The Meaning of Freedom
Alternatives Emerging from the African American Experience of Slavery

Chika Okoe

INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine the meanings of freedom as a concept conceived and acted upon by African American slaves, freedmen, and freedwomen in the United States. The struggle for freedom serves as a commonplace framework for understanding and contextualizing African American history. This freedom struggle encompasses not only slave revolts, but also many other forms of resistance including but not limited to: marronage, escapes via the Underground Railroad, truancy (skipping out on plantation work for short periods), radical attempts to remake American society during Reconstruction (1861-1877), the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power movement and, arguably, contemporary struggles for racial justice such as the Black Lives Matter movement. The goal of this paper is to reconstruct the meaning of “freedom” as it was articulated by enslaved and newly free African Americans. Black people in the United States have occupied unique positions of “unfreedom” within a nation reputedly founded in the name of freedom. It seems worth investigating black understandings of freedom as contrasted with the constructions of freedom encountered in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

Freedom and liberation are concepts which form the theoretical backbone of American national life, as linchpins of the country’s founding documents and as inspiration to numerous resistance movements. Within the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the freedom that is constructed represents an ideology based on exclusion: women and all those racialized as non-white (African Americans, Asians, American Indians) were not imagined as partaking of the ideal that all men are created
equal and are endowed with inalienable rights. The conception of freedom espoused by framers of American democracy such as Thomas Jefferson has been described as a negative formulation. That is, freedom was defined through what it was not—subordinate or slave. I intend to search for alternative ways of conceiving freedom, ways that may become evident through investigations of African American cultures and acts of resistance.

The founding documents of the United States, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, invoke freedom and equality as the nation’s impetus for existence, but exhibit startling contradictions with respect to these concepts. The authors of these documents, in fact, ensured unfreedom for significant portions of the population: Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and women were locked out of the protections and privileges conferred by citizenship in the new nation. The contradictions inherent in these writings were reflected in actions of the framers of American democracy, such as holding slaves while professing that all men are created equal. Contradiction of this sort unsettles the critical observer’s ability to utilize these ideas in describing what constitutes citizenship, or meaningful participation in national life, or even what a racially just American society might look like. Or at least, as critical observers, we are compelled to question the meaning of freedom in national life.

How can we usefully think of what it means to be American without recourse to what appear to be thoroughly compromised historical notions? It can be useful to look to meanings of freedom forged through African American experiences, specifically during the period of enslavement and the early stages of emancipation. Slavery, the quintessential “unfreedom,” was defined by several specific conditions. These were: (1) cultural alienation, (2) status as property, (3) the ever-present threat of sale, (4) the denial of income for one’s labor, and (5) subjugation to the force, power, or will of another and (6) the forceful containment of a person within physical boundaries. Following from this definition, I anticipate that conceptions of freedom emerging from experiences of enslavement will evidence strong desires to engage openly in cultural practices such as worship, to maintain

and strengthen family ties, to be compensated for labor, and to move about freely according to one’s own will and desire. Because the black church is widely considered to be one of the most powerful and influential black institutions, I will argue that religious or spiritual notions of freedom as a “promised land” are in evidence. I am interested in interrogating what the promised land actually consisted of through an examination of slave spirituality and song. I intend for the present study to highlight understandings of freedom that prove more useable than the freedom founded on exclusion encountered in the nation’s founding documents.

**Review of Prior Research**

The term “freedom” is widely used within scholarship about African American history. Freedom is what was sought by runaways who joined maroon communities or who fled to the “Free” North. Scholars interpret freedom as being encoded in the spiritual songs and powerfully informing the religious practices of the enslaved. Numerous documented slave revolts can be understood as attempts to secure freedom. Countless acts of resistance, from Frederick Douglass’s defiantly learning to read, to the “dress up” practices of enslaved women who made or appropriated fancy gowns and wore them to clandestine black festivities in the South, were all performed in order to attain some measure of freedom. I hope to tie together several of these strands in order to arrive at a new understanding of freedom, drawing from the experiences, practices, and beliefs of African Americans.

Enslaved people’s primary struggle was to break their chains of bondage. After formal Emancipation came Reconstruction, when the concept of freedom expanded to encompass ideas of black inclusion into the civic and social life of the nation. The present paper is meant to serve as a preliminary research into the meanings of freedom, as it was both understood and enacted by African Americans while enslaved and immediately after emancipation. While many types of evidence could be marshalled in this search, the scope of this paper limits the inquiry to just a few types of evidence, including the use of two primary sources and numerous secondary sources.

I take as a starting point key insights offered by Angela Davis, who frames some of the issues at stake for our study by raising questions about
connections between will, resistance, freedom, and liberation in her Lectures on Liberation. These lectures were given in 1971, when, resulting from the upheavals of the civil rights movement and the birth of black studies as a discipline, scholars began to interrogate the master narrative of American history with regard to its deeply embedded racial assumptions. Up until this time historians had largely failed to write about enslaved people as active agents of history; instead they had been characterized as those who had been acted upon.

Angela Davis sought in these lectures to investigate the extent to which one who is enslaved may experience freedom. Through a close reading of The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Davis shows that “the first condition of freedom is the open act of resistance.” Davis draws a distinction between freedom—which she views as a static ideal, considered by white Americans to be an inherent quality or a possession—and liberation, something that is forged through struggle and actively pursued.

The three autobiographies of Frederick Douglass narrate a journey from enslavement to self-emancipation guided always by a thirst for freedom. Douglass made a strong connection between knowledge and power, and his first “open act of resistance” was to learn to read. Because his conception of freedom was communal, he wrote and spoke forcefully and tirelessly on behalf of abolition, and felt that he would never be truly free until all of the brother and sisters he had left behind in slavery, also became free.

Davis’s work accords with the earlier writings of Herbert Aptheker, a protegé of W.E.B. DuBois who centered an understanding of American slavery around the phenomenon of the slave revolt. Originally published in 1943, Aptheker’s American Negro Slave Revolts focused on the 250 recorded rebellions and revolts he was able to uncover. Aptheker broadened the discussion of slavery to include considerations of the will and resistance of the enslaved, at a time when the prevailing opinion was that slaves had

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placidly acquiesced to their condition.\footnote{Herbert Aptheker, \textit{American Negro Slave Revolts} (New York: International Publishers Co., 1970).}

W.E.B. Du Bois’ monumental \textit{Black Reconstruction in America} gives a historical account of Reconstruction from the perspective of the “self-activity” of African Americans. Du Bois recounts massive work stoppages initiated by slaves after the outbreak of the war that helped to ensure the end of the institution of enslavement. Du Bois also writes of the thousands of slaves who emancipated themselves from slavery by fleeing behind Union Army lines during the Civil War. He goes on to detail the political activities of the freedmen in the context of Reconstruction governments that provided some of the first public schooling and public health departments in the southern states.\footnote{W.E.B. Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America,} 1860-1880, (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1967).}


Another author who highlighted the theme of will and resistance among enslaved people is George Rawick, who penned “The Historical Roots of Black Liberation” in 1968. Rawick wrote that the emergence of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement was in no way mysterious; that the self-activity of black slaves had fostered multifaceted forms of resistance that helped to generate a strong black community and cultural forms like music, dance, and storytelling. Tales of Br’er Rabbit, who survives and occasionally even triumphs over those more powerful than himself, constitute one instance of cultural production. Rawick judged unique features of the enslaved community, like distinctive religious practices of “African cult meetings” and “sings,” to be the roots of rebellions, abolitionism, and the
black freedom struggles of the late twentieth century. Cedric Robinson, in his 1987 masterwork *Black Marxism*, would further develop the thesis that black resistance in the Americas was born out of the preserved cultural memory of life on African soil.

George Rawick was attentive to African American culture as the editor of the 41-volume publication *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, which compiles the oral histories gathered from former slaves by interviewers with the Federal Writers Project during the Great Depression. He wrote the introductory volume, a study of the making of the slave community “From Sundown to Sunup,” the period in which enslaved people could forge a culture of resistance and survival, which Rawick credits with fostering liberatory impulses. The remaining 40 volumes comprise around 2,000 oral histories from all across the country, and present rich material on individuals’ experiences of enslavement, emancipation, Reconstruction, and more. These interviews present difficulties to the careful researcher because of the power imbalances they reflect: White interviewers were questioning black subjects during the 1930s and 40s in the Jim Crow era South. Additionally, the transcriptions tend to reflect racism on the part of interviewers, who created “nonsense orthographies” (gross misspellings) to reflect black speech patterns and give the impression of faithful recordings, when in actuality, much of the material was written down after the unrecorded interview had taken place.

Paul Gilroy, in his 1993 study *The Black Atlantic*, focused scholarly attention on the new culture generated by Africans who came to the New World as slaves and their descendants. Gilroy posited that the creators of “black Atlantic” culture embraced non-rationality through music and found expression for emotionality in spirituals and the blues. Gilroy, like Cedric

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Robinson, aimed to identify an epistemology, ontology, and axiology characteristic of Africans in the Americas.

As this paper aims to examine the transition from legal enslavement to formal emancipation, Saidiya Hartman’s 1997 study *Scenes of Subjection* provides perspective on the period. Hartman posited the continuation of domination during this period, arguing at the same time for practices of self-fashioning among slaves. Hartman’s work acknowledged the ability of slaves to enact resistance, “everyday practice” in her terminology, that may not result in liberation but nonetheless creates space for the humanity of the enslaved to be expressed. One of Hartman’s important contributions was to provocatively trouble the meaning of formal emancipation, with the claim that “an amazing continuity belied the hypostatized discontinuities and epochal shifts installed by categories like slavery and freedom.”

Stephanie M. H. Camp’s 2004 study, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, also highlights the resistance of enslaved people—specifically women—to their condition, as essential to understanding the subjectivity and survival of African Americans under slavery. Camp researched acts of everyday resistance on the part of enslaved women in the plantation south, paying particularly close attention to slaveowners’ methods of physical and spatial constraint, as well as to the “rival geographies” of the enslaved. Her study offered evidence of how bondwomen created spaces of resistance and enjoyment through truancy, secret dances in the woods, practices of dress up, and displays of abolitionist literature, so as to instantiate a momentary freedom.

Recent scholars have analyzed the founding documents and early history of the United States and surmised that America’s originary freedom was based on exclusion and subjugation. Anne Cheng, in *The Melancholy of Race*, utilizes a psychoanalytic lens to diagnose a melancholic “exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others” by the dominant racial group in the United States. Cheng assessed the freedom written into the Declaration of Independence and the U.S Constitution as being based on


exclusion of African Americans and Asians. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe points to how African slave and Asian coolie labor facilitated the rise of republics in Europe and North America and helped to structure Enlightenment thought. Subjugated labor on the plantations of the New World, Lowe wrote, created “the conditions of possibility for European philosophy to think the universality of human freedom, however much freedom for colonized peoples was precisely foreclosed within that philosophy.” Lowe went on to examine the ways in which the “affirmation of the desire for freedom is so inhabited by the forgetting of its conditions of possibility, that every narrative articulation of freedom is haunted by its burial, by the violence of forgetting.”

Cheng’s and Lowe’s investigations into the contradictions exemplified by the founding documents of the U.S. provide motivation to my own project of exploring the historical meanings of freedom. I intend to examine continuities and contradictions between the dominant construction and the alternative conceptions that may become evident through examination of black histories of resistance, cultural forms, and narratives. What appears to be absent from these prior studies is any explicit theory of what constitutes black notions of freedom, as distinguished from dominant—white—ideas and ideals. While many of the studies referenced examine enactments of black freedom through acts of everyday or more extreme resistance, none purports to seek out a notion of freedom that is not based on exclusion, not defined over and against what it is not. This study aims to discover ways of understanding freedom that may be discerned from oral histories, writings, songs, and forms of resistance of enslaved and formerly enslaved African Americans.

**METHODS**

I utilize an extensive survey of secondary literature on questions of the relation between slavery and freedom and the self-conceptions of the enslaved. These analyses are relied upon as guides into an archive whose

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nature is extremely limited. Many slave published narratives are extant, and these will be touched upon briefly. I also utilize a historical method, analyzing some primary documents that speak to conceptions of freedom by enslaved and formerly enslaved people. Because of the preliminarily investigatory nature of this inquiry, I have gathered information about the ideas of freedom held by slaves throughout the United States. I have looked into sources of information about slaves from about the founding of the republic, from about 1776, until the end of the period of Reconstruction in 1877.

My data comes from two primary sources: the spiritual songs of African American slaves as recorded in *Slave Songs of the United States*, an 1867 publication dealing primarily with songs sung on the Sea Islands of South Carolina; and the meeting minutes of the 1866 Freedmen’s Convention of North Carolina. Commentary in the book about slave song provided information about how the songs were performed and developed. I looked at the song lyrics for evidence of ideas of freedom, any characterizations of what the “promised land” was hoped or expected to be like. This paper draws more heavily on secondary literature than lyrical content for its analysis, looking to scholars who have provided clues as to how to glean from the spirituals underlying ideas of freedom.

**ANALYSIS**

**Religious Practices: “Literally to be Free”**

Religion and uniquely African American religious practices were central to black people’s constructions of freedom during the time of slavery and at the dawn of emancipation. Black spirituality served as a space within which to dream freedom, to metaphorize freedom through songs looking forward to a promised land. Spirituality also served as a vector for political activity, which was largely sublimated but at times burst forth into revolt. The spiritual songs of the slaves played a role of tremendous importance within slave religion and slave resistance.

For enslaved people, the practice of religion was not confined

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within walls. Religious worship was often conducted outdoors. Even in circumstances where slaves were provided weekly church services by white clergy, it was not uncommon that weekly parallel services would be conducted “in dugouts and hollows.” Some slaveholders forbade their slaves from attending church altogether, but enterprising worshippers frequently held secret prayer meetings in woods and swamps. Ellen Butler, born a slave in Louisiana in 1859 recounted: “Massa never ‘lowed us go to church but they have big holes in the fields they gits down in and prays. They done that way ‘cause the white folks didn’t want them to pray. They used to pray for freedom.”

The idea that the slaves prayed for freedom goes part of the way toward explaining such fierce devotion to worship even at the risk of severe punishment. Building on Angela Davis’s assertion that one begins to enact one’s liberation through acts of rebellion, it follows that this defiance of the wishes of white slaveholders created the felt experience of freedom. Constraints could temporarily be thrown off and worshippers had opportunity to give vent to “emotions that slavery would naturally tend to curtail. The Negro went to church literally to be free,” in the words of LeRoi Jones.

That religion would form such a central place within the lives of slaves, giving space to the expression of their longings for freedom is easy to understand. Because slaves’ social “place” was reflected and affirmed by white control over their physical place, it became of prime importance for the enslaved to secure for themselves some space outside the control of whites and beyond the constraints of slavery. Freedom, then, in connection with worship is marked by unrestrained or “free” movement (to secret gatherings) and activity within a “free” space, or one in which slaves could act autonomously.


Spiritual Songs: Music as a Sublimated Form of Politics

Thomas Barker names as one of the defining characteristics of slave religion “the way in which it conceived of the spiritual and the material as part of an indivisible unity.” One of the hallmarks of slave religion was the singing of spirituals, songs “sung primarily as rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social songs, rather than exclusively within the church.”

Barker contends that this intertwining, or nonduality, of the spiritual and the material directly informed the slaves’ conception of freedom so that the experience and the imagination of freedom enabled and reinforced one another.

Barker builds on insights from Paul Gilroy in order to draw attention to the frequent practice of retrieving from the past an indictment of the present, and at the same time enacting a hope for the future within the spiritual songs of the enslaved. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy identifies collaboration between the Enlightenment ideal of reason and practices of racial terror, and shows that slaves’ rejection of this ideal is embodied in their embrace of music: “According to Gilroy, language loses something of its referentiality when rationalism walks hand in hand with terror and brutality. Thus, Gilroy writes, ‘the power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language.’” Spirituals such as “Go Down Moses,” “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” and “Michael Row the Boat Ashore” make links with the captivity of the ancient Hebrews in Egypt in order to construct a consciousness of freedom, to create a world outside the time and space of enslavement in the Americas. In the words of one scholar, “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.”

Here, freedom can be seen as a world-making project, or a utopia,


which is always a rejection of the present world. Freedom becomes not just a notion, but a space and time in which enslaved people could step outside of the constraints of their everyday world.

In echoes of arguments made by George Rawick in “The Historical Roots of Black Liberation,” Thomas Barker writes that spirituals, as a practice through which enslaved individuals could express their longings relatively candidly, constituted a form of resistance to white domination. He views spirituals as a repository for sublimated desires and simultaneously as a mechanism of revolutionary consciousness. Perhaps it is no surprise that Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, the leaders of two of the most sensational cases of attempted slave revolts in American history, were both preachers. The following quote about emancipation from Booker T. Washington supports the idea that slave spirituals nurtured the spirit of resistance through continually imagining and calling for freedom.

As the great day grew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder, had more ring, and lasted later into the night. Most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom. True, they had sung those same verses before, but they had been careful to explain that the “freedom” in these songs referred to the next world, and had no connection with life in this world. Now they gradually threw off the mask, and were not afraid to let it be known that the “freedom” in their songs meant freedom of the body in this world.”

-- Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery

The spirituals as they come to us in published form do not completely reflect the practices of antebellum singers. It must be remembered that these were performances involving the whole body, evoking an overall sense of

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full embodiment which in at least one contemporary account resembled a state of bacchantic ecstasy in which the congregation of a Virginia African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1869 “seem[ed] to realize the actual coming of the chariot, and their elevation to the golden seats.”25 This type of metaphorical “transport” speaks to the ability to almost bend time and space in order to instantiate freedom. Freedom here is free movement and free expression, a time and place beyond the present constraints of the body.

Besides physical gesture, another aspect characterizing slave song was highly inventive improvisation. It seems that the songs were built up through improvisation, invented lines being added to known ones. Further, a communal spirit was embodied in the call-and-response format of the songs.26 All of the songs functioned as call-and-response participatory experiences, in which a line would be sung by whoever was leading, and then the refrain sung by all those gathered together formed the response.27 Improvisation represents a mode of free expression, arises from autonomy and self-fashioning. At the same time, rootedness in responsive community points to a freedom that is not individualistic, but rather engages the individual in a relationship with the whole.

PLANTATION WORKERS IN SOUTH CAROLINA: REFUSAL OF THE “SLAVE CROP”

In South Carolina, the U.S. Navy occupied the Sea Islands settlement of Port Royal in November of 1861, which prompted almost all whites to flee to the interior, abandoning their plantations and slaves in the process. The enslaved populations of the islands held by Union forces during the Civil War lived out a type of “rehearsal” for Reconstruction in which they were able to contribute to the creation of a new way of living that came to be known as the “Port Royal Experiment.” Among these former slaves’ earliest actions was to sack the great houses of their former masters. They

destroyed cotton gins and proceeded to plant corn and potatoes. African Americans at Port Royal refused to plant the “slave crop” of cotton, which had only ever enriched whites, but had never benefitted them. To the newly free blacks, “free labor” meant farming their own land and living largely independently of the marketplace (by contrast, to whites the term signified blacks working on plantations for wages).\textsuperscript{28} Freedmen and freedwomen of the South carolina Sea Islands initially defined freedom as their claim to autonomous control over the plantation lands they had worked as slaves.\textsuperscript{29}

After the war ended, much of the plantation land was auctioned off for nonpayment of taxes by the Treasury Department. Blacks’ claims went unrecognized by the government; they were given no special reference, and most of the land went to army officers, government officials, and Northern speculators and cotton companies. These northern interests took control of plantation land and hired black people to raise cotton. Some freed people managed to pool their resources to purchase a small portion of the land that was sold, thereby preserving their vision of land-based freedom in the place of their former enslavement. This response to adverse conditions also highlights a strong sense of community that enabled black people to resist white domination.

At Davis Bend, in the Mississippi Valley, another “experiment” in Reconstruction took place. In what was called by some a “negro paradise,” freedmen and freedwomen cooperatively ran a large-scale plantation after the white owners fled. Unlike the residents of Port Royal, these blacks did not eschew the marketplace and raised successful cotton crops to sell. This community prospered into the 1880s and sent several of the first blacks into government in the state. For the former slaves at Davis Bend, who had been allowed an unusual amount of autonomy in the management of plantation affairs prior to emancipation, freedom was an opportunity to acquire wealth and participate in the market economy and the government. This is markedly different from the ideas of freedom seen at Port Royal.


The divergence may result from the unique conditions of the enslaved community at Davis Bend. This plantation had been a “model” slave system instituted by Joseph Davis, brother of Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy’s president. In the model plantation, slaves were far better fed and housed than was customary in Mississippi, and they were able to exercise extraordinary measures of self-governance. One leader of the slave community had run a store. Neighboring planters had mocked “Joe Davis’s free negroes,” an indictment which calls to mind the acts of will, or self-activity, posited by George Rawick and Angela Davis as central in the fashioning of liberation.30

Freedmen’s Conventions in North Carolina: Men of the Great Tradition

In Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1865 and 1866, freedmen held conventions where they came together to discuss and decide about the issues facing their communities with the aim of uplifting the race. The 1865 meeting was a few days prior to the state constitutional convention, and delegates highlighted issues of just compensation for labor, education for black children, and the reuniting of black families. Delegates also stressed the need for black inclusion into the political process.31 The meeting minutes still survive for the four-day 1866 convention. At that meeting, delegates from all over the state repeatedly stressed the need for both religion and education among the black community. The delegates established the Freedmen’s Educational Association of North Carolina, with the aim of aiding in the establishment of public schools, “from which none should be excluded on account of color or poverty and to encourage unsectarian education in this State especially among the Freedmen.” The freedmen resolved to form auxiliaries to the state organization and that these auxiliaries would be charged with recording incidents of the “outrages” of violence being committed against blacks throughout the state and reporting these to the state organization and the newspapers. The men praised the passage by the 39th Congress of the Freedmen’s Bureau bill, the Civil Rights bill, and the 13th Constitutional Amendment. They prayed that “a like spirit should

30. Foner, Reconstruction, 58-60.

guide the 40th session, until the protection of all citizens equally under law would be secured.” The delegates earnestly protested against the taking of black children to be bound out for labor without the parents’ consent, a practice that hearkened back to conditions of unfreedom under slavery. The conventioneers concurred with the arguments made by the unreconstructed states that taxation without representation was unjust, holding that this reasoning applied as well to the “native born colored citizens of North Carolina.” At the close of the first day’s session, the freedmen sang the spiritual “Sound the Loud Timbrel.” They were moved to sing the song again following a speech given by North Carolina Governor John Worth during the second day’s proceedings. Analysis of this meeting shows that the main concerns of this group of men revolved around securing access to education, attaining equal political and social rights, and dealing with incidences of violence by whites against blacks.32

These conventioneers were relatively privileged freedmen with the resources to travel to the state capital for four days and to pay the convention’s dues (plus monthly membership dues), and all had reputations that led to their designation as being “of moral character.”33 We can see what historian Eric Foner terms the “Great Tradition” at work among the delegates of the Freedmen’s Convention of 1866 in their repeated emphasis on the uplifting qualities of education and religion, their insistence on suffrage and equal rights, and the highly educated, decorous language with which they conduct the proceedings. According to Foner, the Great Tradition, exemplified by Frederick Douglass, affirmed that blacks formed an integral part of the national body and were entitled to same rights and opportunities as whites. Within this tradition, free blacks were encouraged to forsake menial work, educate themselves, and live unimpeachable lives, thus elevating the race.34 This belief system evidences a belief in the promise of full American citizenship for African Americans.

This group of freedmen surveyed the landscape in 1866 and surmised that their freedom would be supported and extended through education,

32. Freedmen’s Convention of 1865, North Carolina History Project.
33. Ibid.
34. Foner, Reconstruction, 58-60.
moral impeccability, and political participation. Note that the delegates’ material concerns included securing physical safety in the face of concerted campaigns of racial terror, preserving family ties, and affirming the rights of black parents to custody of their children. For these men, freedom was necessarily inflected by the experience of racist violence and of slavery’s impediments to education and the continual threat of the dissolution of families. Freedom to these North Carolina freedmen, meant education for all, not just blacks, tellingly. The first state-run free public schools in the South were instituted by Reconstruction governments that included black lawmakers advocating these measures. Freedom meant the right to reunite and to preserve the family. Freedom meant safety from violence. Freedom still connoted a realm beyond the troubled present, a place accessed and expressed through spirituals: “Sound the loud timbrel o’er Egypt’s dark sea. Jehovah has triumphed -- his people are free!”

Conclusions

The meanings of freedom to enslaved and emancipated African Americans varied by context, although spiritual practices and spiritual songs create a clear throughline among varying classes and locations of black people. Spirituals were songs sung by all, from South Carolina lowcountry farmers to conventioneers. The songs evince an abiding practice of imagining an alternate time and place as a way to temporarily transcend the constraints of the less-than-free present. The songs served as a form of resistance, allowing the singers to enact freedom as defiance, as the open act of rebellion that is fundamental to liberation. Spiritual devotion, through “sings” and through prayer meetings were also a way to create space and time outside of enslavement, freedom as a spatio-temporal experience. In spirituals we can see how freedom meant free expression, improvisation and creativity as mechanisms of affirming an autonomous self. The songs as well as provided opportunities to give voice to the emotionality and sufferings expressed in these “sorrow songs.”

Communality also emerges as a central theme that relates to freedom. We have seen already how spirituals were sung as a group affair, in call-and-response, throughout the black community. Delegates to the North Carolina Freedmen’s Convention showed great concern for the violence
afflicting blacks throughout the state and took collective action, charging each delegate with responsibility for documenting and publicizing acts of violence in his area. Frederick Douglass theorized his own freedom as incomplete until the time that all people held in bondage should go free. The notion of racial uplift is itself a communal value, that African Americans as a community ought to have access to practical and moral education and to political and civil rights. In the case of education, the freedmen seemed to conceive of community quite broadly, advocating schools for all children without regard to race. Preserving family ties was also a major prerogative of freedom, a concern to protect the community from being torn asunder, as had happened during slavery. Finally, newly free people in the Sea Islands of South Carolina showed the faith they had in community by pooling together their resources to buy land. They enacted freedom as collective decision-making power over the use of land and as the ability to grow their own food and remain relatively independent or “free” of the market economy controlled by whites. Free black folks at Davis Bend, Mississippi, participated in the market for cotton, and they did so successfully as a cooperative, a community-run plantation.

For middle-class and well-to-do blacks, freedom after emancipation came to signify equal rights under law and representation and inclusion in governance. This understanding of freedom to mean social and political rights aligns with the views espoused by the framers of the Constitution. There is likely a correlation with the higher socioeconomic status of freedmen who took Frederick Douglass as a model of the Great Tradition. The notion at work here may be that of freedom as a possession to be acquired or safeguarded, the static ideal that Angela Davis contrasted against liberation, which arises from action.

Alternative understandings of freedom—divergences from the freedom-as-exclusion enshrined in America’s founding—emerge from black resistance to white domination. African American spirituality is one powerful form of such resistance. Faith in and expression of a realm beyond the conditions of alienation and subjugation formed the basis of black spirituality. It is no accident that the wooded places, caves, and hollows that served as places of worship were not subjected to the control of whites. Wild places constituted a rival geography to that of enslavement. Spiritual songs
provided a means of transport to alternate times as well as places, whether to visit the ancient past of the Hebrews’ captivity or to glimpse some future kingdom where freedom would reign. In the spirituals, freedom appears as a spatio-temporal concern and as a survival mechanism, as in lines from the song “Poor Rosy”:

...Heav’n shall-a be my home. I cannot stay in Hell one day, Heav’n shall-a be my home. I’ll sing and pray my soul away, Heav’n shall-a be my home.\(^{35}\)

The lyrics express resistance against the reigning regime, an outright rejection of “hellish” conditions of racialized oppression. The repetition of “shall” gives voice to a fierce determination and a faith that the singer will reach another world, that “away” to which the soul will make its home. Songs such as this provide evidence of the liberatory self-activity of African Americans in slavery and continued to be sung long after formalized emancipation.\(^{36}\) Creating and maintaining cultures of resistance, through song and other means, is an aspect of the work of liberation. Both freedom and liberation can perhaps be viewed as belonging to a spiritual or otherworldly realm: ideals that may not be achievable in this life, but that serve as aspirations. From the spirituals we learn that we can aim at freedom through the liberatory work of resistance, the unending struggle for autonomy within community, for creativity, self-expression and affirmation of our human experience.

\(^{35}\) Allen, Ware, and Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States*, 51.

\(^{36}\) Many of the freedom songs sung during the marches, sit-ins, and freedom rides of the civil rights movement were improvised from old spirituals. An example drawn from SNCC workers in McComb, Mississippi had these lyrics: “Michael, row the boat ashore, Alleluia; Christian brothers, don’t be slow, Alleluia; Mississippi’s next to go, Alleluia.” Cited in Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 126.
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