YOU GOT A RIGHT TO THE TREE OF LIFE

African American Spirituals and Religions of the Diaspora

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Run, Mary, run
Run, Mary, run I say
Run, Mary, run
You got a right to the tree of life.

You got a right, you got a right
You got a right to the tree of life.
Little Mary you got a right
You got a right to the tree of life.
Hebrew children got a right
You got a right to the tree of life.
Weeping Mary, you got a right
You got a right to the tree of life.
Cross is heavy, but you got a right
You got a right to the tree of life.
Come to tell you, you got a right
You got a right to the tree of life.
Children gone, but you got a right
You got a right to the tree of life.
Oh weeping Mary...¹

In 1936, Martiniano Eliseu de Bomfim, an esteemed leader in the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé, was interviewed by a local newspaper in Salvador, Bahia. Seu Martiniano, as he was respectfully known, was a babalawo, a diviner priest. He had been born in the mid-nineteenth century and his
parents, both originally from Africa, had been slaves. In the interview, as he
reflected on his life, he talked about the traumas of slavery and the meaning of
the religion he inherited from his father and mother. “My mother, I remember
well, had a scar on her buttocks from where she was burned as a punishment.”
Seu Martiniano’s father maintained an altar room where he regularly thanked
and honored Oyá, a Yoruba deity of winds and transformative change, whom
the father credited with carrying him through great tribulations. After the
father’s passing, the son took over the ritual responsibilities of the family altar.2

The juxtaposition of these subjects—sufferings under slavery and the
accompaniment of sustaining spiritual forces—is echoed in the experience of
most of the religious traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. The song above,
“Run, Mary, Run,” reminds us of the genius and poetry with which the spiritu-
als entered the stories and metaphors of the Bible and opened them to a pow-
erful new set of meanings based in the African American struggle for freedom.
Mary is Jesus’ mother, yes, a member of the oppressed Hebrew nation; but, in
this song, she is also the enslaved Black woman whose burdens are heavy and
whose children have been stolen from her. Run, Mary, Run the spiritual urges,
don’t let the sorrows of your present circumstance overtake you. Run meaning,
“keep going.” Run meaning, “don’t be afraid to leave, don’t be afraid to go
north.” Run meaning “get away, physically and otherwise from anything that
denies your humanity.” Run meaning, “run to God.” Run, Mary, Run, because
you got a right to the tree of life. The wounded mothers of Brazil and the weep-
ing Marys of North America shared an imperative for connection to a source
that would comfort them, affirm them and urge them forward on their jour-
neys. Spirituals, like rooms consecrated to the African divinities, are vessels of
the sacred—imbued with a dynamic, holy lifeforce that strengthens, blesses and
animates being.

The spirituals, the traditional songs of African American religion, were cre-
ated by enslaved Africans and their descendants in nineteenth century America,
and hold generations of trauma and transcendence in their tones. They are the
religious form that has most faithfully nourished the link to ancestors and
ancestral traditions among African Americans and they continue to be a source
of great cultural and spiritual sustenance for all people who experience them.

“Run, Mary Run” suggests another point of connection among traditions of
the diaspora in the image of the tree of life.3 Standing at the entrance to a Vodun
hounfor (temple) in Haiti, or rising in a place of honor in the yard of a
Candomblé terreiro (ritual community) or a Santeria shrine, there will often be

SUMMER 2007 • 267
a large sumptuous tree, whose sheltering branches are heavy with leaves and whose trunk is tied with cord or a length of white cloth. This is the abode and manifestation of Iroko, a divinity whose differing names—Loco, Loko, Iroko, Zaratembo, Tempo, and others—in different religions all reflect a powerful, shielding spirit whose roots and branches represent the links between the spiritual and material worlds, as well as the connections between living human beings and their ancestors. The Africans who came across the Atlantic as slaves carried with them this tradition of recognizing a sacred tree as the dwelling of a protective divinity and as a symbol of their own relationship to spirit and to lineage. For Blacks in North America, whose religion drew heavily on rituals and understandings from African ancestral traditions, the biblical promise that the children of God have “a right to the tree of life” may have resonated even beyond its liberatory Christian implications toward older assurances of protection, continuity and care.

In examining the connections between the spirituals, which are the oldest extant religio-cultural form in Black North American life, and other religious traditions of the Afro-Atlantic world, we begin with the assumption, perhaps best articulated by historian Sterling Stuckey, that the spirituals cannot be fully understood “apart from their natural, ceremonial context” and apart from the history that created them. Stuckey writes that too often, the tendency has been to approach the songs as a musical form only, unrelated to dance rhythms and unrelated to ritual. However, as even the most cursory historical examination will attest, these sacred songs were developed as part of a larger complex of African American religiosity, which is essential to understanding their nineteenth century meaning, their continuing influence and their profound connection to Black religions all over the Western hemisphere.

The Afro-Atlantic Diaspora as a Meaning of Religion
Throughout the Americas, from Boston in New England to Montevideo in the Viceroyalty of La Plata, in every place where African women, men and children were enslaved, there emerged cultural and religious forms reflecting the particular complexities, terrors and exigencies of each situation. Finding themselves sometimes among Protestants, sometimes among Catholics; in gold mining towns in central Brazil; on sugar cane plantations in Jamaica and Cuba; in the coffee-producing hills of Venezuela; on cotton and indigo estates in the southern regions of the USA; and in homes, streets, rivers, fields and even small
factories everywhere in between, Africans and their descendants, in generations of bondage, encountered and helped create the New World.

As they settled in the new places—towns and cities often built with their labor, canals dug up out of muck and swamp by the sacrifice of their lives, and whole national economies depending mightily on their unremunerated work—the enslaved people took stock of where they were and who they were now expected to be. By and large, they were expected to be property, a permanent servant class working under duress, with few, if any, legal rights, and at constant risk of losing bodily and family integrity. This expectation, violently enforced, was in unremitting tension with the Africans’ own sense of who they actually were. Historian of religions, Charles H. Long, suggests that the meaning of Black religion across the Americas, emerges from this tension and from the process of “wrestling” with the question of how to stay human in a fundamentally inhumane situation: blackness as an essentially religious task.

With a combination of resources from their homelands and their captivities, enslaved people in the Americas, found ways to negotiate, resist, and in some moments, even transform the afflictions they faced. African American spirituals arose out of response to enslavement in the United States, not only in terms of evocative, often coded, lyrics, but also in the very circumstance of the creation and development of the music. The songs, almost always accompanied by ritual movement and dance, melded biblical language to African religious values and New World experiences of struggle. They provided the foundation for the emergence of a distinctive, African American Christianity marked by many elements common to other traditions of the diaspora such as Santeria, Vodou and Candomblé.

One of the most important of these shared religious elements is the circle dance. In the United States, it is known as the “ring shout.” This is a ritual combination of music and movement that was widely recognized and practiced in the nineteenth century (although probably in use in some form earlier as well), and though much less common now, is still present in the more limited form of “holy dance” and individual “shouting” in many of the most traditional Black church congregations. It was a ceremonial activity created by people with roots in many different parts of west and central Africa who found themselves together in a difficult new land and were faced with the need to remember traditions that could enable them to survive here. Stuckey and Long both refer to the ring shout as the way that Africans in North America literally re-membered, rejoined themselves to their origins and created a new experience of self and
community in the New World.

African Americans felt most free to sing spirituals accompanied by the ring shout dances when they were away from the gaze of masters and overseers, who often forbade the gatherings. When the slave quarters was far enough away from the residence of the owners, Black people might gather there in one of the cabins, moving to the side the meager furnishings so that a danced circle could form in the center of the room. The narratives of former slaves mention that a large tin basin was sometimes overturned and raised to the rafters to "catch the sound" and lessen the likelihood that the gathering would be discovered. Or, the basin or barrel might be filled with water and set in the middle of the room or by the door in the belief that it could serve a similar purpose of dampening down the sound. When slaves had access to their own churches, with moveable benches or pews, the ring shout ceremonies often occurred there, after the formal "sermon" service was completed. But just as often, people gathered in woods bordering the plantations where they lived or in simply constructed "praise houses" or "hush harbors" or sometimes out in the open air, around a fire. There they would raise up the song and move in an easy, slightly weighted step in a counterclockwise ring, starting with a slow tempo and gradually building to a cadence that featured the syncopation of handclaps, feet stomping and percussive sticks to keep and vary the rhythm. And in the repetition of the sung lines and the movement of the circling bodies, the spirit was called and answered.

Throughout the diaspora, enslaved people used their homes, wooded and isolated places, and structures they built with the express purpose of sheltering their gatherings, to meet, to dance, to sing and to thus call spirit into their midst. The barracoons, large warehouse-style sleeping quarters common on plantations in Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean were sometimes, at the end of the long workday or on a Sunday or saint's day, the site of large gatherings of slaves to dance and drum together; simultaneously remembering traditions that had been brought from Africa and, in the circumstances of bondage, creating new ones. But in Cuba as well as in Brazil and Haiti, the largest gatherings were often held away from the plantations in peripheral areas of difficult access, similar to the practice of praise house and hush harbor worship in the United States.

Long defines religion as "orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world." For people of African descent in the Americas, both during slavery and in its long
aftermath, religion thus becomes the means by which one remembers and cul-
tivates an alternative understanding of one’s humanity, in the face of constant
affronts and denials. Not limited to the institutional church, rather spread
across the breadth of culture, family, community, and language, this meaning
of religion feeds an—other experience of reality that nurtures connection to the
divine and sustains a truly human identity.

Over the course of their presence in the Americas, people of African descent
have developed an amazing array of religious traditions in places as disparate as
Uruguay, Peru, Mexico, Trinidad and Guyana. Among the most widely practiced
of the Afro-Atlantic religions are Cuban Santería (also known as Lucumi, or
Regla Ocha), Brazilian Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou. While there is tremen-
dous variety within and among these practices there are also a number of essen-
tial elements that are shared in greater or lesser measure by them all. Like the
ring shout, each of these three traditions is characterized by ritualized, collec-
tive music and dance rhythms—the primary means by which, on the continent
and in the African diaspora, the sacred is honored and called into the human
community. In these sister traditions, the circle dance is central to the experi-
ence of community and to the experience of worship. Long’s and Stuckey’s
observations about the “binding” nature of the circle in the religion of Blacks in
North America are strongly echoed in the experience of Candomblé in Brazil, for
example, where the roda (sacred danced ring) is the means by which divinities
from many different African ethnic communities are ritually called into com-
munion—with each other and with their exiled generations.

Another characteristic shared among many Afro-Atlantic religions is a
marked intimacy with spirit; a great sense of close, even familial relationship
with divinity. The phenomenon of manifesting the spiritual energy of the
deity in one’s body, (“possession”), is evidence of the exceptional intimacy
between humans and Spirit that characterizes most religions of the
Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

The sacred spirits of Africa, in the Americas, are known by various names:
Orishas, Iwas, Voduns, Wintis, nkisis, among others. These terms have roots in one
or more of the languages of West and Central Africa, but have essentially simi-
lar meanings—divinities; the divine presence in nature; manifestations of God;
protective spiritual energies.
The Transformational Power of the Spirituals

Diarists and travelers through the nineteenth century south frequently noted the peculiar power and beauty of the songs of slaves. Observers sometimes found it difficult to explain the sounds they heard, but many described being moved in extraordinary, and even distressing, ways. George Hepworth, a New England minister visiting Carrollton, Louisiana during the Civil War, wrote of encountering “a large number of refugee blacks, not yet freedmen” who were gathered in the area, “living on three-quarter Government rations and working in every way in which they could.” Hepworth describes entering a simple church the former slaves had built on their new compound and finding therein about a hundred people, in perfect silence:

“At length, however, a single voice, coming from a dark corner of the room, began a low, mournful chant, in which the whole assemblage joined by degrees. It was a strange song, with seemingly very little rhythm, and was what is termed in music a minor; it was not a psalm, nor a real song, as we understand these words; for there was nothing that approached the jubilant in it. It seemed more like a wail, a mournful, dirge-like expression of sorrow. At first, I was inclined to laugh, it was far from what I had been accustomed to call music; then I felt uncomfortable, as though I could not endure it, and half rose to leave the room; and at last, as the weird chorus rose a little above, and then fell a little below, the keynote, I was overcome by the real sadness and depression of soul which it seemed to symbolize…. They sang for a full half-hour,—an old man knelt down to pray. His voice was at first low and indistinct … He seemed to gain impulse as he went on, and pretty soon burst out with an O good, dear Lord! we pray for de cullered people. Thou knows well ‘nuff what we’ve been through: do, do, oh! do gib us free! when the whole audience swayed back and forward in their seats, and uttered in perfect harmony a sound like that caused by prolonging the letter m with the lips closed. One or two began this wild, mournful chorus; and in an instant all joined in, and the sound swelled upwards and downwards like waves of the sea.”

The spirituals are a transforming and transformational music. A principal aim of the songs, when sung in ceremonial context, has been to invoke the presence of spirit. Like Hepworth, other nineteenth and early twentieth century observers remarked at palpable changes in the energy of the meetings and churches where spirituals were being sung. They commented that Black singers manipulated timbres in ways unexpected and unfamiliar to ears trained to European music scales. Nonetheless, these “strange” resonances often had sig-
nal effects on the spirit of the place and on the listener him or herself. In a Florida guidebook published in 1876, author Sidney Lanier writes:

“I have seen a whole congregation of negroes at night . . . swaying to and fro with the ecstasy and glory of [their song], abandon as by one consent the semitone that should come according to the civilized modus, and sing in its place a big lusty whole tone that would shake any man’s soul.”

This is one of the most marked ways in which the African American spirituals tradition resembles other religious expressions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. In Santeria, Vodou, Candomblé and many other Black traditions of the Caribbean and Latin America, a central objective of collective worship is to create the space for the sacred to enter and engage with the people present. The spirit is not simply to be considered and acknowledged, but to be felt, experienced and relished. The combination of chanted or sung prayer, ritual music and dance is intended to transform the space and the individuals present so that they are open to another quality of experience. So too, the spirituals, especially when accompanied by rhythmic movement and the ring shout, were designed to manifestly change the nature of the space. To sacralize it. To sacralize the singers and the listeners. To make available to all present an alternative experience of being in the world.

It is important to understand that this transformational meaning and purpose of the spirituals was widespread in the first century of the creation of this music. An example was recorded in 1926 by Clifton Furness who attended a prayer meeting held in one of the old slave cabins on a South Carolina plantation. Furness related that the service started with the preacher slowly reading a selection of scripture, gradually increasing his tempo and vigor, until, after a while a steady moaning rose up in the shadowy corners where the women sat. Some of the women, their babies wrapped in bundles, patted and rocked in time to the flow of the preacher’s rhythm and several men tapped their feet “in strange syncopation.” Furness reported that a vigorous cadence developed in the room, a rhythmic presence that affected all who were there, including himself. “It seemed to take shape almost visibly, and grow,” he wrote. “I was gripped with the feeling of a mass-intelligence, a self-conscious entity, gradually informing the crowd and taking possession of every mind there, including my own.” As the intensity grew, a man sitting directly in front of Furness, his head bowed, body
swaying and feet moving up and down, suddenly shouted aloud: *Git right—sodger! Git right—sodger! Git right—wit Gawd!*

"Instantly the crowd took it up . . . A distinct melodic outline became more and more prominent, shaping itself around the central theme of the words, *Git right, sodger!* Scraps of other words and tunes were flung into the melody of sound by individual singers from time to time, but the general trend was carried on by a deep undercurrent, which appeared to be stronger than the mind of any individual present, for it bore the mass of improvised harmony and rhythms into the most effective climax of incremental repetition that I have ever heard. I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us along, call it mob-mind, communal composition, or what you will."10

Visitors to African American ritual ceremonies often initially felt a certain physical/psychic discomfort at the nature of the energy present, especially as it grew discernibly in strength. Some then also reported feeling a powerful connection to that energy as it touched everyone present in profound ways. Many who attend ceremonies of contemporary Candomblé, Santeria and Vodou report a similar combination of responses. The percussive rhythms can be so affecting that observers feel an unexplained desire to leave or to cry, as if the sounds were influencing them at vibrational levels and frequencies of which they had not previously been aware.11

**Spirituals in African American Christianity**

As we have seen, in the nineteenth century context, before Black religious music entered the concert halls, the ring shout and spirituals were closely associated. It was not possible to have the sacred circle dance without some form of vocal music with percussive accents; nor was it likely, in a worship setting, to experience the singing of the sacred songs without repetitive corporal movement in a circle.

From the sea islands off of South Carolina and Georgia, west to Mississippi and Louisiana and back northeast to Philadelphia, there are reports from travelers, diarists and later, former slaves themselves, describing the sacred circle dances that Black people performed throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. Not all African Americans deemed the ring shout an appropriate form of veneration, however. In the 1870s, Bishop Daniel Alexander
Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal church expressed an almost apoplectic frustration that the danced circle with rhythmic clapping of hands was virtually a prerequisite for worship and conversion among most Black people he encountered at the time. It is, he wrote “the essence of religion” to the vast majority of ignorant masses. At a large revival (“a bush meeting”) of Black Christians in Philadelphia, the bishop condemned the practice as “heathenish” and demanded that the local pastor “go and stop their dancing.” Bishop Payne was told, “Sinners won’t get converted unless there is a ring... The Spirit of God works upon people in different ways. At camp meeting there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted.”

Scholars of African American history and religion have indicated that the process of “Christianization” of Black slaves was much lengthier and more complex than previously thought. Though Africans and their descendants lived and labored in the mainland colonies (and later the new nation) from the seventeenth century, large-scale conversions of African American people occurred from the 1820s forward. Prior to that time, most Blacks were not Christian. And throughout the nineteenth century, the Christianity to which the majority of Black people converted was distinctly influenced by African values and traditions. In the spirituals, as well as in the sermons of Black preachers and in the chanted prayers of congregations, the words, stories and language of nineteenth century American Christianity were welded to African artistic and ritual forms. The rhythms and tones of the preachers’ voices and of the congregations’ singing, the danced movements and the handclaps and tapped beats were all African, although the message was ostensibly Christian. Stuckey writes that even when standard Christian hymns were part of a worship ceremony, African sensibilities were transforming the music. “While a hymn was being sung, rhythms of the ring shout, which were the rhythms of the spirituals, were being applied, as the Africans took possession of the hymn.”

The role of Black ministers and singers in the transformation/creation of Black religion in the United States cannot be underestimated. As they interpreted biblical stories through the lens of their own oppression, enslaved people began to form a distinctive understanding of Christianity that emphasized the liberatory aspects of the Bible’s imperatives and Jesus’ great compassion and alliance with suffering people. The combination of the “freedom-seeking” impulse in Black New World religion; an emphasis on transformative music and rhythmic, percussive movement in worship; and the experience of possession or intimacy with spirit is the hallmark of African American Christianity, setting it
apart from other variants of the Christian tradition in the United States. These elements are among those shared profoundly with other religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

There are interesting parallels between the experience of slaves in Protestant areas of North American and those in Catholic contexts in the Caribbean and South America, in terms of the use of Christian structures to meet their needs. In countries where Catholicism was the dominant religion, Black people often used the hagiography of the saints to create "codes" by which African deities could be identified and worshipped without undue resistance. For example, St. Lazarus—whose bodily sores and association with death and rebirth marked a similarity to the orisha of healing, Omolú or Obaluaíye (Babaluaíye)—became a legitimate and legitimizing representation in Santeria and Candomblé. Similarly, St. George, often depicted on a horse with the armor and implements of battle, is associated with Oxóssi or Ochosi, a hunter/warrior orisha who rides on horseback.

Protestant Christianity in the nineteenth century United States encouraged individual reading of the Bible to a much greater extent than did Roman Catholicism of the same period in Latin America. That encouragement was the means by which many people gained a modicum of literacy in North America, including some enslaved people, although slaves were generally forbidden by law and custom to read. Nevertheless, the few individuals in the slave community who did gain this skill often shared what they learned with their fellows. Religious leaders in particular would have been in a position to help disseminate the stories of the Old and New Testaments, and together with the communities they served, begin to create an alternative interpretation, a "freedom exegesis" based in their experiences as people in bondage. The outlines of this alternative, African American interpretation of the Bible are well-known as many elements survive today in the social justice witness of the Black church and in the lyrics of countless spirituals. The lyrics speak, sometimes directly and sometimes more obliquely, to the inevitable coming of justice, the steadfast faithfulness of God, the compassion of Jesus for those suffering and mistreated, and the right of all God's children to share in the bounty of the earth.

The spirituals are often recognized as carrying "coded messages" understood by the Blacks who sang them but not necessarily by owners or enforcers. Songs such as "Wade in the Water," "Go Down Moses," and "Follow the Drinking Gourd," served unsuspected purposes of alerting slaves that an opportunity to escape was close by. Other songs, like "Run, Mary, Run" and "Oh Freedom"—
which respectively included the lines “You got a right to the tree of life” and “Before I be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave”—reflected and fed courage to resist slavery by both internal and external means.

In addition to these kinds of codes, there is a substrata of cipher in the spirituals that highlights yet another connection to sister traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. This level of “secret language” was present in the sound of the songs, the way they were sung: the elided tones and repetitions, the humming, the broomstick and stomped feet percussive accompaniments; the chants, the prayers and responsive callings in entrancing rhythm. These distinctive elements of traditional spirituals were echoes and adaptations of African forms of communicating with the divinities and the ancestors. In this sense, the songs were not only codes for freedom and courage, they were also codes for summoning the spirits of Africa, in the ancestral ways.

It was thus by means of the spirituals and the ring shout that Africans found a way to connect their traditional forms of worship to the exercise of Christian faith. And it was in this conversion that African Americans re-created and re-interpreted Christianity to speak to African imperatives and to their experience of slavery and resistance in the New World. Anthropologist and scholar of Black folk traditions, Zora Neale Hurston, studied African American religion for many years with a close and knowledgeable eye, her observations made stronger through comparative work in Haiti and her own broad experience of varieties of Black religiosity. Hurston found many resonances of African religious values in the contemporary Black church of the mid-twentieth century. “In fact,” she said, “the Negro has not been christianized as extensively as is generally believed. The great masses are still standing before their pagan altars and calling old gods by a new name.”15

In addition to the ring shout, Black North American religious expression in the nineteenth century included other ritual movements such as clapping, swaying and a deep intimacy with spirit that manifested as “possession.” Hand clapping, like dance, is important in many traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. Commonly, clapping is used as a percussive accompaniment to singing—sometimes just a simple, regular marking of the downbeat and sometimes with syncopated varying quick and slow rhythms that recall tambourines or drums. In contemporary Black church settings in the United States clapping is still used to emphasize and affirm the words of a prayer, a sermon or a song, such that the emphasis itself is a bodily acknowledgment of spiritual presence and the emotional richness of the experience. This clapping, as emphasis, often takes the
form of several distinct, sonorous beats accompanied by spirited “hmmms” or exclamations. Clapping can also be an expression of joy, or, like music and dance, another way to use the body to summon spirit.

In many religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, the experience of possession or the ritual manifestation of sacred energies in the bodies of devotees, expresses the fundamental nature of the relationship between human beings and the divine. It is a linkage of exchange, of mutuality, of shared responsibility, and above all, of accompaniment. Anthropologist Sheila Walker writes that “a palpable relationship between people and their deities is a unifying feature of the Africa-to-Afro-America religious continuum.”16 Certainly, Santeria, Vodou and Candomblé are strongly marked by this phenomenon which is a central rite in the ritual life of the faith communities. In Black churches in the United States, especially Baptist, Pentecostal and Holiness churches some members regularly “get the Holy Ghost”, “get the Spirit”, or simply, “get happy.” Bernice Johnson Reagon refers to this intimacy with spirit as a tendency in Black religion “to get common with God,” that is, to relate to God almost as one would to a family member, and to experience Jesus as a deeply personal friend who, as much as anything else, offers compassionate and powerful company on the road of life. Walk with me Lord, walk with me./ While I’m walking this tedious journey/ I want Jesus just to walk with me.

This familiarity with God, rooted in African understandings of relationship between human beings and the divine, appears to have taken on especially marked characteristics in the Americas. It was as if, in the experience of slavery and the consequent struggles of resistance, there was a greater need for the presence and protection of sacred spirits. French photographer and scholar of African religions, Pierre Verger, wrote that in West Africa ceremonies for the embodiment of divine energies are the responsibility of a relative few liturgical leaders especially designated and trained for that work. In the New World, he noted, receiving the Spirit is a more widespread occurrence.17

The relatively more common experience of possession and initiation into the service of the orixás and iwas on this side of the Atlantic is perhaps a reflection of the effects of the physical and psychic disjunctions caused by the Middle Passage and slavery. Surviving the traumas, one could surmise, required a stronger grip, a tighter embrace between deity and devotee, than that which had existed previously.18 The spirituals facilitated this strong embrace, and songs such as Come Down Angels reflect the importance of calling on the embodied presence of the Holy Spirit. Come down angels, trouble the waters/ Come down
angels, trouble the waters/ Come down angels, trouble the waters/ Let God's saints come in.

The angels, the saints, the Holy Ghost, Jesus, the Lord. African Americans called on the sacred spirits of the Bible just as their foreparents and their relatives in other parts of the hemisphere called on the African spirits. Hurston wrote that all over the diaspora, the divinities cultivated and honored by Black people are “hardworking gods who serve their devotees just as laboriously as the supplicant serves them.”19 In Vodou, Candomblé and Santeria, relationship to ïwa, nkisi or orisha is very often understood as an inherited trait, a ritual obligation to which devotees are called. The tradition of generationally linked pastoral roles in the Black church may perhaps be seen in an analogous light. Certainly the deep, abiding, almost familial devotion to Jesus associated with traditional southern Black religion is related to the personal connection people of African descent have nurtured with their spirits all over the New World.

In most traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora the body is an essential conduit for spirit. It is not understood as somehow in opposition to the sacred, but as a housing for it, a place for spirit to enter into the world. The Black body, in the countries of the western hemisphere, has also been overwhelmingly a laboring body, a commodified body, a body undergoing many kinds of distress and signification. This tension—between the suffering body and the sacred body; the despised body and the cherished body—is lived out in the creation and perpetuation of the spirituals.

In her book, The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry writes about the relationship of human creativity to the challenge of expressing physical trauma. Ultimately, she says, the inexpressibility of great distress in simple verbal exposition leads to a “wider frame of invention.”20 That “wider frame of invention” for African Americans, included these songs, which emerged from the bodies of slaves as much as from their voices. The spirituals were a means of engaging the depth and complexity of a people’s experience of enslavement and resistance. A way to open up a pathway to another kind of gnosis: “Running the songs through your body,” Reagon implies, is a means toward a different understanding, an—other way of knowing who one is in the world.

Notes
3. In the King James Version of the Bible, book of Revelations, chapter 22, there is a passage that describes a river of vital water, on either side of which stood "the tree of life" that bore "twelve manner of fruits and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." Further into the chapter, in verse 14, there is also this: "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city."
5. In fact, spirituals were sometimes called "cabin songs," implying their original nature as a private music created by and for enslaved people. See program notes from The Spirituals Project's Third Annual Gala, Newman Center, The University of Denver. November 5, 2005; 6
7. The divinities are called orishas in the Yoruba-based traditions of Santeria and Candomblé (albeit with different spellings in each); Iwas in Vodou; voduns in Dahomean Candomblé traditions; wintis in the Surinamese religion of the same name; and nkisis in Cuban tradition of Congo-Angola origin known as Palo as well as in the Congo-Angolan lineages of Brazilian Candomblé.
11. It must be said, however, that the power of the ritual music of Afro-Atlantic religions can also have the opposite effect, drawing people to listen and eliciting feelings of unexplained connection to the energies cultivated there.
12. Although the bishop was himself African American, he believed, like some of his fellow Black elites, that the ring shout was improper, unchristian and disgraceful to the race.
15. Zora Neale Hurston, The Sanctified Church, Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981; 103
18. Harding, 155-156