



## “Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around”

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# “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around”

Spirituals as Embodied Acts of Resistance

P. KIMBERLEIGH JORDAN

For nearly four centuries, people of African descent in the Diaspora expressed their presence, pain, desires, and hopes through the repertoire of the spirituals.<sup>1</sup> Spirituals materialize the historic and continuing power and possibility of black existence through sound, movement, communal and spiritual formation, in the face of long histories of racialized oppressions that have violated black bodies, minds, and spirits. By congregating in performative and spiritually powerful ways, black people have connected to divine realms and each other, building a foundation for continued existence in unfamiliar and unfriendly lands.

My interest in the spirituals departs from the usual ethnomusicological analysis, instead using a dance-analytical lens to engage the spirituals as embodied black performance. I argue that the spirituals have been significant sites of spiritual power and resistance in the African Diaspora during three overlapping, interrelated periods of black performance history—the congregational, the concert, and the Civil Rights protest periods. The congregational period had its greatest influence during the colonial and antebellum eras of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the concert period began with the 1871 founding of the Fisk Jubilee Singers; the Civil Rights protest period began in the mid-twentieth

century. Each expresses a distinctive response to the lived experiences of black people, and the embodied performance that occurs in each period expresses power to resist death-dealing circumstances and to reach toward possibilities of hope and liberation. I examine the embodied performance of the spirituals through a dance analytical lens, foregrounding the presence of the body and focusing on ways that black bodies have resisted annihilation through faith and spiritual practice. The spirituals have held a persistent place in black performance practices throughout the history of the African Diaspora in North America. The continued powerful and moving presence of black bodies in them energizes this study.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, scholar of African American culture and history and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, describes the spirituals as “announc[ing] our existence” culturally and ontologically:

These [spirituals] have to do with stating a worldview, or positioning yourself in the world . . . this culture that empowers you as a unit in the universe and places you, and makes you know you are a child of the universe . . . that would give us a chance to be different from the recipe that brought us here . . . Black singing is *running sound through your body*. [Y]ou cannot sing a [spiritual] and not change your condition.<sup>2</sup>

Within this performative complex, sound and movement overlap, enabling the performer to experience personal and communal “change.” This notion of spirituals effecting “change” is a primary reason that spirituals

engage black bodies—both as laboring, suffering, commodified bodies, and as bodies through which divine power can move. The spirituals exemplify Black communal performance of *sound running through the [moving] body* over three performance periods.

### The Congregational Period

Africans brought to North America in the colonial and antebellum periods came from a variety of cultures and spiritual backgrounds. Immaterial elements of their cultures and backgrounds were not erased by transatlantic passage.<sup>3</sup> Though the white people who enslaved them claimed Christianity as their religion, they were minimally effective in initial efforts to convert Africans to Christianity. Instead, Africans would, as one of the spirituals proclaims, “steal away” to private locations to commune before the divine in their own ways, absent from the gaze of white owners.<sup>4</sup> Such practices included ritual gatherings with dance, sound, rhythmic performance, call-and-response, spoken and sung words at their core—all elements of immaterial Africanist cultures.<sup>5</sup> Participating in these rituals, early generations of enslaved Africans resisted encroaching Christian hegemony, with its notions of how bodies should and should not worship God.

The religious landscape for free and enslaved people of North America began to change during the Christian revivalist periods of the mid-18th through the mid-19th centuries. As more enslaved persons were born in North America, more adapted and syncretized Christianity toward embodied worship and liberative theological

understandings. These adapted theologies and practices cosigned their future emancipation, rather than their continued oppression.

### Communal and Congregational Spirituals

The earliest performances of spirituals in North America were communal performances by everyday people in out-of-the-way places like hush arbors, clearings, and praise houses. Sounds and movement reflected the diverse Africanist communities that produced them. Lyrics and tunes were orally transmitted, situating the black moving body as the repository of performance. Interwoven with the sound of spirituals were rhythmically and improvisationally moving bodies.

### The Ring Shout

A significant example of spirituals as communal sacred performance *running sound through moving bodies* is the Ring Shout. A unique kinesthetic ritual, it combines a number of embodied expressions: lower and upper body movement, singing, rhythm-making, and spiritual formation. Its existence evidences early generations of diasporan Africans’ resistance to cultural and spiritual annihilation, bringing together spiritual practices from the breadth of Africanist traditions and rematerializing through black bodies. Native-born Africans and their American-born progeny practiced the Ring Shout, developed it, and passed it on to subsequent generations.

Imagine a group of black people gathered in a remote place, away from any authority or audience of slave owners and missionaries.

They are standing. They rock, hum, and pray lengthy song-prayers for the Spirit to inhabit their gathering. Eventually a leader “lifts” a song, sometimes called a “runnin’ spiritual.” The runnin’ spiritual is up-tempo and accompanies the Shout’s perambulatory rhythm. As tempo and rhythm quicken, the people move into the ring, shuffling in a counter-clockwise direction, their feet close to the floor and never crossing their ankles. The grounded, linear foot movement creates an ongoing baseline rhythm—what James Weldon Johnson calls “the fundamental beat of the dance.”<sup>6</sup>

A description of a Ring Shout<sup>7</sup> in late-nineteenth-century Florida:

The Shouters formed in a Ring, men and women alternating, their bodies close together, moved round and round on shuffling feet that never left the floor. With the heel of the right foot, they pounded out the fundamental beat of the dance and with their hands clapped out the varying rhythmic accents of the chant; for the music was, in fact, an African chant and the Shout an African dance, the whole pagan rite transplanted and adapted to Christian worship. Round and round the Ring would go: one, two, three, four, five hours, the very monotony and sound and motion inducing ecstatic frenzy.<sup>8</sup>

In the Gullah tradition,<sup>9</sup> this “fundamental beat” is a pulse from the “sticker,” who stands with the song leader and strikes out a rhythm with a stick on the floor. Staccato sounds of handclapping and other body percussion enrich the embodied sonic mix—offered in call-and-response style.<sup>10</sup> The

Ring Shout is a fully engaging spiritual practice for its participants.

## Concert Spirituals

Concert spirituals are the focus of the second performance period. “Concert” refers to a public performance of music or dance compositions previously rehearsed and dependent upon performer technique and training. Concert spirituals fused Africanist spiritual practice and embodiment, as well as western European musical tradition based on the diatonic octave scale. This was the post-Emancipation period of Reconstruction, with its historical highs and lows, especially in the struggles of newly freed slaves and the evaporation of promises, proffered to them during Reconstruction, of resources and equality. Though no longer property, black bodies continued to be in trouble. Where congregational spirituals were birthed in seclusion, the genesis of concert spirituals was decidedly public. Performed on a proscenium stage, concert spirituals were sung *a capella* by virtually immobile performers. Certainly, *running sound through im/mobile black bodies* under the gaze of others was precarious.

## Running Sound through Immobile Bodies: Fisk Jubilee Singers

Fisk University was founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee, shortly after the 1863 signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 1865 conclusion of the Civil War. By 1871, Fisk was already in financial trouble and facing closure. This danger was alleviated by publicity and fundraising efforts around a

group of students who came to be known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Their public performances around the nation offered images and embodied clues of what it would take for the formerly enslaved and their progeny to survive in the post-Eman-cipation, post-Reconstruction world. Their presence and performance suggested survival tools including cultural and aesthetic assimilation, literacy, education, Christian religiosity, and an unmoving physical presentation—all promoted by a nascent black politics of respectability. Their initial concert tour of 1871 took them from Nashville to Cincinnati to sing at a Christian denominational meeting and changing the history of black sacred performance. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, and later others, attracted critical acclaim and sold-out halls, bringing much-needed monies and positive attention to Fisk and the broader project of educating freed men and women.

Over one thousand people, including presidential candidate James A. Garfield, attended an early performance by Fisk on August 8, 1880, at the Chautauqua Institution. Following the concert, Garfield was introduced to the Singers. Before leaving Chautauqua, Garfield responded in a speech:

I heard yesterday the songs of those who were lately redeemed from slavery, [...] and I wondered, if the tropical sun had not distilled its sweetness, and if the sorrows of centuries of slavery had not distilled its sadness into the voices, which were unutterably sweet. And voices fit to sing the songs of freedom, as they sing them wherever they go. I thank the choir for the lessons they have taught me here. [...] The old prophet

said, “Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God”; I believe God has stretched out his hands to the children of Ethiopia; I thank you.<sup>11</sup>

For Garfield, seeing the still bodies of the Fisk students on stage conjured images of their past laboring, suffering, enslaved bodies. It must also have been evocative to see formerly enslaved men and women performing their own knowledge of having come “up from slavery” through the spirituals. Using the concert stage to present what had existed only in the private spaces of Africanist spiritual formation, the performers invited the gaze of white audiences. That gaze beheld a well-groomed, elegant, and decorous group of young black female and male performers. The fact that, a few years earlier, they had been enchattled bodies picking cotton and tobacco, subject to their masters’ advances, beatings, or both, was concealed behind their dignified attire, precise diction and unmoving bodies. Gone were the rocking, swaying, body percussion, and the ring moving counterclockwise. These singers *ran sound through their no-longer-moving bodies*. The stillness was significant because, in addition to musical changes in the spirituals, the now-unmoving bodies marked a change in the performance of spirituals. As singing separated from dance and movement, the body’s presence seemed less significant.

How did the presentation of motionless concert spirituals relate to earlier performances of congregational spirituals constructed by bodies producing sound and movement? Dance theorist André Lepecki argues that stillness is not so much a “denial of dance, but a moment in which there is deep formal

probing of the expressive and perceptual thresholds of dance as a medium due to social and political circumstances." Importantly he adds, stillness "becomes an action filled with force."<sup>12</sup>

On one level, the singers' stillness can be seen as a rejection of earlier embodied sacred performance. On another level, it may be understood as the ultimate performance of survival and a deeply rooted stance of strength. To extend Lepecki's argument toward embodied sacred performance, the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed their own kind of force in stillness—a powerful, resistant force. Announcing their existence in a new way, the Fisk Singers' concert spirituals thus materialized evidence of black survival, life, and potentiality. They represented an historical and spiritual journey-as-movement-through-time-and-space in the African Diaspora.

The Fisk Singers performed resistance by standing—still and alive—and *running sound through a body that was no longer property*. To stand and return the white gaze, knowing that Western culture had made its best efforts to commodify, objectify, and kill them and their ancestors through enslavement, was powerful performance indeed.

### Danced Concert Spirituals

This sound/embodiment equation, though powerful, separated moving bodies from singing bodies. The onset of the twentieth century returned movement to the performance of spirituals by way of virtuosic, though silent, dancing bodies. With "social and political circumstances"—new forms of domination like lynching, Jim Crow laws, and

massive migration—continuing to press upon black bodies, African American dance artists looked to the repertoire of the now esteemed concert spirituals. With Lepecki's "still act" in mind, what does it mean for concert dance to always already constitute a "silent act?" What does it cost black dancing bodies to be silent in the continually racist United States? As most concert dance is traditionally done without speaking, danced concert spirituals may have taken a toll on black dancers, who no longer expressed the sound that ran through their bodies.

Nevertheless, concert spirituals accompanying modern dance became a cornerstone of the black dance repertoire in the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.<sup>13</sup> An early example, by dancer and choreographer Edna Guy, illuminates the problems of black bodies dancing concert spirituals. Reviewing Guy's work entitled "Danced Spirituals," performed in 1931 in the "First Negro Dance Recital in America,"<sup>14</sup> John Martin of the *New York Times* wrote:

It is not these dances which echo and imitate the manner of the dancers of another race that the Negro dancers are at their best, but in those in which their forthrightness and simplicity have full play. Miss Guy's group of "spirituals" and the primitive ritual dances [...] can be counted in this category.<sup>15</sup>

No longer expressing awe, Martin criticizes other works on the program for "imitate[ing] the manner ... of another race," while backhandedly complimenting Guy for, what he misunderstands as, displays of simplicity and primitivity.

Despite problems with reception, a number of black choreographers followed Edna Guy's footsteps and engaged the repertoire of spirituals to accompany concert choreography. Arguably the greatest achievement in danced spirituals premiered in 1960 with Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. Ailey used a broad selection of songs to describe the arc of history from enslavement to freedom. Stylized, concertized, and set within a framework of modern dance techniques, Ailey called *Revelations* a "blood memory" of his experiences in a Black Baptist church in Texas.<sup>16</sup>

*Revelations* is filled with movements and shapes culled from African American culture and religiosity, as well as Martha Graham and Lester Horton dance techniques. Ailey's choreography employs a sense of embodied resistance, revealing dancers firmly rooted to the ground, but reaching plaintively, or bearing each other's weight and defying the forces of gravity. The dancers struggle to achieve something just beyond their grasp while avoiding sinking to the ground. These steps contrast with the airy elevations of classical ballet, instead grounded in an abiding and centered strength—materializing what Fred Moten suggests is the "performative essence of Blackness."<sup>17</sup> *Revelations*, as the quintessential danced spiritual, evidences a capacity to hope, despite earthly circumstances.

From the immobile performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers to the thoroughly mobile performances of African American modern dancers, the concert spirituals have been central to Black religious and performance culture. More than anything, they have been part of a black spiritual and cultural survival apparatus to resist annihilation in the diaspora.

## Civil Rights Protest Performance

During the mid-twentieth-century period of Civil Rights protests, where black people publicly asserted resistance and desire for long-delayed liberation and equality, the spirituals became "freedom songs" enacted on US streets as everyday people marched, walked, fell, and performed other choreographies of non-violent resistance. The spirituals changed to fit the needs of new generations and circumstances. What was lifted in the 1870s from communal settings once again was lifted, now from concert settings, and placed onto the moving bodies of everyday Black people who *ran sound through their moving and singing bodies*. They announced their existence through the repertoire of the spirituals in the face of their era's particular racialized oppressions. Scholar/activist Reagon notes:

I began to notice how well the old songs we knew fit our current situation. Many of the freedom songs we sang we had learned as spirituals, sacred songs created by slaves. Our struggle against racism often found us reaching for connections with those who during the nineteenth century fought to end slavery in this country.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the communal performance of spirituals was reinvigorated offstage.

As exemplum, in the spring of 1963, protesters in Raleigh, North Carolina demanded full access to all public accommodations. Marchers were primarily students from two historically African American colleges—Shaw University and St. Augustine's College—and the (segregated) J.W. Ligon High School.<sup>19</sup> Nightly, protesters marched through the

downtown Raleigh streets singing spirituals with relevant lyrics. They marched to the county Courthouse and segregated businesses.

A confrontational freedom song called “I’m Gonna Tell God How You Treat Me” was sung to the tune of the old spiritual, “I’m Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table,” punctuated by marching feet and handclapping rhythms. The lyrics serve as a record of local sites of Civil Rights struggles:

I’m gonna tell God how you treat me;  
I’m gonna tell God how you treat me one of  
these days. Hallelujah!

[Other verses]:

I’m gonna eat those twenty-eight flavors. [...]  
I’m gonna work at Sears and Roebuck. [...]  
I’m gonna dance at the Governor’s  
Mansion. [...] We’re gonna end this  
segregation. [...]  
I’m gonna sit at the welcome table.<sup>20</sup>

Over the next decade, Raleigh, like other southern US cities, desegregated public accommodations, businesses, and schools. Yet these victories have not rendered the spirituals irrelevant, because the black quest for full freedom continues. Though the Ring Shout is rarely performed, many black churches perform the spirituals in communal styles. Freedom songs continue to be lifted where there are struggles against racialized and other oppressions.

## A Final Scene

A diverse group of students about to attend a large protest demanding justice at the

School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia led a chapel service at Union Theological Seminary that included a prayerful commissioning and concluded with the spiritual “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round.” The song was performed call-and-response style as the soon-to-be-protesters were encircled by the congregation. As the seminarians sang, they began with the original lyrics:

Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me ‘round  
[repeat]  
I’m gonna keep on walkin,’ keep on talkin’  
Marching up to freedom land!

Then the song leader lifted some additional words:

Ain’t gonna let injustice turn me ‘round . . .  
Ain’t gonna let racism turn me ‘round . . .  
Ain’t gonna let no Ferguson turn me  
‘round.<sup>21</sup>

The song had traversed generations of black performance history in the Diaspora: from hush arbor to concert stage to street protest—now finding itself in a twenty-first-century chapel and on its way to being “lifted” at the gates of an institution seen as unjust and oppressive. This time, black and brown bodies (now with some white allies) sing and march, no longer in a counterclockwise circle, but in long lines through city centers, by courthouses, over bridges, and to the gates of injustice.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. The term “spiritual” refers herein to Africanist and African American singing, sound, hums, moans and embodied communal performance. In the musical lexicon, “spiritual” is a generic name that refers to faith-based content and can be performed in diverse locales, from church to cotton field. Furthermore, “spiritual” is not an inherently racialized term, as there are both white and Black spirituals. The formal definition of “spiritual” is eighteenth- or nineteenth-century vocal music created in the United States by people of African descent, or European descent who settled in Appalachia. Described as “the musical expression of spiritual emotion,” spirituals hold a significant place in Black sacred performance traditions. See Maud Cuney Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, African American Women Writers series, 1910–1940, ed. H.L. Gates (New York: G.K. Hall/Simon Schuster MacMillan; 1936, reprint 1996), 68; James Robert Davidson, *A Dictionary of Protestant Music* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 294–97.

2. This framework is often repeated by Reagon in the documentary. See Bernice Johnson Reagon, *The Songs are Free with Bernice Johnson Reagon—Bill Moyers’ Journal*, online video, directed by Gail Pellett (February 6, 1991; New York City: PBS), <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/watch3.html>.

3. Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 98–120.

4. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 98–120, 246–7.

5. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 16–17.

6. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Viking, 1933), 22, quoted in Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford, 1987), 331.

7. McIntosh County Shouters, Kennedy Center, *Millennium—Homegrown: The Music of America Series*, Washington, DC, December 1, 2010, <http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/videos/?id=M4470&type=A>.

8. J.W. Johnson, quoted in Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 331.

9. For resources on Gullah traditions, see: Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*, Cambridge Studies on the American South series (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullahs*, American Social Experience series (New York: NYU, 1989); LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

10. For additional Ring Shout description, see: Walter Pitts, Jr., *Old Ship of Zion: The Afro-Baptist Ritual in the African Diaspora*, Religion in America series, ed. H.S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 92–7; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*; Bernice Johnson Reagon, T. Bolden, and L. Pertillar-Brevard, *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions Educators’ Guide*, ed. Michaëlle Scanlon (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution/National Public Radio, 1994); Art Rosenbaum, *Shout Because You’re Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Stuckey, *Slave Culture*. Jonathan C. Davis analyzes the Chesapeake

tradition of the Shout in *Together Let Us Sweetly Live: The Singing and Praying Bands*, Music in America Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 7–13, 139–40.

11. *New York Tribune*, August 10, 1880, n.p.

12. André Lepecki, “Undoing the Fantasy of the Dancing Subject: ‘Still Acts’ in Jerome Bel’s *The Last Performance*,” in *The Salt of the Earth: On Dance, Politics and Reality*, eds. Steven de Belder and Koen Tachelet (Brussels: Vlaams Theater Instituut, 2001).

13. See Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15, 258 fn17; Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 30–44; John O. Perpener III, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 90–94, 135, 169, 202.

14. Dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild reflects on Edna Guy: “The thwarted career of Edna Guy, African American modern dancer and Denishawn ‘wannabe,’ [...] We marvel at how Guy survived in the face of unspeakable racism from both whites like St. Denis and blacks that would choose lighter-skinned dancers over this talented, dark-complexioned woman.” See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, review of “Free to

Dance, Dance in America/Great Performances,” *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 110.

15. John Martin, “Dance Recital Given by Negro Artists: Edna Guy and Group Prove Interesting in Primitive Ritual Dances,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1931. Quoted in Richard A. Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (London: Prion, 1989), 25–6.

16. See DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, 15.

17. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 16–18.

18. Bernice Johnson Reagon, *If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition*, Abraham Lincoln Lecture series (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 104.

19. Clyde R. Appleton, “Singing in the Streets of Raleigh, 1963: Some Recollections,” *Journal of The Black Perspective in Music* 3 (Autumn 1975): 243–245.

20. Appleton, 245–6, 252.

21. At the time of the chapel service, the question of the indictment of a police officer in Ferguson, MO, who shot Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was unanswered. See “No Mas, No More! Chapel Led by Students Attending SOA.” Program from the Service of Worship, Thursday, November 20, 2014, James Chapel, Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

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