The Vernacular Tradition Part 1

In African American literature, *the vernacular* refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories, and, in our own era, hip-hop songs that are part of the oral, not primarily the literate (or written-down) tradition of black expression. What distinguishes this body of work is its in-group and, at times, secretive, defensive, and aggressive character: it is not, generally speaking, produced for circulation beyond the black group itself (though it sometimes is bought and sold by those outside its circle). This highly charged material has been extraordinarily influential for writers of poetry, fiction, drama, and so on. What would the work of Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison be like without its black vernacular ingredients? What, for that matter, would the writing of Mark Twain or William Faulkner be without these same elements? Still, this vernacular material also has its own shapes, its own integrity, its own place in the black literary canon: *the literature of the vernacular.*

Defining the vernacular and delineating it as a category of African American literary studies have been difficult and controversial projects. Some critics note the vernacular's typical demarcation as a category of things that are male, attached only to lower-class groups, and otherwise simplistically expressive of a vast and

Juke Joint, Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1939. "Musically speaking," wrote Zora Neale Hurston in an important essay of 1934, "the Jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues, and on blues has been founded jazz."

Throughout this section, titles followed by • are available on the StudySpace website

complexly layered and dispersed group of people. Others warn both against the sentimentalization of a stereotyped "folk" and their "lore" and against the impulse to define black people and their literature solely in terms of the production of unconscious but somehow definitive work from the bottom of the social hierarchy. With these critiques often come warnings against forming too easy an idea about the shape and direction of African American literary history. Most emphatic is the argument against a "modernist" view that would posit an almost sacred set of foundational vernacular texts by "black and unknown bards" (to borrow James Weldon Johnson's ringing phrase) leading to ever more complex works by higher and higher artists marching into the future. Is contemporary music really more "progressive" or "complex" than the work of Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, or Louis Armstrong?

And yet even after these questions and criticisms have been raised, somehow such distinctive forms as church songs, blues, tall tales, work songs, games, jokes, dozens, and rap songs—along with myriad other such forms, past and present—persist among African Americans, as they have for decades. They are, as a Langston Hughes poem announces, *still here*. Indeed, the vernacular is not a body of quaint, folksy items. It is not an exclusive male province. Nor is it associated with a particular level of society or with a particular historical era. It is neither long ago, far away, nor fading. Instead, the vernacular encompasses vigorous, dynamic processes of expression, past and present. It makes up a rich storehouse of materials wherein the values, styles, and character types of black American life are reflected in language that is highly energized and often marvelously eloquent.

Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison have argued that vernacular art accounts, to a large degree, for the black American's legacy of self-awareness and endurance. For black performers and listeners (as well as readers) it has often served the classic function of teaching as it delights. Refusing to subscribe wholly to the white American's ethos and worldview, African Americans expressed in these vernacular forms their own ways of seeing the world, its history, and its meanings. The vernacular comprises, Ellison said, nothing less than another instance of humanity's "triumph over chaos." In it experiences of the past are remembered and evaluated; through it African Americans attempt to humanize an often harsh world, and to do so with honesty, with toughness, and often with humor.

THE VERNACULAR: A BRIEF HISTORY

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century observers, black and white, recorded their fascination with these black oral forms. Thomas Jefferson, for example, observed that musically the slaves "are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time." Nearly fifty years later, a Mississippi planter used conventionally racialized language to inform Frederick Law Olmstead that "niggers is allers good singers nat'rally. I reckon they got better lungs than white folks, they hev such powerful voices." Frederick Douglass took pains in each of his autobiographies to define the meaning of the songs of slaves. He points out, for instance, that those who hear the music as evidence that the slaves are happy with their station in life miss the slave songs' deeper, troubled moanings and meanings. By the end of the nineteenth century, some black writers were declaring these forms evidence of special "Negro genius," a keystone proof of black contribution to world culture and of black readiness for full U.S. citizenship.

Early landmark anthologies of black literature, *The New Negro* (1925), *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931), and *The Negro Caravan* (1941), included careful discussions of black songs and stories; *Caravan* presented vernacular texts as forms to be enjoyed and studied both as art and as part of the usually unseen historical record. These books opened the way to the realization that black writers, most obviously poets, were sometimes strongly influenced by vernacular forms. Certain Negro writers of the 1920s and 1930s (and their literary offspring of later decades) consciously sought to draw artistic power from the vernacular into their writing. In some cases—one thinks of works by Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston as examples—writers celebrated such forms as blues and sermons and tried to capture them on the page with as little intrusion as possible.

By the late 1930s, however, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and other African American writers who were close students of the black vernacular warned against the sentimentalization of "the folk" and declared the writer's responsibility to do what they saw Eliot, Stein, and Joyce (along with Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Duke Ellington) doing in their art: to capture the note and trick of the vernacular at the same time that he or she transformed it into something new by drawing on artistic sources and traditions beyond the vernacular. These writers warned too against the danger of winning audiences for black writing with the "easy tears" of a simplified black folklore at the expense of political engagement. What Ellison in particular advocated was a literature as conscious of the best new thinking in political science and modern writing as it was of the ways of Brer Rabbit and the down-home blues. Sounding a similar note in the late 1970s, Albert Murray pronounced what he termed (with a reference to literary critic Kenneth Burke) the "vernacular imperative" for writers: all writers, said Murray, must be thoroughly knowledgeable of the local materials surrounding them (what else could they write about with true authority?) as well as of the artistic traditions for transforming those materials—the vernacular—into the silver and gold of personalized modern artistic expression.

The Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s reflected many of these controversies and convictions about the vernacular. It was a period of the rediscovery of Hurston, who was widely celebrated by the rising new group of feminist writers as well as by various factions of the male-centered black aesthetic group. At the same time, it was a period of rediscovery of Wright and Hughes, whose radical politics and celebration of the potential within black working-class communities were widely heralded and imitated. More than ever there was a general sense of black vernacular expression as something of current value not just among working classes but throughout the African American "nation." Such students of black speech and story as Roger Abrahams, John Szwed, and Geneva Smitherman helped define the peculiarities of black vernacular expression and noted its relation to black oral forms throughout the Americas and in Africa. By the 1980s and 1990s, many scholars and writers recognized the black vernacular as an enormously rich and various source. Key analytical books by Lawrence Levine, Sterling Stuckey, Albert Murray, Ralph Ellison, Houston A. Baker Jr., Henry Louis Gates Jr., Cheryl Wall, and others paved the way

for the ongoing contemporary analysis of the forms as sources for historical and critical insight and also as wellsprings for the writer. In the first years of the twenty-first century, scholars across the disciplines, including Farah Jasmine Griffin, Brent Hayes Edwards, Fred Moten, Adam Bradley, Kobena Mercer, Greg Tate, Robin D. G. Kelley, Michael Veal, Lawrence P. Jackson, George E. Lewis, and Daphne Brooks, have charted new directions in black American vernacular studies.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, *all* of these vernacular forms continued to exist and, in some cases, to multiply and flourish. On a given weekend in New York City, for example, one might choose to hear live performances of blues, jazz, and gospel as well as several contemporary forms related to R&B. As hip-hop culture has continued to increase in commercial value and worldwide visibility, one wonders how much black vernacular remains. But this is always a key question for students of these forms. How to evaluate a creolized form once it hits the marketplace, once the marketers have, in Langston Hughes's phrase, "taken our blues and gone?" How to separate and celebrate the superb fire and ice of hip-hop at its best from the bland imitations and marketeering hoaxes? With this is the mystery that for all the tawdry caprice and relentlessness of the marketplace, somehow the impulse to create vernacular forms that are fresh, independently produced, and recognizably black has persisted.

DEFINING THE VERNACULAR

What is the vernacular? According to *Webster's* second edition, the term comes from the Latin—"*vernaculus:* Born in one's house, native, from *verna,* a slave born in his master's house, a native"—and counts among its meanings the following: (1) "belonging to, developed in, and spoken or used by the people of a particular place, region, or country; native; indigenous. . . . (2) characteristic of a locality; local." In the context of American art, the vernacular may be defined as expression that springs from the creative interaction between the received or learned traditions and that which is locally invented, "made in America." This definition, derived from Ralph Ellison and American cultural historian John A. Kouwenhoven, sees Manhattan's skyscrapers as well as Appalachian quilts as vernacular because they use modern techniques and forms (machines, factory-made materials, etc.) along with what Ellison calls the play-it-by-ear methods and local products that give American forms their distinctive resonances and power. What, then, is the African American vernacular? It consists of forms sacred—songs, prayers, and sermons—and secular—work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz, and stories of many kinds. It also consists of dances, wordless musical performances, stage shows, and visual art forms of many sorts.

As Houston A. Baker Jr. noted, the word *vernacular* as a cultural term has been used most frequently to describe developments in the world of architecture. In contrast to the exalted, refined, or learned styles of designing buildings, the vernacular in architecture refers both to local styles by builders unaware of or unconcerned with developments beyond their particular province and to works by inspired, cosmopolitan architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, a careful student of architecture as a worldwide enterprise and of the latest technologies but also one who wanted his buildings custom-made for their surroundings.

Black ironworkers, from slavery through the twentieth century, left their mark. Along with quilters, basketmakers, and tailors, ironworkers offer another instance of African continuity in art. The delicate figuration of the gates, windows, and staircases of Philip Simmons (1912–2009) have made him one of the most celebrated iron artists in American history.

This example from architecture is relevant insofar as the makers of black vernacular art used the American language and everything at their disposal to make art that paid a minimum of attention to the Thou-shalt-nots of the academy or the arbiters of high style. Coming from the bottom of the American social ladder, blacks have been relatively free from scrutiny by the official cultural monitors. As a group they tended to care little about such opinions; what the black social dance called the Black Bottom looked like to the proctors at the local ballet class (be they white or black) was of little interest to them. Thus it is no surprise that the black inventors of this rich array of definitively American forms have had such a potent impact on America's cultural life and history. Consider, for example, the world-wide impact of the social dances called the cake-walk (with its strong impulses to parody) and the Lindy-Hop (the aerial dance taking its name from Charles Lindberg's daring nonstop airplane voyage from New York to Paris, 1927).

The forms included here are varied and resist aesthetic generalizations. One is drawn nonetheless to parts of Zora Neale Hurston's wonderful catalog of the "Characteristics of Negro Expression": "angularity," "asymmetry," a tendency toward "mimicry" and the "will to adorn." In addition, the forms share traits that reflect their African background: call–response patterns of many kinds; group creation; and a poly-rhythmically percussive, dance-beat orientation not only in musical forms but in the rhythm of a line, tale, or rhyme. It is not surprising that improvisation is a highly prized aspect of vernacular performance. Here too one finds European, Euro-American, and American Indian forms reshaped to African American purposes and

At the end of the nineteenth century, the black dance called the cakewalk, with its strong elements of parody, found its way to New York stage shows and became a citywide and then a national dance craze.

sensibilities. For example, like black folktales, tales from Europe often lack clear delineations of sacred and profane, good and evil, righteous punishers and righteously punished. Similarly, the blues offer few such consolations, solutions, or even scapegoats. At times what seems revealed is the starkness of a life that is real, that is tough, and that must be confronted without the convenience of formulaic dodges or wishful escapes. Even the spirituals admit that "I've been 'buked and I've been scorned, I've been talked about, / Sure as you're born." And the church songs involve—along with the yearning for heaven's peace—confrontation with real troubles of the world and the will to do something about them.

One of the most compelling efforts at generalization about African American aesthetics is drawn by Henry Louis Gates Jr. from the vernacular itself. Drawing on linguistic research by Geneva Smitherman and others, Gates has defined *signifying*—the often competitively figurative, subversively parodying speech of tales and of less formalized talk as well as of various forms of music—as an impulse that operates not only between contesting tale tellers but between writers (and painters, and dancers, etc.) as well. According to this view, Toni Morrison signifies on writers who precede her by revising their conceptions of character and scene, for example, or perhaps she even signifies on aspects of the novelistic tradition itself. In Gates's complex formulations about how African Americans create, the vernacular meets not only formal art but the world of scholarly criticism as well.

This leaves us with a battery of concerns from postmodern cultural criticism: Is the idea of the vernacular "essentialist," that is, dependent on definitions of racial essences that are not knowable outside the black circle? What is *black* about the black vernacular? When is "American" culture not *black* and *vernacular*? What stake do cultural observers have in this terminology, or, for that matter, in its rejection?

This leads us further to inquire: How were this section's entries selected? Whence came these particular texts? Pouring over dozens of anthologies and collections, hymnals, songbooks, recordings, and literary works yielded texts that are not only historically representative but also distinctive and resonant with aesthetic power. One abiding problem with capturing such works is that they were not originally constructed for the printed page but for performance within complicated social and often highly ritualized settings. Nonstandard pronunciations in texts transcribed from records are generally represented with a minimum of invented spellings—the "eye dialect" so often used by American writers to designate declassé or politically disempowered groups. This effort was informed by those of writers who captured black speech by getting the rhythms right, the pauses, the special emphases and colors. But contractions and new spellings were allowed when they seemed called for.

What determines the order of the vernacular selections, genre by genre? Whenever possible, works are presented in chronological order and are clustered according to authorship. But because authorship and chronology are often unknown or ambiguous (for example, who first told the tale of the rabbit and the tar-baby?), we simply have done our best to ascertain credits and dates when they are available. In the folktales section, works are credited and dated in footnotes, but—recognizing that in this instance the "authors" are the recorders (brilliantly artistic ones though they may be) of works created incrementally by many, many voices over many, many years—they are listed not by date or writer but by subject: the animal tales precede the ones with human characters and follow a general chronological arc. Such broad thematic and timeline concerns govern all of the vernacular section's orderings—even when specific dates and authors are given. For even in the case of a Duke Ellington song or a Martin Luther King sermon/speech, for which date and author seem so specific, what we reproduce here is one particular text or version of a performance given over and over, according to changing settings and moments. And both Ellington and King draw on rich vernacular traditions (on black and unknown bards) to fashion and project their works. (In Ellington's case, the best text may be the recorded "text," with its performance by the sixteen members of his band, each of whom adds much more to the creative process than is the case with European "classical" music.) More than any other form of black literature, the vernacular resists being captured on a page or in a historical frame: by definition, it is about gradual, group creation; it is about *change*.

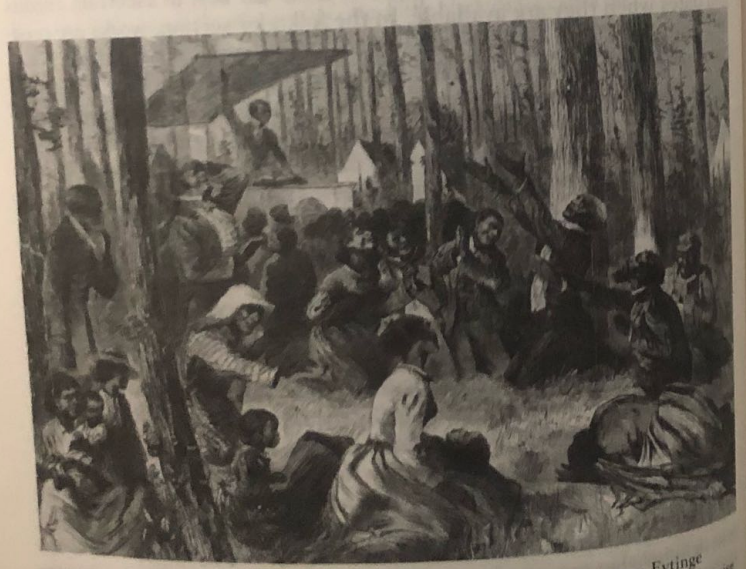
Clearly, the selections here and on the StudySpace playlist are not meant to be definitive but to invite further explorations and findings. Black vernacular forms are works in progress, experiments in a still new country. They have not survived because they are perfect, polished jewels but because they are vigorous fountains of expression. Not only are they influential for

writers but they are wonderful creations on their own. In the black tradition, no forms are more quick or overflowing with black power and black meaning.

SPIRITUALS

Negro spirituals are the religious songs sung by African Americans since the earliest days of slavery and first gathered in a book in 1801 by the black church leader Richard Allen. As scholars have observed, this term, whether abbreviated to *spirituals* or not, is somewhat misleading: for many black slaves, and for their offspring, the divisions between secular and sacred were not as definite as the designation *spirituals* would suggest. Certainly these religious songs were not sung only in churches or in religious ritual settings. Travelers in the Old South and slaves themselves reported that music about God and the Bible was sung during work time, play time, and rest time as well as on Sundays at praise meetings. As historian Lawrence Levine observed, for slaves the concept of the sacred signified a strong will to incorporate "within this world all the elements of the divine."

That the songs were sung not just in ritual worship but throughout the day meant that they served as powerful shields against the values of the slaveholders and their killing definitions of black humanity. For one thing, along with a sense of the slaves' personal self-worth as children of a mighty God, the spirituals offered them much-needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery's restrictions and cruelties. Certainly, "this world is not my home" was a steady theme in the spirituals, one that offered its singer–hearers visions of a peaceful, loving realm beyond the one in



"A Negro Camp Meeting in the South." This 1872 engraving by Solomon Eytinge depicts a church meeting held outdoors, apart from intruders. Families gathered to praise God in sermon and song and to consider their "rolling through an unfriendly world" (as one spiritual puts it) toward "a bright side, somewhere."

which they labored. Some of the songs bespoke the dream of flying away, leaving the world of care behind:

I've got two wings for to veil my face
I've got two wings for to fly away . . .

Along with such visions of displacement and escape, many of the spirituals offered images of a steady and just King Jesus who had a comfortable space around his altar where those in Heaven could rest a while (significant for people forced to work all day), a place where they would be reunited with "friends and kindreds" who had gone before. One song makes clear the vision of familiarity and ease:

A-settin' down with Jesus
Eatin' hone and drinkin' wine
Marchin' round de throne
Wid Peter, James, and John.

And:

I'm gonna tell God all my troubles,
When I get home . . .
I'm gonna tell him the road was rocky
When I get home.

In such visions of justice and peace resided both a healthful impulse to escape the sorrowful world and an implied criticism of life's earthly overwork, injustice, and violence.

Most of the spirituals were not about easeful King Jesus at all, however, but about the Old Testament God and his heroes and prophets. Moses, Job, Daniel, Samson, and Ezekiel are celebrated in scores of spirituals along with the chosen people, protected by their furiously watchful god. According to poet and critic Sterling A. Brown, "Fairly easy allegories identified Egypt-land with the South, Pharaoh with the masters, the Israelites with themselves and Moses with their leader." It is not surprising that some of the songs offered not just psychic escapes and veiled criticisms but calls for this-worldly attentiveness and direct action:

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
And why not every man?

Frederick Douglass and others spoke of references in the spirituals to escapes not to heaven but to freedomland, whether in the non-slave-holding states or all the way to Canada. "Swing low sweet chariot, Coming for to carry me home" was evidently one of those songs that referred to the urge, and perhaps the specific plan, to make a run out of the jaws of slavery into the land of freedom. Many songs, doubtless sung well out of the master's earshot, celebrated the coming of freedom:

O Freedom;
O Freedom!
And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave!
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Other secret songs were equally direct and stark:

No more driver's lash for me;
No more, no more . . .
No more peck of corn for me;
Many thousands go.

In terms of form, these songs employ the call–response patterns of West and Central Africa, patterns that were encouraged by the lining-out (that is, the calling out of the song lyrics in anticipation of the group's singing of the lyrics) of hymns that the New World Africans encountered in the Protestant services of America. The

single voice of the chorus would be answered by a group of singers, usually the entire group gathered together. The songs varied in rhythm. Dirgelike sorrow songs, rightly named by W. E. B. Du Bois in his marvelous chapter on the music in *The Souls of Black Folk*, were quite appropriate for such plaintive lyrics as

Don't know what my mother wants to stay here fuh,
Dis ole world ain't been no friend to huh.

Only slightly less dark was the meditative poetry that clergyman, writer, and army officer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of the first to pay respectful attention to the spiritual, heard among black Civil War soldiers:

I'll lie in de grave
And stretch out my arms,
When I lay dis body down.

Elsewhere, the spirituals presented a drivingly percussive vision of Judgment Day. "That Great Gittin' Up Morning!," a song of Gabriel, trumpet song, and jubilation, might have been used in a ring shout where the possessed worshipers were inspired to raise their voices and move their bodies in praise of the Lord.

Further study of spirituals will investigate efforts to capture their sounds on the printed page—by Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and many others. New work will explore the spirituals' African, European, and Native American sources; the debates over the originality of their forms and verses; their presentation in minstrel shows and other commercial venues; their fund-raising importance for nineteenth- and twentieth-century black schools; their uses by classically trained black composers and arrangers as a concert "art music"; their uses by Antonín Dvořák, William Grant Still, Duke Ellington, and other composers in search of an indigenous American music that used large forms; their importance for "race men and women" of the last two hundred years, who often pointed to the songs as evidence of "Negro genius"; and their relation to gospel and to other African American musics. Suffice it to say that even when read they are both moving and inspiring in their complex expression of sorrow and a hope for far-off joy.

City Called Heaven•

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow.
I'm tossed in this wide world alone.
No hope have I for tomorrow.
I'm tryin' to make heaven my home.

Sometimes I am toss'ted and driven.
Sometimes I don't know where to roam.
I've heard of a city called heaven.
I've started to make it my home.

My mother's gone on to pure glory.
My father's still walkin' in sin.
My sisters and brothers won't own me
Because I'm a-tryin' to get in.

Sometimes I am toss'ted and driven.
Sometimes I don't know where to roam,
But I've heard of a city called heaven
And I've started to make it my home.

I Know Moon-Rise[1]

"I know moon-rise, I know star-rise,
Lay dis body down.
I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight,
To lay dis body down.
I'll walk in de graveyard, I'll walk through de graveyard,
To lay dis body down.
I'll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms;[2]
Lay dis body down.
I go to de judgment in de evenin' of de day,
When I lay dis body down;
And my soul and your soul will meet in de day
When I lay dis body down."

Ezekiel Saw de Wheel[1]•

Ezekiel saw de wheel
'Way up in de middle of de air
Ezekiel saw de wheel
'Way in de middle of the air

The big wheel run by faith
And de little wheel run by de grace of God
A wheel in a wheel
'Way in de middle of de air

Better mind my brother how you walk on de cross
'Way in de middle of de air
Your foot might slip and your soul get lost
'Way in de middle of de air

Old Satan wears a club foot shoe
'Way in de middle of de air
If you don't mind he'll slip it on you
'Way in de middle of the air

Ezekiel saw de wheel
'Way up in de middle of de air
Ezekiel saw de wheel
'Way in de middle of the air

The big wheel run by faith
And de little wheel run by de grace of God

1. This particular spiritual was singled out by 19th-century scholar, abolitionist, and army officer Thomas Wentworth Higginson for special praise.
2. Of this line, Higginson wrote in 1867: "Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered, was his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively than in that line."

1. A Negro spiritual inspired by the biblical book of Ezekiel and arranged by William Dawson.

A wheel in a wheel
'Way in de middle of de air

Ezekiel saw de wheel
'Way up in de middle of de air
Ezekiel saw de wheel
'Way in de middle of de air

I'm a-Rollin'•

I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,

O, brothers, won't you help me,
O, brothers, won't you help me to pray;
O, brothers, won't you help me,
Won't you help me in de service of de Lord.

I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,

O, sisters, won't you help me,
O, sisters, won't you help me to pray;
O, sisters, won't you help me,
Won't you help me in de service of de Lord.

I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin' through an unfriendly world.

Go Down, Moses[1]•

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.

When Israel was in Egyptland
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland

1. The scholar and poet Sterling A. Brown observed in 1953 that this song was so direct in its protest that it was banned on many slave plantations.

Tell old Pharaoh
"Let my people go."

"Thus saith the Lord," bold Moses said,
"Let my people go;
If not I'll smite your first-born dead
Let my people go.

"No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go;
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go."

The Lord told Moses what to do
Let my people go;
To lead the children of Israel through,
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland,
Tell old Pharaoh,
"Let my people go!"

Been in the Storm So Long[1]•

I've been in the storm so long,
You know I've been in the storm so long,
Oh Lord, give me more time to pray,
I've been in the storm so long.

I am a motherless child,
Singin' I am a motherless child,
Singin' Oh Lord, give me more time to pray,
I've been in the storm so long.

This is a needy time,
This is a needy time,
Singin' Oh Lord, give me more time to pray,
I've been in the storm so long.

Lord, I need you now,
Lord, I need you now,
Singin' Oh Lord, give me more time to pray,
I've been in the storm so long.

My neighbors need you now,
My neighbors need you now,

1. That this version differs quite a bit from the one on the StudySpace playlist illustrates the dynamism of the oral form. Here and throughout this vernacular section, no single, final authoritative text exists.

Singin' Oh Lord, give me more time to pray,
I've been in the storm so long.

My children need you now,
My children need you now,
Singin' Oh Lord, give me more time to pray,
I've been in the storm so long.

Just look what a shape I'm in,
Just look what a shape I'm in,
Cryin' Oh Lord, give me more time to pray,
I've been in the storm so long.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot[1]•

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan[2] and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home,
A band of angels, coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,
Coming for to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

Steal Away to Jesus[1]•

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,

1. This is often cited as a song not just celebrating the hope of release into heaven but signaling the plan or the moment—or the general aspiration—to be carried "home" to freedom by the Underground Railroad system.
2. A river in the Mideast. *Crossing over Jordan* is a metaphor for going to heaven.
1. Often cited as a signal song for runaway slaves. If so, its lyrics—especially using the dangerous word *steal*—must have been kept secret from white supporters of slavery.

The trumpet sounds within-a my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here.

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

Green trees a-bending,
Po' sinner stands a-trembling,
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here.

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

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?[1]•

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
An' why not everyman?

He delivered Daniel from de lion's den,
Jonah[2] from de belly of de whale.
And de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,
An' why not everyman?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
An' why not everyman?

De moon run down in a purple stream,
De sun forbear to shine,
And every star disappear,
King Jesus shall be mine.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
An' why not everyman?

De wind blows east and de wind blows west,
It blows like de judgment day,
And every poor soul dat never did pray'll
Be glad to pray dat day.

1. When the Babylonians threw Daniel into a lions' den, God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths, thus delivering him from harm (Daniel 6.22).
2. After he had been swallowed by a great fish, Jonah was saved when God heard his prayers (Jonah 2.7–10).

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
An' why not everyman?

I set my foot on de Gospel ship,
An' de ship begin to sail.
It landed me over on Canaan's[3] shore
And I'll never come back no more.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
An' why not everyman?

God's a-Gonna Trouble the Water•

Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
God's a-gonna trouble the water.

See that host all dressed in white,
God's a-gonna trouble the water;
The leader looks like the Israelite,[1]
God's a-gonna trouble the water.

Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
God's a-gonna trouble the water.

See that host all dressed in red,
God's a-gonna trouble the water;
Looks like the band that Moses led,
God's a-gonna trouble the water.

Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
God's a-gonna trouble the water.

Soon I Will Be Done•

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,

3. The Promised Land, encompassing present-day Israel and parts of Syria; here, a symbol of heaven.
1. I.e., Moses.

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.
Goin' home to live with God.

No more weepin' and a-wailing,
No more weepin' and a-wailing,
No more weepin' and a-wailing,
I'm goin' to live with God.

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.
Goin' home to live with God.

I want t' meet my mother,
I want t' meet my mother,
I want t' meet my mother,
I'm goin' to live with God.

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.
Goin' home to live with God.

I want t' meet my Jesus,
I want t' meet my Jesus,
I want t' meet my Jesus,
I'm goin' to live with God.

Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world,
Troubles of the world, the troubles of the world,
Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world.
Goin' home to live with God.

Come Sunday[1]•

Lord, dear Lord of Love,
God almighty, Lord above:
Please look down and see
My people through.

Lord, dear Lord of Love,
God almighty, God above:
Please look down and see
My people through

I believe the sun and moon
Will shine up in the sky;
When the day is gray
I know it's clouds passing by.

1. A hymn by Duke Ellington, from a section of his concert work called *Black, Brown & Beige* (1943). Recorded, with lyrics by Ellington and sung by Mahalia Jackson, in 1958.

He'll give peace and comfort
To every troubled mind:
Come Sunday, Oh come Sunday,
That's the day.

Often we'll feel weary
But He knows our every care;
Go to Him in secret,
He will hear your every prayer.

Lilies of the valley,
They neither toil nor spin;
And flowers bloom
And springtime birds sing.

Often we'll feel weary
But He knows our every care;
Go to Him in secret,
He will hear your every prayer.

Up from dawn 'til sunset
Man works hard all day.
Come Sunday, oh come Sunday,
That's the day.

Secular Rhymes and Songs, Ballads, and Work Songs

As pervasive as were the sacred forms of expression among African Americans, secular forms were nearly as important for the slaves. Perhaps over time such forms have become more important than sacred ones; certainly, this seems to be the case for many blacks of the second half of the twentieth century and of the early twenty-first century as well.

Slave narrators reported mock-prayers, mock-sermons, and other parodies of the forms celebrated in church. Doubtless these provided a kind of outlet for the deeply faithful: the black laughter may have humanized an awesome God and his earthly saints (along with a powerful preacher, the subject of many a joke in this category) and thereby ironically *sustained* belief. Elsewhere, aside from religion and its purposes, such secular parodies of sacred texts contained their own stinging elements of truth:

"Our Fadder, Which are in Heaben!"—
White man owe me leben and pay me seben
"D'y Kingdom come! D'y Will be done!"—
An' if I hadn't tuck dat, I wouldn' git none.

In addition, they expressed with humor the bitter disappointments of slave existence:

My ole Mistiss promise me,
W'en she died, she'd set me free.
She lived so long dat 'er head got bal',
An' she give out 'n de notion a dyin' at all.

Superb narrative rhymes, sometimes framed as songs, also enliven this group. Here one finds praise songs to such fast-moving heroes as Travelin' Man; Long Gone Lost John; Railroad Bill; Po' Lazarus; and John Henry, the hard-muscled steel driver who died trying to outhammer the steam-driven hammer machine. Their more contemporary (that is, current and dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century) cousins are Shine and Stackolee, who, like certain earlier heroic ballad figures, are fast-talking figures of action and, if necessary, violence. Badman figures who "don't mind dying" became more numerous in twentieth-century lore. At times what makes sense in the tales is a figure with an oversize gun who not only can outsmart The Man (or however the square white authority figure is designated) but (and almost invariably these characters are male) can blow him to hell too. These hero and badman forms have had a strong impact on the blues, that other strong-hold of secular expression, and, in current times, on rap music, in which modern wish-fulfillment avengers roam, bragging, daring trouble, ready for war.

In this broad category of the secular, one finds children's game songs, rhyming snatches of advice ("a still tongue makes a wise head"), and other miscellaneous pieces. All are materials of play, which is sometimes fun and frivolous, sometimes instructive, sometimes frighteningly reflective of the violence of American society.

Work songs of slavery and (relative) freedom also fall within this space of secular black vernacular expression. These often ruggedly eloquent songs functioned to pass the time, to synchronize the work pace, and to reflect on the scene the workers witnessed. These story songs and rhymes were often expressed by virtuoso singers and wordsmiths whose underground talents, unseen by the broader society, are celebrated in the worlds in which they reign as "men of words," power figures. Doubtless their energy and unofficial artistry are part of the story of how Africans in America have managed to survive and even to prevail.

Secular Rhymes and Songs

[We raise de wheat]

We raise de wheat,
Dey gib us de corn:
We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de crust;
We sif de meal,
Dey gib us de huss;
We peel de meat,
Dey gib us de skin;
And dat's de way
Dey take us in;
We skim de pot,
Dey gib us de liquor,
And say dat's good enough for nigger.

Me and My Captain

Me an my captain don't agree,
But he don't know, 'cause he don't ask me;

He don't know, he don't know my mind,
When he see me laughing
Just laughing to keep from crying.

Oh what's the matter now,
Me and my captain can't get along nohow;
He don't know, he don't know my mind,
When he see me laughing
Just laughing to keep from crying.

He call me low down I just laugh,
Kick seat of my pants and that ain't half;
He don't know, he don't know my mind,
When he see me laughing
Just laughing to keep from crying.

Got one mind for white folks to see,
'Nother for what I know is me;
He don't know, he don't know my mind,
When he see me laughing
Just laughing to keep from crying.

Promises of Freedom

My ole Mistiss promise me,
W'en she died, she'd set me free.
She lived so long dat 'er head got bal',
An' she give out'n de notion a dyin' at all.

My ole Mistiss say to me:
"Sambo, I'se gwine ter set you free."
But w'en dat head git slick an' bal',
De Lawd couldn' a' killed 'er wid a big green maul.[1]

My ole Mistiss never die,
Wid 'er nose all hooked an' skin all dry.
But my ole Miss, she's somehow gone,
An' she lef' "Uncle Sambo" a-hillin' up co'n.

Ole Mosser lakwise promise me,
W'en he died, he'd set me free.
But ole Mosser go an' make his Will
Fer to leave me a-plowin' ole Beck still.

Yes, my ole Mosser promise me;
But "his papers" didn't leave me free.
A dose of pizen he'ped 'im along.
May de Devil preach 'is fūner'l song.

1. A heavy club, mallet, or staff.

No More Auction Block[1]

No More auction block for me
No more, no more
No more auction block for me
Many thousand gone

No more peck of corn for me
No more, no more
No more peck of corn for me
Many thousand gone

No more driver's lash for me
No more, no more
No more driver's lash for me
Many thousand gone

No more pint of salt for me
No more, no more
No more pint of salt for me
Many thousand gone

No more hundred lash for me
No more, no more
No more hundred lash for me
Many thousand gone

No more mistress call for me
No more, no more
No more mistress call for me
Many thousand gone

Jack and Dinah Want Freedom

Ole Aunt Dinah, she's jes lak me.
She wuk so hard dat she want to be free.
But, you know, Aunt Dinah's gittin' sorter ole;
An' she's feared to go to Canada, caze it's so cōl'.

Dar wus ole Uncle Jack, he want to git free.
He find de way Norf by de moss on de tree.
He cross dat river a-floatin' in a tub.
Dem Patterollers[1] give 'im a mighty close rub.

Dar is ole Uncle Billy, he's a mighty good Nigger.
He tote all de news to Mosser a little bigger.
When you tells Uncle Billy, you wants free fer a fac';
De nex' day de hide drap off'n yō' back.

1. By Gustavus D. Pike (1873); performed by The Jubilee Singers.

1. Formally and informally appointed police agents charged with intercepting fugitive slaves.

Run, Nigger, Run

Run, nigger run; de patter-roller[1] catch you;
Run, nigger, run, it's almost day.
Run, nigger, run; de patter-roller catch you;
Run, nigger, run, and try to get away.

Dis nigger run, he run his best,
Stuck his head in a hornet's nest,
Jumped de fence and run fru de paster;
White man run, but nigger run faster.

Dat nigger run, dat nigger flew,
Dat nigger tore his shirt in two.

Another Man Done Gone•

Another man done gone,
Another man done gone,
Uh—from the county farm,
Another man done gone.

I didn't know his name,
I didn't know his name,
I didn't know his name,
I didn't know his name.

He had a long chain on,
He had a long chain on,
He had a long chain on,
He had a long chain on.

He killed another man,
He killed another man,
He killed another man,
He killed another man.

I don' know where he's gone,
I don' know where he's gone,
I don' know where he's gone,
I don' know where he's gone.

I'm going to walk your log,
I'm going to walk your log,
I'm going to walk your log,
I'm going to walk your log.

1. See n. 1, p. 23, right.

You May Go But This Will Bring You Back[1]•

You may leave and go to Hali-ma-fack,[2]
But my slow-drag will-a bring you back,
A-well-a you may go but this will bring you back.

Ahhh, I been in the country but I moved to town,
I'm a toe-low shaker[3] from a-head on down,
Well-a you may go but this will bring you back.

Ahh, some folks call me a toe-low shaker,
It's a doggone lie, I'm a backbone breaker,[4]
Well-a you may go but this will bring you back.

Aw, you like my peaches but you don't like me,
Don't you like my peaches, don't you shake my tree,
Well-a you may go but this will bring you back.

A-hoodoo, a-hoodoo, a-hoodoo working,
My heels are popping and my toenails cracking,
Well-a you may go but this will bring you back.

1. Sung by Zora Neale Hurston in 1935 during an interview conducted by the Library of Congress.
2. Facetious reference to the Halifax River in Florida and/or to Halifax in Nova Scotia; used here to mean a long distance. It also refers to a faraway mythic realm, such as the "Philamayork" of many tales.
3. Juke-house dancer.
4. See n. 3.

Ballads

John Henry[1]•

When John Henry was a little fellow,
You could hold him in the palm of your hand,
He said to his pa, "When I grow up
I'm gonna be a steel-driving man.
Gonna be a steel-driving man."

When John Henry was a little baby,
Setting on his mammy's knee,
He said "The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road[2]
Is gonna be the death of me,
Gonna be the death of me."

One day his captain told him,
How he had bet a man
That John Henry would beat his steam-drill down,
Cause John Henry was the best in the land,
John Henry was the best in the land.

1. The StudySpace playlist features a different version of the ballad of John Henry.
2. The Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad line.

John Henry kissed his hammer,
White man turned on steam,
Shaker held John Henry's trusty steel,
Was the biggest race the world had ever seen,
Lord, biggest race the world ever seen.

John Henry on the right side
The steam drill on the left,
"Before I'll let your steam drill beat me down,
I'll hammer my fool self to death,
Hammer my fool self to death."

John Henry walked in the tunnel,
His captain by his side,
The mountain so tall, John Henry so small,
He laid down his hammer and he cried,
Laid down his hammer and he cried.

Captain heard a mighty rumbling,
Said "The mountain must be caving in,"
John Henry said to the captain,
"It's my hammer swinging in de wind,
My hammer swinging in de wind."

John Henry said to his shaker,[3]
"Shaker, you'd better pray;
For if ever I miss this piece of steel,
Tomorrow'll be your burial day,
Tomorrow'll be your burial day."

John Henry said to his shaker,
"Lordy, shake it while I sing,
I'm pulling my hammer from my shoulders down,
Great Gawdamighty, how she ring,
Great Gawdamighty, how she ring!"

John Henry said to his captain,
"Before I ever leave town,
Gimme one mo' drink of dat tom-cat gin,
And I'll hammer dat steam driver down,
I'll hammer dat steam driver down."

John Henry said to his captain,
"Before I ever leave town,
Gimme a twelve-pound hammer wid a whale-bone handle,
And I'll hammer dat steam driver down,
I'll hammer dat steam drill on down."

John Henry said to his captain,
"A man ain't nothin' but a man,
But before I'll let dat steam drill beat me down,

3. The railroad worker who holds the drill upright and rotates it between the blows of the hammer.

I'll die wid my hammer in my hand,
Die wid my hammer in my hand."

The man that invented the steam drill
He thought he was mighty fine,
John Henry drove down fourteen feet,
While the steam drill only made nine,
Steam drill only made nine.

"Oh, lookaway over yonder, captain,
You can't see like me,"
He gave a long and loud and lonesome cry,
"Lawd, a hammer be the death of me,
A hammer be the death of me!"

John Henry had a little woman,
Her name was Polly Ann,
John Henry took sick, she took his hammer,
She hammered like a natural man,
Lawd, she hammered like a natural man.

John Henry hammering on the mountain
As the whistle blew for half-past two,
The last words his captain heard him say,
"I've done hammered my insides in two,
Lawd, I've hammered my insides in two."

The hammer that John Henry swung
It weighed over twelve pound,
He broke a rib in his left hand side
And his intrels fell on the ground,
And his intrels fell on the ground.

John Henry, O, John Henry,
His blood is running red,
Fell right down with his hammer to the ground,
Said, "I beat him to the bottom but I'm dead,
Lawd, beat him to the bottom but I'm dead."

When John Henry was laying there dying,
The people all by his side,
The very last words they heard him say,
"Give me a cool drink of water 'fore I die,
Cool drink of water 'fore I die."

John Henry had a little woman,
The dress she wore was red,
She went down the track, and she never looked back,
Going where her man fell dead,
Going where her man fell dead.

John Henry had a little woman,
The dress she wore was blue,
De very last words she said to him,

"John Henry, I'll be true to you,
John Henry, I'll be true to you."

"Who's gonna shoes yo' little feet,
Who's gonna glove yo' hand,
Who's gonna kiss yo' pretty, pretty cheek,
Now you done lost yo' man?
Now you done lost yo' man?"

"My mammy's gonna shoes my little feet,
Pappy gonna glove my hand,
My sister's gonna kiss my pretty, pretty cheek,
Now I done lost my man,
Now I done lost my man."

They carried him down by the river,
And buried him in the sand,
And everybody that passed that way,
Said, "There lies that steel-driving man,
There lies a steel-driving man."

They took John Henry to the river,
And buried him in the sand,
And every locomotive come a-roaring by,
Says "There lies that steel-drivin' man,
Lawd, there lies a *steel*-drivin' man."

Some say he came from Georgia,
And some from Alabam,
But its wrote on the rock at the Big Bend Tunnel,
That he was an East Virginia man,
Lord, Lord, an East Virginia man.

Frankie and Johnny•

Frankie and Johnny were lovers,
Lordy, how they could love,
Swore to be true to each other,
True as the stars up above,
He was her man, but he done her wrong.

Frankie went down to the corner,
To buy her a bucket of beer,
Frankie says "Mister Bartender,
Has my lovin' Johnnie been here?
He is my man, but he's doing me wrong."

"I don't want to cause you no trouble
Don't want to tell you no lie,
I saw your Johnnie half-an-hour ago
Making love to Nelly Bly.
He is your man, but he's doing you wrong."

Frankie went down to the hotel
Looked over the transom so high,
There she saw her lovin' Johnnie
Making love to Nelly Bly
He was her man; he was doing her wrong.

Frankie threw back her kimono,
Pulled out her big forty-four;
Rooty-toot-toot: three times she shot
Right through that hotel door,
She shot her man, who was doing her wrong.

"Roll me over gently,
Roll me over slow,
Roll me over on my right side,
Cause these bullets hurt me so,
I was your man, but I done you wrong."

Bring all your rubber-tired hearses
Bring all your rubber-tired hacks,
They're carrying poor Johnny to the burying ground
And they ain't gonna bring him back,
He was her man, but he done her wrong.

Frankie says to the sheriff,
"What are they going to do?"
The sheriff he said to Frankie,
"It's the 'lectric chair for you.
He was your man, and he done you wrong."

"Put me in that dungeon,
Put me in that cell,
Put me where the northeast wind
Blows from the southeast corner of hell,
I shot my man, 'cause he done me wrong."

Railroad Bill

CHORUS:

Railroad Bill, Railroad Bill,
He never worked and he never will
I'm gonna ride old Railroad Bill.

VERSES:

Railroad Bill he was a mighty mean man
He shot the midnight lantern out the brakeman's hand
I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill.

Railroad Bill took my wife,
Said if I didn't like it, he would take my life,
I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill.

Going up on a mountain, going out west,
Thirty-eight special sticking out of my vest,
I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill.

Buy me a pistol just as long as my arm,
Kill everybody ever done me harm,
I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill.

I've got a thirty-eight special on a forty-five frame,
How in the world can I miss him when I got dead aim,
I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill.

Buy me a pistol just as long as my arm,
Kill everybody ever done me harm,
I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill.

Honey, honey, think I'm a fool,
Think I would quit you while the weather is cool,
I'm going to ride old Railroad Bill.

The Signifying Monkey[1]•

The Monkey and the Lion
Got to talking one day.
Monkey looked down and said, Lion,
I hear you's king in every way.
But I know somebody
Who do not think that is true—
He told me he could whip
The living daylights out of you.
Lion said, Who?
Monkey said, Lion,
He talked about your mama
And talked about your grandma, too,
And I'm too polite to tell you
What he said about you.
Lion said, Who said what? Who?
Monkey in the tree,
Lion on the ground.
Monkey kept on signifying
But he didn't come down.
Monkey said, His name is Elephant—
He stone sure is not your friend.
Lion said, He don't need to be
Because today will be his end.
Lion took off through the jungle
Lickity-split,

1. This somewhat sanitized version was presented by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps in *The Book of American Negro Folklore* (1958). "Signifying" a wide variety of African American verbal games involving ritual insult, competition, innuendo, parody, and other forms of loaded expression.

Meaning to grab Elephant
And tear him bit to bit. Period!
He come across Elephant copping a righteous nod
Under a fine cool shady tree.
Lion said, You big old no-good so-and-so,
It's either you or me.
Lion let out a solid roar
And bopped Elephant with his paw.
Elephant just took his trunk
And busted old Lion's jaw.
Lion let out another roar,
Reared up six feet tall.
Elephant just kicked him in the belly
And laughed to see him drop and fall.
Lion rolled over,
Copped Elephant by the throat.
Elephant just shook him loose
And butted him like a goat,
Then he tromped him and he stomped him
Till the Lion yelled, Oh, no!
And it was near-nigh sunset
When Elephant let Lion go.
The signifying Monkey
Was still setting in his tree
When he looked down and saw the Lion.
Said, Why, Lion, who can that there be?
Lion said, It's me.
Monkey rapped, Why, Lion,
You look more dead than alive!
Lion said, Monkey, I don't want
To hear your jive-end jive.
Monkey just kept on signifying,
Lion, you for sure caught hell—
Mister Elephant's done whipped you
To a fare-thee-well!
Why, Lion, you look like to me
You been in the precinct station
And had the third-degree,
Else you look like
You been high on gage[2]
And done got caught
In a monkey cage!
You ain't no king to me.
Facts, I don't think that you
Can even as much as roar—
And if you try I'm liable
To come down out of this tree and
Whip your tail some more.
The Monkey started laughing
And jumping up and down.
But he jumped so hard the limb broke
And he landed—*bam!*—on the ground.

2. Marijuana.

When he went to run, his foot slipped
And he fell flat down.
Grrr-rrr-rr-r! The Lion was on him
With his front feet and his hind.
Monkey hollered, Ow!
I didn't mean it, Mister Lion!
Lion said, You little flea-bag you!
Why, I'll eat you up alive.
I wouldn't a-been in this fix a-tall
Wasn't for your signifying jive.
Please, said Monkey, Mister Lion,
If you'll just let me go,
I got something to tell you, *please,*
I think you ought to know.
Lion let the Monkey loose
To see what his tale could be—
And Monkey jumped right back on up
Into his tree.
What I was gonna tell you, said Monkey,
Is you square old so-and-so,
If you fool with me I'll get
Elephant to whip your head some more.
Monkey, said the Lion,
Beat to his unbooted knees,
You and all your signifying children
Better stay up in them trees.
Which is why today
Monkey does his signifying
A-way-up out of the way.

Stackolee•

One dark and dusty day
I was strolling down the street.
I thought I heard some old dog bark,
But it warn't nothing but Stackolee gambling in the dark.
Stackolee threw seven.
Billy said, It ain't that way.
You better go home and come back another day.
Stackolee shot Billy four times in the head
And left that fool on the floor damn near dead.
Stackolee decided he'd go up to Sister Lou's.
Said, Sister Lou! Sister Lou, guess what I done done?
I just shot and killed Billy, your big-head son.
Sister Lou said, Stackolee, that can't be true!
You and Billy been friends for a year or two.
Stackolee said, Woman, if you don't believe what I said,
Go count the bullet holes in that son-of-a-gun's head.
Sister Lou got frantic and all in a rage,
Like a tea hound dame on some frantic gage.
She got on the phone, Sheriff, Sheriff, I want you to help poor me.
I want you to catch that bad son-of-a-gun they call Stackolee.

Sheriff said, My name might begin with an s and end with an *f*
But if you want that bad Stackolee you got to get him yourself.
So Stackolee left, he went walking down the New Haven track.
A train come along and flattened him on his back.
He went up in the air and when he fell
Stackolee landed right down in hell.
He said, Devil, devil, put your fork up on the shelf
'Cause I'm gonna run this devilish place myself.
There came a rumbling on the earth and a tumbling on the ground,
That bad son-of-a-gun, Stackolee, was turning hell around.
He ran across one of his ex-girl friends down there.
She was Chock-full-o'-nuts and had pony-tail hair.
She said, Stackolee, Stackolee, wait for me.
I'm trying to please you, can't you see?
She said, I'm going around the corner but I'll be right back.
I'm gonna see if I can't stack my sack.
Stackolee said, Susie Belle, go on and stack your sack.
But I just might not be here when you get back.
Meanwhile, Stackolee went with the devil's wife and with his girl friend, too.
Winked at the devil and said, I'll go with you.
The devil turned around to hit him a lick.
Stackolee knocked the devil down with a big black stick.
Now, to end this story, so I heard tell,
Stackolee, all by his self, is running hell.

Sinking of the *Titanic*[1]

It was 1912 when the awful news got around
That the great *Titanic* was sinking down.
Shine came running up on deck, told the Captain, "Please,
The water in the boiler room is up to my knees."

Captain said, "Take your black self on back down there!
I got a hundred-fifty pumps to keep the boiler room clear."
Shine went back in the hole, started shovelling coal,
Singing, "Lord, have mercy, Lord, on my soul!"

Just then half the ocean jumped across the boiler room deck.
Shine yelled to the Captain, "The water's 'round my neck!"
Captain said, "Go back! Neither fear nor doubt!
I got a hundred more pumps to keep the water out."

"Your words sound happy and your words sound true,
But this is one time, Cap, your words won't do.
I don't like chicken and I don't like ham—
And I don't believe your pumps is worth a damn!"

1. This sanitized version was presented by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps in *The Book of American Negro Folklore* (1958).

The old *Titanic* was beginning to sink.
Shine pulled off his clothes and jumped in the brink.
He said, "Little fish, big fish, and shark fishes, too,
Get out of my way because I'm coming through."

Captain on bridge hollered, "Shine, Shine, save poor me,
And I'm make you as rich as any man can be."
Shine said, "There's more gold on land than there is on sea."
And he swimmed on.

Big fat banker begging, "Shine, Shine, save poor me!
I'll give you a thousand shares of T and T."
Shine said, "More stocks on land than there is on sea."
And he swimmed on.

When all them white folks went to heaven,
Shine was in Sugar Ray's Bar drinking Seagrams Seven.

Shine and the *Titanic*[1]

One day when the great *Titanic* was sinking away,
Captain was in his quarters one lonely night,
This old man came up the port side.
He said, "Captain, Captain, the water's over the first fireroom door."
He said, "Shine, Shine, have no doubt.
We got forty-nine pumps to pump the water out."
Shine went down and he came up again.
He said, "Captain, look! That damn water's still coming in."
Captain said, "Shine, Shine, have no doubt,
Now we have ninety-nine pumps to pump the water out."
He said, "Captain, there was a time when your word might be true,
But this is one damn time your word won't do."
So Shine he jumped overboard. He took two kicks, one stroke,
He was off like a PT boat.[2]
Captain came up on the deck. He said, "Shine, Shine, save poor me.
I'll give you more money than any black man want to see."
Shine said, "You know my color and you guessed my race.
Come in here and give these sharks a chase."
Captain's daughter came up on deck,
Drawers in her hand, brassiere around her neck.
She said, "Shine, Shine, save poor me.
Give you more pregnant pussy than a black man want to see."
Shine said, "I know you're pregnant, 'bout to have a kid,
But if that boat sink two more inches, you'll swim this coast just like Shine did."
The Captain's wife came up on deck. She said, "Shine, Shine, save poor me.

1. This typically bawdy version was recorded as spoken in Philadelphia and published in Roger Abraham's *Deep down in the Jungle* (1964).

2. A fast, maneuverable U.S. fighting vessel that specialized in torpedoing enemy ships.

I'll let you eat pussy like a rat eats cheese."
Shine said, "I like pussy, I ain't no rat.
I like cock, but not like that."
Shine kept a-swimming.
Shine came past the whale's den.
The whale invited old Shine in.
Shine said, "I know you're king of the ocean, king of the sea,
But you gotta be a water-splashing motherfucker to outswim me."
So Shine kept on stroking.
Now Shine met up with the shark.
Shark said, "Shine, Shine, can't you see.
When you jump in these waters you belongs to me."
Shine said, "I know you outswim the barracuda, outsmart every fish in the sea,
But you gotta be a stroking motherfucker to outswim me."
Shine kept a-swimming.
When the word got to Washington that the great *Titanic* had sunk,
Shine was on Broadway, one-third drunk.

Work Songs

Pick a Bale of Cotton•

Jump down, turn around to pick a bale of cotton.
Jump down, turn around, pick a bale a day.

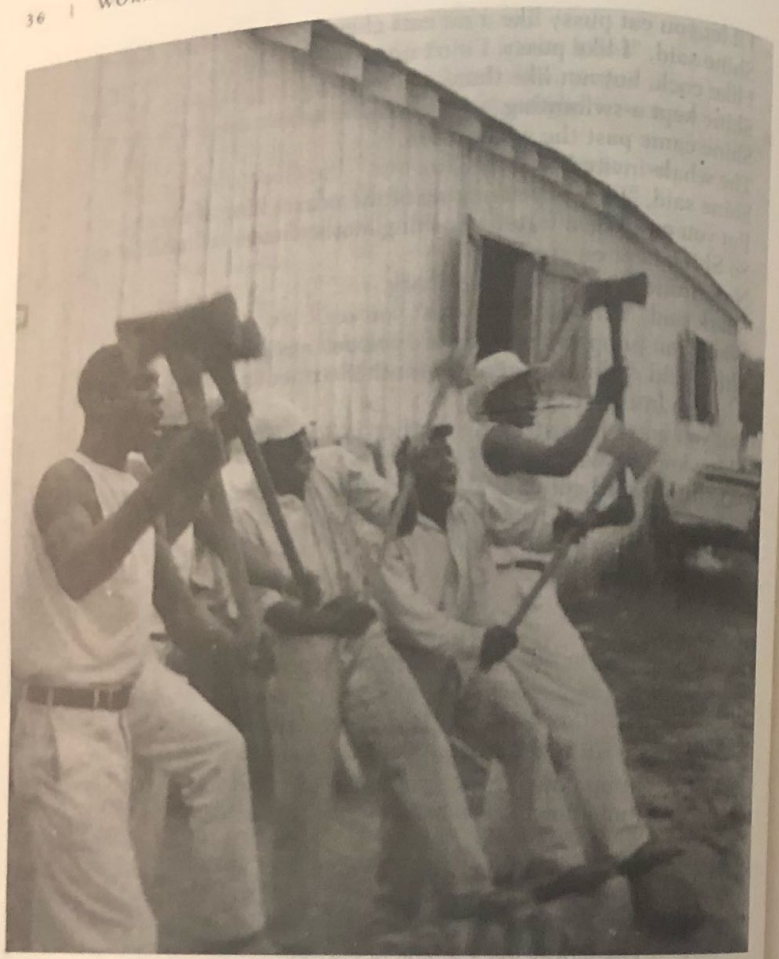
Jump down, turn around to pick a bale of cotton.
Jump down, turn around, pick a bale a day.

Oh, Lordy, pick a bale of cotton!
Oh, Lordy, pick a bale a day!

Me and my gal can pick a bale of cotton,
Me and my gal can pick a bale a day. . . .
Me and my wife can pick a bale of cotton,
Me and my wife can pick a bale a day. . . .

Me and my friend can pick a bale of cotton,
Me and my friend can pick a bale a day. . . .

Me and my poppa can pick a bale of cotton,
Me and my poppa can pick a bale a day.
Oh, Lordy, pick a bale of cotton!
Oh, Lordy, pick a bale a day!



Inmate "Lightnin'" Washington and others singing at Darrington State Prison Farm, Sandy Point, Texas, 1934. Photograph by Alan Lomax.

Go Down, Old Hannah[1]•

Go down, old Hannah,
  Won't you rise no more?
Go down, old Hannah,
  Won't you rise no more?

Lawd, if you rise,
  Bring judgment on.
Lawd, if you rise,
  Bring judgment on.

Oh, did you hear
  What the captain said?

1. The sun.

Oh, did you hear
  What the captain said?

That if you work
  He'll treat you well,
And if you don't
  He'll give you hell.

Oh, go down, old Hannah,
  Won't you rise no more?
Won't you go down, old Hannah,
  Won't you rise no more?

Oh, long-time man,
  Hold up your head.
Well, you may get a pardon
  And you may drop dead.

Lawdy, nobody feels sorry
  For the life-time man.
Nobody feels sorry
  For the life-time man.

Can't You Line It?[1]•

When I get in Illinois
I'm going to spread the news about the Florida boys.

CHORUS:

(All men straining at rail in concert.)
Shove it over! Hey, hey, can't you line it?
(Shaking rail.) Ah, shack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack.
(Grunt as they move rail.) Can't you move it? Hey, hey, can't you try.

Tell what the hobo told the bum,
If you get any corn-bread save me some.

CHORUS

A nickle's worth of bacon, and a dime's worth of lard,
I would buy more but the time's too hard.

CHORUS

Wonder what's the matter with the walking boss,
It's done five-thirty and he won't knock off.

1. This song is common to the railroad camps. It is suited to the "lining" rhythm. That is, it fits the straining of the men at the lining bars as the rail is placed in position to be spiked down [Zora Neale Hurston's note].

CHORUS

I ast my Cap'n what's the time of day,
He got mad and throwed his watch away.

CHORUS

Cap'n got a pistol and he try to play bad,
But I'm going to take it if he make me mad.

CHORUS

Cap'n got a burner[2] I'd like to have,
A 32:20 with a shiny barrel.

CHORUS

De Cap'n can't read, de Cap'n can't write,
How do he know that the time is right?

CHORUS

Me and my buddy and two three more,
Going to ramshack Georgy everywhere we go.

CHORUS

Here come a woman walking 'cross the field,
Her mouth exhausting like an automobile.

2. Gun [Hurston's note].

The Blues

At the beginning of the twentieth century, observers in New Orleans and elsewhere in the South began to notice a new kind of music. This music borrowed harmonic and structural devices and vocal techniques from work songs and spirituals. But unlike these other forms, this music was usually sung not by a chorus but by a single voice accompanied by one or more instruments. Like the earlier forms, blues, as this music came to be known, involved a compellingly rhythmical sound that relied on patterns of call–response between singer and audience, and at times between singer and instrument, too. In spite of all the affinities with church songs, blues music was decidedly secular; it promised no heavenly grace or home but offered instead a stylized complaint about earthly trials and troubles, a complaint countered, if at all, by the hope of better days back in some "sweet home" like Chicago or in another town or by the flickering promise of a "do-right" loving companion. Its dances were not the holy possession dances of church ritual but the courtship dances of Saturday night revelry and after-hours fun that held at bay, albeit temporarily, the melancholia typically described in blues lyrics.

Philosophically, the blues speak of a hard-won, wry optimism in the face of the immutable fact that life on earth involves a steady diet of trouble and pain. Songwriter and bandleader W. C. Handy (1873–1958) is called "the father of the blues" because he took careful note of this form of expression and transcribed its songs. But Handy was more than just a copyist. Having mastered the idiomatic forms, he combined and extended them to produce the first storehouse of blues compositions that were both true to their beginnings and inventive. Like the earlier blues of uncertain authorship—so widely circulated and so often reinvented that they may somewhat justly be termed group creations—Handy's blues were most often twelve-bar forms: three lines of four beats each, the first line repeated twice and followed by a third end-rhymed line:

I hate to see the evening sun go down.
I hate to see that evening sun go down.
'Cause my baby, he done left this town.*

Other blues songs vary from this particular pattern but still are defined as blues because of their use of "blue notes" and other characteristic blues patterns and sounds. All blues songs involve improvisation, sometimes just in terms of timing and emphasis, sometimes more elaborate reinvention of melodies and even meanings. They also involve particular sounds: train bells and whistles, sexual groans, conversational whispers, rhapsodies, shouts, stories, talk to band members and audiences, and—especially in their first rural incarnations—barnyard squawks and squeals as well.

A full discussion of the blues would take into account the early southern farms where black singing flourished; the background in African and European forms; the impact of minstrelsy, medicine shows, and carnivals on the music; the importance of dance to the music; early blues centers such as New Orleans, Memphis, and the Mississippi Delta; the movement of the blues to the Southwest, the Midwest, and up the eastern seaboard; and the persistence of the blues in jazz and other American musics, including, some would argue, hip-hop music. Worth noting here is how this powerful form inspired writers, choreographers, and visual artists throughout the twentieth century. In 1953, as a headnote to his first published fiction, Albert Murray wrote: "We all learn from Mann, Joyce, Hemingway, Eliot, and the rest, but I'm also trying to write in terms of the tradition I grew up in, the Negro tradition of blues, stomps, ragtimes, jumps, and swing. After all, very few writers have done as much with American experience as Jelly Roll Morton, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington." Ralph Ellison said that Richard Wright's *Black Boy* was like the blues in "its refusal to offer solutions"; he also composed the following compelling definition of the form:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

As Murray's and Ellison's words show, to term a poem, play, or work of fiction a "blues piece" or to note blues influence within it is to associate it with modern black American vernacular expression at its finest.

New scholarship is asking: What is the continuing effect of blues on jazz, including avant-garde jazz, and on forms that defy such classifications? What is the relation of blues music to world musics that share certain blues structures and attitudes? Where are women in the story of the blues? What themes of masculinity, femininity, gender, class, and region emerge in this music? What part do politics and economics play?

*From Handy's "St. Louis Blues."