may have been exceptional, New Orleans was by far the most populous antebellum Southern city, with a correspondingly large free and enslaved Black population. To say, therefore, that the status of New Orleans was “exceptional” does not diminish its numerical significance in relation to the total slave population, which was, in fact, great.

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