

FISK JUBILEE SINGERS



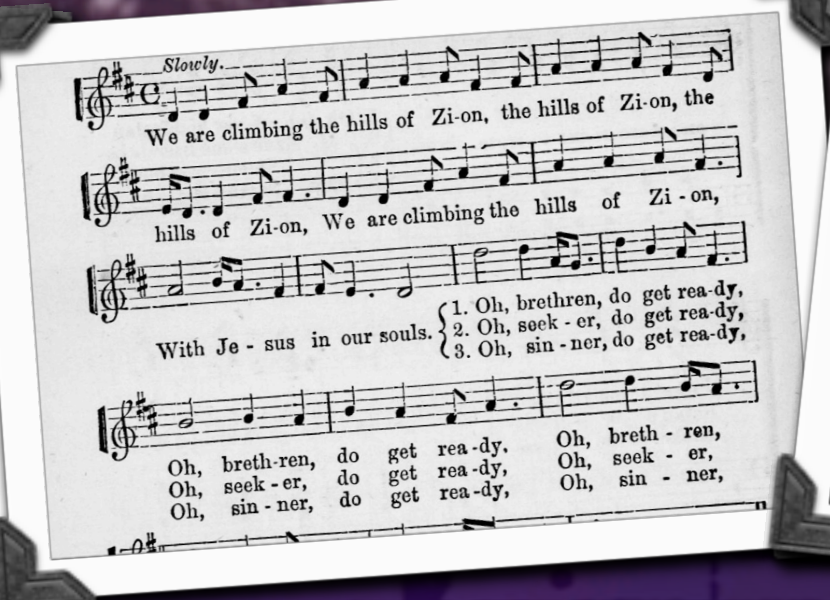
FISK UNIVERSITY

- ▶ Fisk University was founded in Nashville, TN by the American Missionary Association and first opened in 1866 after the close of the Civil War.
- ▶ Its aim was to educate freedmen, to be an institution where young men and women, "irrespective of color," could get a liberal arts education.
- ▶ Almost all Fisk students were newly freed slaves.
- ▶ Only five years later Fisk University was in danger of complete financial ruin.



GEORGE WHITE

- ▶ The University Treasurer (also music professor) George White offered to form a small choir of nine students (2 quartets and a pianist) to take a performance tour to raise money for the University.
- ▶ Fisk University and its alumni celebrate October 6 as "Jubilee Day." It marks the day in 1871 when the singers left on their first concert tour to Cincinnati to save Fisk University. After earning only \$50 in proceeds from their first concert, they graciously donated every penny to victims of the "Great Chicago Fire" of 1871.



THE MUSIC

- ▶ The first touring group had a program of largely classical selections, including a cantata and some Stephen Foster tunes, but no spirituals whatsoever. This was a bit of a surprise to the white audiences, who had come partly out of curiosity and to see what they thought might be a minstrelsy show.
- ▶ In waiting to perform one night, the singers started to quietly sing a spiritual backstage. The crowd heard them and encouraged them to sing it for them on stage. They were reticent to do so, as they regarded the spiritual as their own personal prayer. They sang the spiritual and the audience loved it!

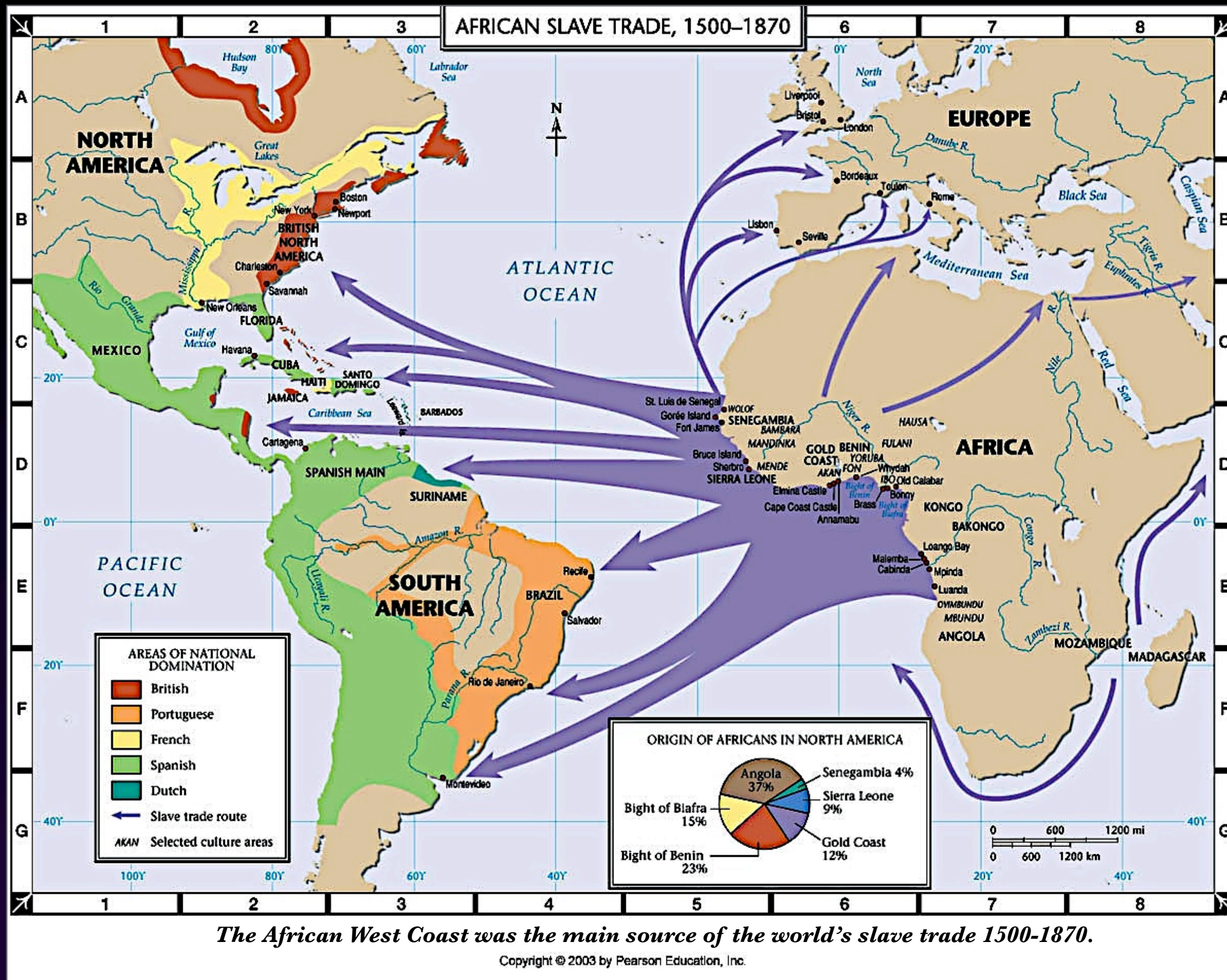


ACCLAIM

- ▶ In a very harsh political and social climate, the Jubilee Singers bravely toured along the path of the Underground Railroad, even singing in the White House for Grant. Eventually, their fine voices, impressive rhythmic unity and spirited singing won over the audiences in the US.
- ▶ In 1873 they took a European concert tour and sang for Queen Victoria, impressing her so much that she had her court artist paint a floor to ceiling portrait of those singers, which still hangs on the Fisk campus today. The singers raised over \$40,000 on their tour and built the first permanent structure on campus, Jubilee Hall.

THE RISE OF THE SPIRITUAL

THE JOURNEY FROM THE WEST COAST OF AFRICA TO THE WORLD CONCERT STAGE



THE "PORT ROYAL EXPERIMENT" & THE FIRST BOOK OF SLAVE SONGS

In 1861, the Union Army invaded the South Carolina coastline at Port Royal. These coastal sea islands and plantation properties were abandoned by the Southern plantation owners fearing the Union soldiers, consequently leaving over 10,000 slaves behind. The Port Royal Experiment (also referred to as the Great Reconstruction Rehearsal) was spearheaded in a cooperative effort between the Union Government and abolitionist charity workers. Their goal was to help the slaves become self-sufficient (in advanced hope of emancipation) by setting up schools, churches and training the slaves to live and support themselves, eventually granting them small parcels of land and to found the new town of Mitchelville on Hilton Head Island.

It was during the Port Royal Experiment that we have our first documented manuscripts of written spirituals. In the Port Royal area, William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison collected and wrote down the very first book of spirituals, *Slave Songs of the United States*, which was published in 1867.

In 1865, President Andrew Johnson eventually returned the land to the original owners.

POINTS OF NOTE:

- ▶ African slaves were imported into the Virginia Colonies by Dutch traders as early as 1619, following the first permanent English settlement in the Americas (Jamestown) by only 8 years.
- ▶ Christianity had been introduced into African society far more than the the Western World suspected at the time. By the time the slaves arrived in the Americas, they already had thorough knowledge of the Bible and Bible stories, although they were often incorporated into and combined with their regional folklore.
- ▶ They were monotheists, believing in one God, contrary to the belief held and promulgated by some plantation owners in an effort to portray their slaves as ignorant and backward. **Why would they do this?** It was to help justify and insure the practice of slavery and continuation of profit.
- ▶ Surprisingly, slaveowners encouraged singing and the practice of Christian religion amongst the slaves. The hymnody of the 18th century, as transmitted through its Southern branches (Kentucky, Missouri, Columbian, Union, and Southern Harmony) inserted itself into the slave culture, resulting in a fusion of African and quasi-European musical ideas.
- ▶ Consider technology's impact on slavery...in 1790, the US Census counted about 700,000 slaves present in the United States. The cotton gin was invented by Eli Whitney in 1793, increasing the global demand for cotton and consequently, also the need for field workers to harvest the cotton. By 1860, there were four million slaves working in the US to meet the demand in the States and abroad.

MUSIC & MANUSCRIPT

- ▶ Not much is known about the music of the slaves in the Unites States prior to the Civil War and the resulting emancipation of the slaves because nobody documented it. The spirituals were an oral tradition and largely improvisatory. It's nearly impossible to know exactly what the music of the first slaves was like.
- ▶ **The first written documentation of spirituals (in terms of musical manuscripts) was in 1867, during the Port Royal Experiment, when William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison, a group of Northern Abolitionists, collected and wrote down the songs as they were sung to them by the slaves. They also included the singers' names with each tune.**
- ▶ **The first organized performance on a concert stage of African American spirituals came in 1871, as the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Nashville, Tennessee embarked on their United States tour.**



PERFORMANCE & PRACTICE

KEY INFORMATION & PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES FOR SPIRITUALS

SLAVE SONG CATEGORIES:

- 1. Religious Spirituals:** make direct reference to the members of the Holy Trinity or feature preaching/teaching themes. *Examples: My God is So High, King Jesus is a Listenin', Little Innocent Lamb, Lord, I want to be a Christian*
- 2. Freedom Spirituals:** offer a sense of “deliverance” or earthly trials and often reference Old Testament stories of Moses and the Israelites. *Examples: Great Day, Go Down Moses, A City Called Heaven, All My Trials, In dat Great Gittin' up Mornin'*
- 3. Escape Spirituals:** the interesting “coded” or “signal songs” of the slaves. They have hidden messages embedded in the text designed to secretly communicate and plan escapes from their plantations unbeknownst to their slave masters. *Examples: Follow the Drinking Gourd, Steal Away, Wade in the Water, Keep Your Lamps, The Old Ship of Zion, Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*
- 4. The Shout & Hollers:** many of the more “secular” spirituals fall into this category, offering instruction on movement to accompany the singing. This is a little known-about category. *Examples: Secular tunes from R. Allen's 1801 edition...or otherwise not written down.*
- 5. Work Songs:** this music is best known to accompany movement, usually working on the plantation or in the fields. It's true that most spirituals can simultaneously belong to other categories and still be a work song. A defining characteristic of a spiritual is rhythmic vitality and drive. They were designed to be “moved to” in a working or traveling manner, even the very slowest songs. These were often *call and response* style.

PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS:

Approach: spirituals evolved over hundreds of years, native music from Africa amalgamating with the music and culture of the new America. It is a rich oral tradition, created and perpetuated *by the community of singers*, not individual composers. Because of this, there is an innate flexibility and sense of animation that must be present in the music.

Rhythm: Native African music was permeated by complex rhythms and syncopation, often layered upon layers, in voices and drums. The white slave-masters were frightened that slaves were communicating through the use of drums, and banned their use. The slaves sought to get a similar feel as the drums through a uniquely percussive use of only their voices in their singing. Although this was tempered when eventually fused with the more “European style” of America, this rhythmic vitality must be clearly present as the basis of every song.

Synchronicity: Also to be minded, the music was not only clearly inspirational to its singers, but also completely *functional* in synchronizing the work or traveling movement that accompanied it. Sense of clear and purposeful rhythmic drive, anchored by the lowest voices must be present.

Diction: there are no codified manners of choosing/presenting diction for spirituals, because it is an oral tradition and not documented, but there are three widely recognized practices:

- 1. Standard English:** standard English...the conservative approach, albeit a somewhat inaccurate representation of the authentic style that draws listeners to spirituals.
- 2. Spiritual/African-American Dialect:** attempts to lend the most integrity and authenticity to the art
 1. Phonetic decay...drop final consonants *example: burnin' (drop g)*
 2. Consonants...modification of sounds that were not in common usage *example: “that” becomes “dat”*
 3. Diphthongs...there is no diphthong, first vowels only *example: “my” becomes “mah”*
 4. Schwa...neutral approach to vowels *example: “heavenly” becomes “heb-un-ly”*
 5. Clipping syllables... *example: “witness” becomes “wi'-ness”*
- 3. Hybrid:** most commonly used, combines authentic dialect with standard English

Regardless of the diction choice, it must still be rhythmic, not only in the onset, but its release as well, providing momentum through each phrase by propelling the text forward.

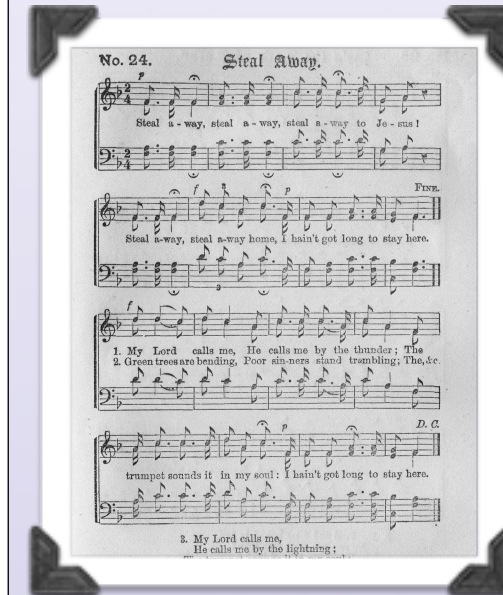
Tone Color: one must balance one's own artistic sensibilities with the knowledge and respect of the singers that originated the music. The voices should be full bodied and rich in all parts, a darker tonal color, paying close attention to unity and balance.

Characteristics: spirituals often exist in a *call and response* style...a conversation of sorts within the choir. Phrases are usually short and repetitive, alternating verses (with questions or struggles) and refrains (with answers/solutions). Syncopation, poly-rhythms, and complex rhythmic layering are almost always present as an element of the music.

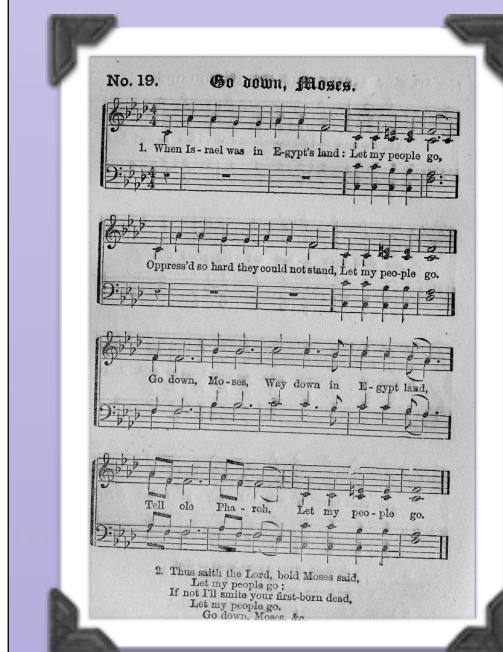
Consider: a spiritual deserves as much score study, scholarly regard and respect as other pieces of music in the standard choral repertory. Conductors should take time to discover as much information about the spiritual as possible before presenting the music to choristers in an effort to illuminate the specific meaning of the text, song and the spirit of the culture.

STEAL AWAY: The Meaning Behind the Music

Spirituals provided slaves a means of safely and openly communicating with each other about their plans to escape their bondage. Their slave masters had little or no idea that while they were singing about “stealing away to



Jesus,” they were actually making plans to run away from their plantation. *Wade in the Water* gave instructions not on baptism (as the slave-master was led to believe), but for escaped slaves to travel in the water so that their scent would be more difficult to trace by hound dogs. When spirituals refer to the “devil,” they actually



mean the slave-master. When they speak of “Moses,” it was a signal that Harriet Tubman (nicknamed “Sister Moses”) was close at hand and ready to help slaves escape on the Underground Railroad. Any reference to “hell” was code for “being sold further south,” the worst imaginable fate.