We Shall Not Be Moved/No nos moverán

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In spite of Karl Marx’s famous dictum that religion is the opiate of the people, the singing of religious songs in the history of the United States has often been associated with struggles for human rights, social justice, and peace. This can be seen most clearly in the case of African American spirituals, dating back to the times of slavery and continuing to the present day. The song “I Shall Not Be Moved” is one of many African American spirituals that have been put to work not only to express religious devotion and ease the pain of many an individual soul but also to change worldly conditions of exploitation and injustice that have brought so much hurt and injury to U.S. Africans as a people. It continues to occupy a prominent place in the collective imagination of African Americans as an expression of resistance and endurance in the face of oppression, as indicated by its use as the title for a collection of poetry by one of the most prominent black poets in U.S. history, Maya Angelou (1990). As I discuss below, the song has also been a standard in the religious repertoire of southern white Protestants since the nineteenth century, for whom it seems to have expressed a more strictly religious sentiment.

Although as with nearly all “traditional” songs the precise origins of “I Shall Not Be Moved” remain unclear, its lyrical elements are biblical, echoing Psalms 1, 16, and 62, including the following lines:
“And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper” (Psalm 1:3); “I have set the LORD always before me: because [he is] at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (Psalm 16:8); and/or “He only [is] my rock and my salvation: [he is] my defence; I shall not be moved” (Psalm 62:6). By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the “lining out” of psalms for singing in Protestant churches was commonplace in both Great Britain and its North American colonies. In New England, in the northeastern United States, blacks as well as whites participated in the practice of singing psalms, as did people in the U.S. South, though to a lesser extent (Darden 2004; J. Scott 1983; Southern 1997). Nonetheless, in his 1903 essay “The Negro Church,” the great African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois includes a letter written in 1755 by a white Presbyterian minister in Virginia whose congregants included slaves, who remarks, “The Negroes, above all the human species that I ever knew, have an ear for music and a kind of ecstatic delight in psalmody” (quoted in Zuckerman 2000: 121). By the mid-eighteenth century, the so-called Great Awakening, a religious revival among Protestants, swept the North American colonies, leading to the supplanting of the practice of rote psalm singing in churches by the singing of somewhat livelier and more artfully composed hymns, many of them penned by the British theologians Isaac Watts and John Wesley (Burnim 2006; Darden 2004; J. Scott 1983; Southern 1997). Indeed, the origin of the term “spiritual” to refer to certain types of religious songs may come from Watts’s first collection of hymns, published in 1707 and titled Hymns and Spiritual Songs. Nevertheless, my own review of several of the eighteenth-century hymnals published by Watts and Wesley did not locate any songs containing the same lyrical structure of “I Shall Not Be Moved,” as follows:

I shall not, I shall not be moved,
I shall not, I shall not be moved,
Just like a tree that’s planted by the water,
I shall not be moved.
On my way to heaven, I shall not be moved . . .
Fightin’ sinnin’ Satan . . .
Jesus is my captain.
This suggests that the song did not arrive in the North American colonies from Britain but rather came into being on the American continent. Here it should be noted that the historical record indicates that Africans in North America who were exposed to the new British-origin hymns during the Great Awakening took to them readily, as suggested by their adoption by the few free-standing black churches that existed in the North around the time of U.S. independence. Nonetheless, the majority of Africans in North America lived as slaves in what would become the southern United States and would not begin to be converted to Christianity until near the end of the eighteenth century (Burnim 2006; Darden 2004; J. Scott 1983; Southern 1997; Wilmore 2000; Wood 2000).

**Songs of African Slaves in the United States**

“I Shall Not Be Moved” belongs to a body of artistic work that is a New World invention, created by Africans trafficked into slavery in North America, where they encountered not only the horrors of racist exploitation but also the powerful messages of liberation paradoxically embedded in their white masters’ Protestant Christianity. Peter Wood (2000: 92), for example, quotes a black preacher in Georgia on the eve of the revolution against British colonialism as saying that “God would send Deliverance to the Negroes, from the power of their Masters, as He freed the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage.”

Africans sang of their experiences as slaves and infused them with messages of Christian redemption in the thousands of songs they created for themselves, known collectively as *spirituals*. According to the African American scholar, singer, composer, and civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon (2001: 68), this “body of musical literature” documents “the voice of African American people struggling to battle the yoke of human bondage we call American slavery.” They were called *spirituals* “by the people who created them because they come from the spirit—deep within.” In an oft-cited interpretive essay exploring the social, cultural, and theological meanings of spirituals, James Cone ([1972] 1991: 30) argues that spirituals are best understood as “historical” songs rather than songs expressing religious devotion or personal sorrows:
The spirituals are historical songs which speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage and what they did to hold themselves together and fight back. We are told that the people of Israel could not sing the Lord’s song in a strange land. But, for blacks, their being [original emphasis] depended upon a song. Through song, they built new structures for existence in an alien land. The spirituals enabled blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude.

Arthur Jones (1993: 7), like Cone and other scholars, highlights the retention of African elements in slave spirituals, noting that the enslaved Africans “who created the spirituals were not Christian, in the sense of instant conversion to a new religion.” Rather, he notes, their large-scale adoption of Christianity came near the end of slavery, making the conversion process gradual, which resulted in “a creative blend of African traditions and Christianity, creating a new transformed religion different in form and substance from the religion of the slave holder.” As John Lovell (1972) and Wyatt Tee Walker (1979) have also noted, Jones (1993: 10) goes on to remark in his essay that spirituals served the vital social function of strengthening bonds of tribe, kinship, and spiritual identity, a function that they would serve many times again in other times, in other places, and among other peoples. More prosaically, Walker (1979: 52–59), one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s lieutenants in the twentieth-century civil rights movement, lists the distinctive features of African American spirituals, several of which are African legacies, as including deep biblicalism with an eternal message, prominent rhythm, antiphonal (call and response) structure, double or coded meaning, and repetition. Several of these features are prominent in “I Shall Not Be Moved” and have contributed to the song’s ready adaptation to many social justice struggles around the world.

The role played by spirituals in the struggle for Africans’ liberation from slavery usually was indirect and largely affective but could at times be quite direct and instrumental. In both cases, spirituals made use of “code” or “double meaning,” a feature that Robert Darden
(2004: 79) notes was common in African folklore. Thus, the former slave turned abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass noted that spirituals’ repeated references to “Canaan” doubled as a reference to escape to freedom in Canada or just “the North” more generally (Darden 2004: 87). Cone ([1972] 1991: 86) and others (e.g., Lovell 1972) argue that references to “heaven” in spirituals should not be taken literally as a reference to another life but rather as a reference to slaves’ desire for emancipation. Similarly, the folklorist Russell Ames (1960: 139) argues that listeners should not take lyrics that seem to emphasize an individual’s personal relationship with her savior too literally, noting that “when . . . the slaves sang ‘I,’ it appears that they often meant ‘We,’ the whole Negro people, or perhaps all human beings who suffer.”

Going further, Ames argues that “taken as a whole, the Negro spirituals make up an epic . . . unified by the themes of compassion for all oppressed people and a determination to struggle against and overcome the oppressors.” In his comprehensive history of the Afro-American spiritual, Lovell (1972: 342) identifies “I Shall Not Be Moved” as a specific instance of Ames’s broader point that when a slave sang of her faith that she personally would be saved, in reality she was professing her unswerving commitment to seeking liberation from bondage for both herself and her people: “The singer, the member [of the congregation], the seeker is fixed in his plan. He will not allow himself to be frightened out of it. . . . Like a tree that’s planted by the waters, I shall not be moved.” Similarly, Waldo Martin (2000: 257) argues that individual religious commitment and collective struggles for “secular freedom” were dialectically interconnected, informing one another and buttressing “a sense of peoplehood, community, or nationality among African Americans.”

Sometimes the double meaning of spirituals was not metaphorical but was instead quite concrete. With regard to antebellum slave revolts and the operation of the Underground Railroad, the use of spirituals as code for communication among emancipationist conspirators is legendary. In leading his famous slave insurrection in Virginia in 1831, the black preacher Nat Turner called his fellow conspirators to secret meetings by singing the beautiful spiritual ‘Steal Away’: My Lord, He calls me / He calls me by the thunder / The trumpet sounds it in my soul / I ain’t got long to stay here / Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus / Steal away, steal away, steal away.
away home / I ain’t got long to stay here” (quoted in Ames 1960: 150).
Similarly, Harriet Tubman, the freed slave who served as leader of the
network of black and white abolitionists who helped Africans escape
slavery by transporting them to the “free” North, was well known as
a singer of spirituals. Such songs as “Follow the Drinking Gourd,”
for example, would be used by conductors of her Underground Rail-
road to alert slaves to prepare for their flight from the plantation. She
herself was known by the biblical name “Moses” and would sing the
spiritual “Wade in the Water” to “remind her ‘passengers’ that it was
important to throw bloodhounds off the scent” and “to help them
keep up their courage” (Ames 1960: 160).5 It is no accident, then, that
W.E.B. DuBois, the leading intellectual voice for black liberation in
the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, begins
each chapter of his famous treatise *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903]
2007) with a transcribed melody from a spiritual and dedicates its
final chapter to what he refers to as “the sorrow songs.” It is similarly
unsurprising that Paul Robeson, the left-wing activist, singer, and
actor of the stage and screen, made slave spirituals a central compo-

tent of his repertoire as a performer:

The power of spirit that our people have is intangible, but it is
a great force that must be unleashed in the struggles of today.
A spirit of steadfast determination, exaltation in the face of
trials—it is the very soul of our people that has been formed
through the long and weary years of our march toward free-
dom. It is the deathless spirit of the great ones who have led
our people in the past—Douglass, Tubman, and all the oth-
ers—and of the millions who kept “a-inching along.” That
spirit lives in our people’s songs—in the sublime grandeur of
“Deep River,” in the driving power of “Jacob’s Ladder,” in the
militancy of “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” and in the poi-
gnant beauty of all our spirituals. (quoted in Jones 1993: 11)

It is also no surprise, therefore, that “I Shall Not Be Moved” would
come to play such a significant role in many different liberation
struggles around the world, given its rootedness in the fertile soil of
the African American spiritual tradition.
The Likely Camp-Meeting Origins of “I Shall Not Be Moved”

According to Samuel Floyd (1995: 41–42), African American spirituals can be divided into two basic types—sorrow songs and jubilees. Sorrow songs “speak of the past and present trials and tribulations suffered by the slaves and their savior,” while jubilees “express the joyful expectation of a better life in the future.” Given its major key, upbeat tempo, and lyrical content, “I Shall Not Be Moved” logically would seem to fall into the “jubilee” category. For this reason, it also seems likely that the song initially emerged in the early nineteenth century in the frontier regions of the southern United States during the religious revival movement known to historians as the Second Great Awakening, which featured gatherings for mass worship known as camp meetings. Such meetings involved continuous religious services held in the forest that took place over the course of several days. Their participants included “the common people, black and white, of all the Protestant denominations” (Southern 1997: 82; see also Bruce 1974: 73–75; Eslinger 1999: 232–233; White 1928: chap. 2; and Work 1915: 83). As a “primarily interracial institution,” congregants at these mass meetings received sermons from both black and white preachers (Southern 1997: 83). Singing was a central component of the camp meeting, with blacks in attendance playing an especially boisterous role, much to the consternation of some conservative white clergy, given the way in which the “noisy” and “folksy” atmosphere of such revivals gave rise to new songs and styles of singing that challenged the “antiquated” church hymns of the day. This is consistent with Waldo Martin’s (2000: 253–254) more general account of the differences between African and white musical encounters in the U.S. South in the early nineteenth century:

The song style of African Americans was evident in vocal as well as instrumental music. The song style of African Americans was highly expressive: more percussive than lyrical. Ample reference is made to the resounding singing of African Americans among themselves, as well as the overpowering vocal might of African Americans drowning out
European Americans when both groups sang together in religious as well as secular settings. In addition to great volume and emotional intensity, African American song style blended vocal gestures—including shouts, falsetto, trills, and slurs—and physical movements like foot stomping, hand clapping, body weaving, and head bobbing. While reinforcing a fundamental rhythmic thrust, this song style also reflected the intimate tie of the music to bodily motion and dance, of music making to performance.8

Waldo Martin’s description here recalls musicologist Simon Frith’s (1996b: 274) recognition of music as an embodied form of social action, so much so that he wryly refers to music making and listening as social movements. In this regard, we can also tie the birth of “I Shall Not Be Moved” in the context of camp meetings to Robert Rosenthal and Richard Flacks’s (2011) recognition of the importance of ritual to promoting a unified identity among social movement participants. Indeed, one of the cultural forms that appears to have contributed to the development of African American spirituals born of the camp meetings is the ring shout practice of slaves. According to Martin (2000: 256–257), the ring shouts, practiced informally and without ecclesiastical supervision by whites, were “intensely charged ritual moments of ecstatic dancing and singing” in which “elements of various religious songs and messages were transformed into African American sacred music, most notably the spiritual.”

For her part, Eileen Southern (1997: 85) calls attention to how the new forms of religious singing by black slaves alarmed white clergy, who did not approve of slaves “holding songfests away from proper supervision, . . . singing songs of their own composing, . . . [and using] tunes that were dangerously near to being dance tunes in the style of slave jubilee melodies.” In spite of clerical concerns, from the slaves’ musical practices “emerged a new kind of religious song that became the distinctive badge of the camp-meeting movement.”9 Writing earlier, Pullen Jackson ([1933] 1965) describes southern whites’ participation in camp meetings in similar terms, with similar reactions from church officials.10 For his part, Darden (2004: 57) suggests that historical conditions on the frontier also influenced the types of songs that were sung at the camp meetings by both whites and blacks. Up-tempo songs with
simple and repetitive refrains and choruses facilitated group singing. Moreover, the refrains and choruses were often taken from existing hymns, making them “easily remembered from meeting to meeting.” This was important, given that most of the participants in camp meetings were illiterate and that meetings were held at night by torchlight, making it all the more advisable to “avoid complicated hymnals and sheet music.” Charles Johnson (1955: 201) notes that in what he calls the “revival spirituals” of the camp meetings, “text simplification” was crucial. The creation of these songs was typically spontaneous, whether the singers were black or white. In some cases, words from older hymns were dropped as they were transformed into the new spirituals. The rhythmic new songs made use of “a combination of scriptural phrases and everyday language,” while “repetition rendered them contagious and easily remembered.” The song “I Shall Not Be Moved” exhibits these characteristics to a tee.

Although a number of hymnals and spiritual songbooks from the early-nineteenth-century camp meetings have been published, I have not been able to locate any that contain the song “I Shall Not Be Moved.” This does not rule out, however, the possibility that the song has camp-meeting origins. Many of the songs sung in the camp meetings were never written down, consisting as they did of lining out of psalms and other biblical verses, one or two lines at a time, combining these lines with a simple, repeated refrain. As Newman White notes in the chapter on religious songs in his 1928 treatise American Negro Folk Songs, in the camp meetings, and later in church settings, hymns existed alongside what he calls “wild chants.” These chants, he observes, were what came to be called camp-meeting songs. He notes that for whites, these songs “were seldom even printed” and “faded into the background with the decline of camp meetings.” Among blacks, however, he notes that such songs “flourished long after their use among whites was relegated to the backwoods” (41). A few pages later in the same chapter, White (1928: 44) gives a further explanation of why such songs were not typically printed:

The most folksy of all the religious folk-songs of white people in the early nineteenth century were seldom written at all. They were a folk possession, perfectly well-known by all the true professors; and besides, why print songs for congrega-
tions the majority of whom cannot read? Moreover there is more than a suspicion that most editors of religious songsters, like John C. Totten, the editor of *A Selection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs—As Usually Sung at Camp-Meetings* (19th edition in 1827, New York), bore down a little consciously on the selection, not wishing to include ungrammatical and undignified songs which everyone knew, anyhow.\(^\text{12}\)

Thus, although it is impossible to know for certain exactly when and where “I Shall Not Be Moved” was sung for the first time, the song’s characteristics and the fact that by the twentieth century it came to form part of both the black and white Protestant traditions strongly suggest camp-meeting origins.\(^\text{13}\)

**Spirituals as African Cultural Imprint on America**

American slaves’ African cultural and musical heritage would seem to have prepared them well for especially active and creative camp-meeting participation. As noted by Dena Epstein and Rosita Sands (2006: 36), the African musical legacy carried by slaves to the New World included the integration of music into daily life as a group activity rather than as an individual performance. Their singing also typically included “repetitive choruses with a lead singer” and “the call-response style of alternating phrases juxtaposed or overlapping.” According to Mellonee Burnim (2006: 54–55), a typical feature of African American spirituals is the “call-response or leader-chorus structure in which the constant repetition of the response allows and encourages everyone to participate,” which, she argues, was a form that was “ubiquitous among the musical cultures of West and Central Africa that supplied slaves to the Americas” and served as “a strong marker of the pervasiveness of African cultural memory in the lived experiences of New World slaves,” one that distinguished their singing from European-origin styles.\(^\text{14}\) For their part, Roger Abrahams and George Foss (1968: 57–58) suggest that African influences may account for the fact that “a progressively large number of traditional songs” among whites in the United States “are either in a simple repetition formula (especially religious songs) or use the blues technique of repeating the first line of a stanza two or three times.”
As should be clear to the reader by now, “I Shall Not Be Moved” strongly exhibits the features attributed to both the African song legacy and the songs of early-nineteenth-century camp meetings in the United States. As noted previously, the song remains a religious standard among both black and white Protestants in the United States, regardless of whether anyone can definitively determine its “true” racial origins. After the Civil War and emancipation of the slaves, the song came to form part of the religious repertoire of both whites and blacks in the southern United States (see, for example, Owens 1983 and Pitts 1991; the song also appears in many published hymnals used by both black and white churches starting in the 1920s). An arrangement by Edward Boatner, chorister of the National Baptist Convention, was published by the Sunday School Publishing Board in 1927 as part of the collection *Spirituals Triumphant: Old and New* and has become one of the standard versions of the song used in African American congregations in the United States. In his foreword to this collection, A. M. Townsend, the secretary of the National Baptist Convention, calls the hymnal “a collection of slave melodies that had their origin in the life of an oppressed yet hopeful people,” going on to say that “no one can sing or write these songs of sorrow, joy, hope, and fear, so nearly as they can be reproduced, as those from whom the songs were originated.” In a similar vein, Bernice Johnson Reagon (2001: 99) also recognizes the dual character of slave spirituals, which at once document the horrors of bondage and offer the hope of redemption for those who seek it:

Spirituals record the struggle of a people to survive, but like no other history, they have the power to touch the souls and stir the emotions of the people who sing and hear them. This African American song, with its evolution within American society—like a great river shooting off hundreds of tributaries to be joined together somewhere further down the way—gives us the richest opportunity to view the African American song tradition in a way that unleashes the powerful human story it holds.

Reagon’s image of the slave spiritual as a great river “shooting off tributaries” that will come back together somewhere downstream in
history is as apt a metaphor as any for the history of “I Shall Not Be Moved” and its passage from one movement to another and across several continents. Where in this chapter we have seen how the song “I Shall Not Be Moved” contributed to the spiritual sustenance of an oppressed racial minority in the United States in the nineteenth century, in the next chapter we see how in the twentieth century the song was wielded as a weapon by an exploited majority—the nation’s industrial workers—in their struggle to organize unions to defend their rights and advance their interests.