Work Requirements

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In the first few decades of cinematic production after the Spanish-American War, people on the social and imperial margins continued to be seen rather than heard. Only gradually, in fact, did sound become part of the picture, so to speak, for films on any subject. While early cinematic exhibitions often used musical accompaniment, it was not until the 1920s that recorded dialogue was integrated into the narrative action. Famously, the first full-length “talkie” was *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Starring Al Jolson in blackface, this technological wonder featured a modern “Black” voice that echoed the racial fantasies of antebellum minstrelsy. Needless to say, Jolson’s smash hit did not have an activist agenda. But in the decades preceding its release, Black song did play an unlikely part in the print culture of social welfare. In kinship less with the demeaning melodrama of blackface cinema than with the managerial gaze of the war actuality, a small group of charity workers and reformers began collecting and transcribing African American work songs. It was a partnership as improbable as it was one-sided. The songs created by enslaved people and their descendants, often under the most brutal of conditions, were pressed into service by reformers struggling to justify the coercive practices of social welfare provision. Was the work demanded in the almshouse, the insane asylum, or the industrial school truly meaningful? The work song offered an answer at once eloquent and equivocal.

The musical transcriptions that found their way into the late nineteenth-century print culture of social welfare are part of a broader history of popular and scholarly interest in the work song. And the genre itself is likewise of much older provenance. If we follow Bruce Jackson’s influential lead, it seems probable that work songs have always existed and have
flourished everywhere. For Jackson, any song used to pace—rather than accompany—physical labor counts as a work song. The melodies employed to stamp barley in ancient Greece, to weave tweed in the Scottish Hebrides, and to navigate the waters of the Caribbean belong to a transhistorical genre defined less by a particular set of formal attributes than by its capacity to choreograph human movement. At its most elemental, the work song coordinates the efforts of a group who need to perform certain tasks at the same time, at the same speed, or in interlocking rhythms. This coordination might allow workers to apply maximum force at just the right moment or to maintain their safety over the course of the day. When the work in question is coerced or strictly policed, work songs can also make it difficult for overseers to single out individual workers for punishment. In these situations, moreover, or whenever the obligation to work is externally imposed—whether by economic necessity or state violence—work songs can offer an emotional outlet and even some degree of control. As Jackson observes, the genre changes “the nature of the work by putting the work into the worker’s framework.”

In the United States, the extensive literature on the genre of the work song amassed by folklorists and musicians dates to the 1930s. This body of writing and recording focuses on the work songs created by Black Americans under successive regimes of racial discipline, from chattel slavery to the convict lease and the Southern penitentiary. While his efforts were not entirely unprecedented, John Lomax is often credited with “salvaging” the genre for academic and lay audiences alike. Indeed, stories of how John Lomax and his son Alan dragged their hulking recording equipment into prisons across the South to capture a “great panoply of original songs” are now themselves the stuff of folklore. Later collectors looked to Southern prisons for the same reasons that brought the Lomaxes there. As Bruce Jackson writes of his own field research, “The last place in North America where work songs survived as a viable tradition was in southern agricultural prisons because many of those institutions maintained, until the 1960s and 1970s, the racially segregated and physically brutal culture of the nineteenth-century plantation.” Signposted by names like Lomax and Jackson but fleshed out by the efforts of countless others, professional and amateur alike, the expansive tradition of twentieth-century folklore has produced a wealth of audio recordings, as well as a rich body of written transcriptions and ethnographies. This latter archive includes scholarly monographs, trade books, anthologies, and liner notes. Whatever their preferred medium, method, or genre, twentieth-century collectors
of African American work songs generally approached their task with a shared sense of urgency. As the poet and scholar Sterling Brown described his own motivation, a “new-fangled machine killed John Henry”; its “numerous offspring would soon kill the work song of his buddies.”

To say that the social welfare reformers of the late nineteenth century paved the way for this celebrated tradition of folklore and audio ethnography is to give them at once too much and too little credit. For though these earlier researchers and aficionados preceded Lomax and his contemporaries by several decades, their transcriptions and ethnographies were scattered and sparse, never amounting to anything that could be described as a tradition, much less a movement. And though turn-of-the-century reformers argued that work songs were threatened by the encroaching forces of industrial modernity, they were ultimately less concerned with safeguarding these cultural artifacts for their own sake than with analyzing the social truths they were thought to contain. For some reformers, the data mined from African American work songs could be used to bolster familiar racial typologies. For others, work songs offered crucial insight into the noneconomic, even spiritual value of work as such. The conviction that work is morally valuable in and of itself, of course, has long been a touchstone for social welfare practice, as for the work society writ large. But in the latter few decades of the nineteenth century, in the face of mounting concerns about the coerced labor performed in a range of custodial institutions, shoring up faith in this truism became especially pressing. Nowhere was the use of inmate labor more conspicuous than in the rise of large-scale, highly rationalized, and monopolistic prison industries in the North and the convict lease system in the South. Similar practices were employed in specialized institutions for people with disabilities and African Americans, among others, which combined penal-style discipline with medical and racial paternalism to promote coerced labor as both therapeutic and cost-effective. Across the board, the ballooning profitability of inmate labor—and belief in its deterrent value—outstripped reformers’ abilities to justify these increasingly violent practices in anything but economic terms.

In the midst of this crisis of institutional labor, reformers banded together under the banner of charities and correction to reimagine social welfare provision from the ground up. Central to this project was rethinking how institutional labor could be made truly meaningful for all parties concerned, for professionalizing social welfare workers as well as for inmates, residents, and patients. In this regard, charities and correction were
part of the wider embrace of “scientific charity” at the turn of the twentieth century. As such, the ideals of institutional reform went hand in hand with the ideals of bureaucratic rationality that, as we saw in previous chapters, also guided the operations of the Pension Bureau and charity organization societies. When African American work songs were conscripted into the agenda of charity and corrections, they thus took their place alongside relatively novel industrial print forms such as the report, the memo, and the conference proceedings. The obvious differences between and among these various genres notwithstanding, each was used to ascertain the circumstances under which institutional labor could be said to possess non-economic value—and to define the nature of that value. Given the genre’s familiar associations with self-directed and purposeful labor, the allure of the work song would seem clear. But the reformers also speculate that the work song might ultimately be used not only to redeem the worst abuses of institutional labor but also in a rather more directly diagnostic capacity to determine whose work ethic was sound and whose wasn’t.

In accounting for how the African American work song entered the print culture of social welfare at the turn of the twentieth century, the story told here reverses the pattern followed in previous chapters. Rather than exploring how a bureaucratic genre of social welfare provision found traction in public culture at large, this chapter asks how a vernacular cultural form was taken up by a reformist community in the throes of professionalization. One print form among many in the orbit of charities and correction, the work song consolidated two evidently irreconcilable impulses driving the ongoing work of institution (re)building. On the one hand, these songs suggested that labor is meaningful only when directed by the physiological rhythms of the laboring body. To some reformers, this universal “truth” aligned the work of charities and correction professionals with what today would be called romantic anticapitalism—a nagging suspicion that capitalist labor can never be as fulfilling, spiritually or otherwise, as bygone modes of work. On the other hand, though, the work song’s synchronicity of inclination and production also provided a model of capitalist discipline, a tool with which to force workers into the rhythms of industrial profit making. Ultimately, this tension allowed the work song to become a sounding board for a profession in transition, a tradition caught between the religious surety of antebellum volunteerism and the rational optimism of social science.

To tell the forgotten story about how the work song came to mediate the turn-of-the-century crisis of institutional labor thus means looking not
forward to the Lomaxes, but back to the roots of charities and correction in earlier reformist traditions. These traditions were preoccupied not with the work song but with the African American spiritual. After exploring the perhaps unlikely afterlives of the Civil War–era Port Royal Experiment in the professionalization of charities and corrections, the chapter offers two case studies. The first, a comparative study of global vernacular work song traditions by the German economist Karl Bücher, illuminates how ethnographic transcriptions in the field and stenographic transcriptions in the settings of white-collar professionalism were tasked with the same cultural work. Turning then from Leipzig and Chicago to Chapel Hill, the chapter then explores how the sociologist Howard Odum launched the Institute for Social Research at the University of North Carolina (UNC) with a series of folk music anthologies. Although Odum and his colleagues at UNC were wary of the baggage that charities and correction began to carry by the 1920s, in emphasizing the redemptive rhythms of institutional labor UNC researchers trod a well-worn path. As in Bücher’s Arbeit und Rhythmus, the work song for Odum encapsulated at once a reformist optimism about the power of productive labor to return anyone to the social fold and a deep-seated ambivalence about what that premise—and such a return—actually entailed in practice.

From Spirituals to Work Songs

Reformist efforts to transcribe the songs of enslaved people were conducted sporadically across the nineteenth century, but the locus classicus for this ethnographic project is the Port Royal Experiment. A Civil War–era “rehearsal for Reconstruction,” the Port Royal Experiment was launched in 1861 by Northern forces on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. After the area fell to the Union navy, Treasury agents, entrepreneurs, and missionaries arrived from the North to help guide the transition to freedom. From the outset, there was broad enthusiasm about the prospects for success. Federal officials and private investors embraced the Sea Islands as a chain of perfectly enclosed social laboratories in which to plan the economic rebuilding of the South. Known collectively as Gideon’s Band, the reformers, abolitionists, and educators who traveled to Port Royal thought conditions equally favorable for redressing the moral blight of slavery. In the spirit of antebellum volunteerism, Gideon’s Band was motivated by a sentimental, often paternalistic, desire to welcome enslaved people into the human community. Widespread confidence about the mission at
hand, however, soon gave way to intense disagreements among the various Northern interests represented on the Sea Islands. White Northerners also clashed with the people they claimed to help, the so-called contraband slaves—a military neologism marking the uncertain legal status of men and women no longer enslaved but not yet free. At stake in these debates was ultimately what economic life would look like and mean on the Sea Islands and across a reconstructed South after the war. Would the system devised at Port Royal subordinate freed people to the demands of Northern capital or would it be guided by the Indigenous practices of Sea Island communities and be alive to the economic autonomy so fiercely asserted by formerly enslaved people?11

In the end, what emerged from the Sea Islands was not the radical vision of land redistribution that contraband slaves demanded and progressive reformers supported. Instead, formerly enslaved people were dispossessed of their subsistence plots and forced by vagrancy legislation and debt peonage into the capitalist market. While devastating by any measure, the collapse of the Port Royal Experiment is eclipsed in popular memory by the failure of Reconstruction a decade later. Today, in fact, the Port Royal Experiment is best known not for the social experiment in free labor conducted on the Sea Islands but for the slave spirituals collected there. Enthralled by the religious music they chanced to overhear at Port Royal, many white Northerners set out to commit these songs to the page. The same insular boundedness that made the Sea Islands perfectly suited for a social experiment in free labor, many reformers believed, also made them perfectly preserved enclaves of slave culture. From Lucy McKim’s pioneering articles in Dwight’s Music Journal to Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s Army Life in a Black Regiment (1869) and countless private letters and memoirs, the Port Royal Experiment yielded a wealth of writing about and transcriptions of slave spirituals.12 These accounts thrilled supporters in the North, who were eager not only for news of the war but also for portraits of “authentic” slave life that conveyed the humanitarian urgency of the Union cause. As the editors of the landmark anthology Slave Songs of the United States (1867) noted, “The wild, sad strains tell, as the sufferers themselves could not, of crushed hopes, keen sorrow, and a dull, daily misery, which covered them as hopelessly as the fog from the rice swamps.”13

Transcriptions of the spirituals made at Port Royal set the terms on which the genre gradually came to be embraced across US public culture after the war, whether in popular magazines, middle-class parlors, or urban concert halls. As a distinguished body of scholarship has shown, this
peculiar reception history was shaped by two broadly overlapping sets of preoccupations. First, the ethnographic accounts that emerged from the Sea Islands were skeptical about whether Western musical notation could capture the “exotic” melodies or idiosyncratic performance of religious slave music. As Ronald Radano observes, these kinds of concerns date back as far as the 1700s in the annals of Anglo-European musicology. But the writing produced at Port Royal gave popular purchase as never before to the idea that Black musical performance “exceeds notation.”14 Second, public interest in the spiritual was also stoked by the narrow mode of interpretation inaugurated at Port Royal. As the sociologist Jon Cruz has demonstrated, songs that originally filled a disparate range of social, religious, and political functions came in the accounts that emerged from the Sea Islands to represent the absolute truth of slave experience. Cruz coins the term “ethnosympathy” to describe how the spiritual was conscripted into a “new humanitarian pursuit of the inner world of distinctive and collectively classifiably subjects.” This “pathos-oriented mode of hearing” allowed reformers and then the public at large to approach the spirituals as “windows into the lives” of enslaved people and into the experience of slavery itself.15 More recently, Daphne Brooks has emphasized how this cultural hermeneutics ultimately had less to do with slave experience than with white catharsis. Where the spirituals and the formerly enslaved people who performed in concert halls across the United States and internationally were taken to embody “the physical and aural manifestation of slavery’s traumas,” intensely empathetic white audiences “expressed a simultaneous affirmation and disavowal of their own complicity with the narrative of slavery.”16

Important though scholarly attention to the depoliticization of slave music on the Sea Islands has been, the prominence of the spirituals in cultural histories of Port Royal has obscured another important legacy of that failed rehearsal for Reconstruction—its role as a turning point in US social welfare provision. If the first white reformers to arrive on the Sea Islands set out to help freed people to assert their full humanity, such radically emancipatory ambitions soon gave way to the morality of the market. Freedom came to mean only the freedom to contract one’s labor, even if under coercion or the threat of imprisonment. By the same token, the sentimental humanitarianism that brought Northern reformers to the Sea Islands and shaped popular reception of the spirituals was gradually replaced by a more plainly disciplinary emphasis on the social value of work in and of itself. Illuminating in this regard is the career of Edward L.
Pierce, the New England lawyer who first called the Union’s attention to the needs of contraband slaves on the Sea Islands and recruited Gideon’s Band.\textsuperscript{17} While he shared the feelings of compassion and outrage that drew other white Northerners to the region, Pierce soon came to believe that preparing formerly enslaved people for freedom had less to do with recognizing their right to self-sovereignty than with shunting them into the labor market. As Amy Dru Stanley notes, Pierce told contraband slaves that “if they were to be free, they would have to work, and would be shut up or deprived of privileges if they did not.”\textsuperscript{18} In an effort to make good on this threat, Pierce devised a system of workhouses and prisons for contraband slaves on the Sea Islands. The end of the Port Royal Experiment did little to temper Pierce’s commitment to work-based welfare provision. Indeed, he drew on the lessons learned on the Sea Islands in his new position as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of State Charities. In that capacity, Pierce proposed that local overseers of the poor should be allowed to extract labor from alms seekers—whether “chopping wood [or] picking stone”—as payment for food or a night’s lodging. As a member of the legislature three years later, Pierce introduced a similar measure subjecting “beggars who refused to work to conviction as vagrants and forced labor.”\textsuperscript{19}

Pierce’s postwar career trajectory was not anomalous. Many alumni of the Port Royal Experiment gradually set aside the Christian humanitarianism of antebellum volunteerism in favor of more explicitly punitive practices of social welfare. Indeed, prisons, asylums, and reformatories came to mirror the Sea Islands—self-enclosed spaces of coerced labor that were celebrated as rehabilitative. Reformers soon gave the name \textit{charity and corrections} to this expansive project, which sought at base to rationalize the provision of social welfare and double down on the social value of work for its own sake. The transition to charity and corrections, of course, did not happen overnight. The years and decades after the Civil War instead marked a period of uneasy transition and recalibration across the fields of institutional work. And the project of charity and corrections coexisted awkwardly at times with the belief that social welfare remained at base a humanitarian, if not explicitly spiritual, undertaking. The transitional quality of charity and corrections is marked by a residual belief in the religious necessity of helping those in need with an equally zealous faith in bureaucratic rationalism and industrial print culture. But there was a nagging question throughout: as reformers were struggling to define what they did as professional work, they still had to show that the work they demanded of people in institutional contexts had noneconomic value. And
so when they turned to Black song, they turned not to the spiritual but to the work song.

The work of wrangling the competing and seemingly contradictory priorities of the moment into a more or less cohesive agenda was spearheaded by the National Conference of Charities and Correction (NCCC), an annual gathering first held in 1874. Initially, the NCCC meetings took place as a breakout group of sorts at the American Social Science Association (ASSA), which had been created in 1865 with a mandate to “guide the public mind to the best practical means of promoting the Amendment of laws, the Advancement of Education, the Prevention and Repression of Crime, the Reformation of Criminals, and the Progress of Public Morality.” The two groups’ aims were considered compatible, if not ultimately interchangeable, in the first few years of the NCCC’s existence. Before long, however, NCCC members began to feel that the ASSA’s theoretical approach to social science was at odds with their own rather more pragmatic focus on reform. A movement was thus begun to establish the NCCC as an independent organization. And while the issues addressed by both groups continued to overlap for several years, as did their membership rosters, a formal separation took place in 1879. Each organization set out to develop its niche, with the ASSA concentrating on research and the NCCC on reform. These two categories, of course, were never mutually exclusive. But the division of intellectual labor between research and reform set the terms on which sociology and social work emerged as distinct academic disciplines later in the twentieth century. Looking back on this split years later, NCCC members saw no reason for regret. As one writer declared in the Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1893, the organization’s history of achievement spoke for itself: “You will find the ideas which have been formulated in the Conference built into the walls of prisons and hospitals for the insane” and incorporated into the spiritual bedrock of society.

To be sure, the suggestion that NCCC ideas provided a cornerstone for brick-and-mortar institutions is rhetorically powerful. But as reprinted in a collection of papers originally presented at an NCCC convention, this flourish of self-congratulation also underscores how the professionalization of charities and correction relied on print culture in general and on the genre of the conference proceeding in particular. Before ideas could become bricks, they had to become pages. And these pages were in turn annually collated into bound volumes that not only bore witness to a history of specific debates and local interventions but also sought
to champion the cumulative—even utopian—ambition of engaged social science (figure 4.1). The *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction* thus served a dual function. They established a specialized rhetorical community, long a hallmark of professionalization, while also embodying the spiritual impact that the NCCC sought to have in the world.²³ Practically speaking, this balancing act was not the cut-and-dried exercise in transcription we might expect. The bulk of each volume of the *Proceedings* consists of reprinted versions of papers that conference members read aloud and later submitted in hard copy, generally after more or less extensive revision.²⁴ Neither were printed accounts of discussions word-for-word transcriptions. Not only did scheduling snags prevent stenographers from attending every session, but the editors evidently had so little faith in transcriptions produced on the spot that they began asking attendees for “abstracts” of their contributions to discussion.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, these documents are conspicuously eloquent and concise; some are even footnoted. All appearances to the contrary, it is thus clear that the *Proceedings* of the NCCC are not unmediated transcripts of everything said at a given meeting. Rather, these volumes are collages of multiply authored texts, each of which bears a unique relation to the event at hand while also sharing in a tacitly acknowledged commitment to the spiritual project of charity and corrections.²⁶ In the *Proceedings*, we might thus suggest, transcription aspires to something like musical notation. It aims not only to account for what happened when but also to allow readers to re-create the fullness of the original conference. That such a promise was never realized did not make it any less worth pursuing. Indeed, what one participant noted of the music played between sessions might have appeared on the masthead of the *Proceedings*: “It is impossible to report in words the good spirit that prevailed among the members, the warm hospitality of the people, and the charm of the music.”²⁷

The formal effort that went into translating the spiritual work of social welfare onto the page dovetails with the contents of the *Proceedings*, which cover a disparate range of topics but continually circle back to the material labor demanded of relief seekers. Was this labor meaningful in any higher sense—beyond, that is, the economic gain accrued by institutions and municipalities? The professional status of welfare workers was thus dependent not only on their bureaucratic abilities but also on the meaning that could be ascribed to the work they required of others. Even the most rational professions, it seems, could not claim the mantle of social science if their practitioners did nothing more than force poor people into pointless
toil. The NCCC’s efforts to answer this question in the affirmative were commonly grounded in an optimistic faith in its members’ organizational abilities. As one speaker argued, administrators needed only “ingenuity, energy, and patience in order to arrange the work so that every inmate who can work, more or less, shall do so, and at the same time so that the needful work of the institution be kept up.” Confidence of this sort relies on a technocratic tautology: because all work is inherently “needful”—for institution and inmate alike—reform is only a matter of finding an arrangement that would allow everyone to join.
In more substantive arguments, institutional labor was commonly celebrated for its educational value. What counted as educational, of course, varied from one paper to the next. To many NCCC members, institutional labor possessed pedagogical value only when it was insulated from the market. The director of the Kentucky Institution for Feeble-Minded Children, for instance, found wide agreement among his colleagues when he argued in 1877 that inmate labor should be regarded not simply as the expeditious means of meeting overhead costs that it clearly was but rather “as educational, in the highest sense of the word.” The audience was no less receptive, however, when the same speaker went on to boast that nearly 75 percent of his residents were self-supporting, effectively collapsing any real distinction between educational and economic value. Another common justification for institutional labor in the Proceedings took the opposite tack, arguing that institutional labor was educational only when genuinely profitable. Prison reform was a touchstone for NCCC members in this camp. Even as fierce a critic of the convict lease system as the novelist George Washington Cable reasoned that inmate labor should not be abandoned. Coerced labor could indeed have educational value, he argued, when prisoners were forced to earn their keep like anyone else. In an 1884 conference paper that would later be republished as “The Freedman’s Case in Equity,” Cable laid out his vision of “the model prison” before inviting audience members to eavesdrop on an imagined conversation between the warden and an incredulous visitor: “Trying to live without competing in the fields of productive labor is just the essence of the crimes for which they were sent here. We make small work of that.”

Beyond reformatories and penitentiaries, NCCC members also looked to Black industrial schools to champion the noneconomic value of institutional labor. In doing so, they linked the professional aims of charities and correction not to the abolitionist energy that fueled the Port Royal Experiment but to the post-Reconstruction project of subordinating Black labor to the demands of racial capitalism. In 1887, for instance, the conference featured a panel called “African and Indian Races” with presentations by NCCC luminary F. B. Sanborn and Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the founder of Hampton Institute. Whereas Sanborn delivered an apologist history of Atlantic slavery and Native American genocide, Armstrong focused on the conference’s work with Black Americans at present. The task at hand, he argued, was to build on the progress made during slavery. If slavery “kept millions from rising to a higher plane,” it nonetheless “held multitudes up from lower depths, and trained them in the elementary
civilization of language, labor, habits, and religion.”32 For Armstrong, the conference could best foster this ongoing project by supporting Black industrial schools, the very embodiment of labor’s educational value. Armstrong’s perspective was the consensus opinion at the NCCC for years to come, but Black voices did occasionally find their way into the print record. In 1904, for instance, the title of the presentation that William E. Benson of the Kowaliga School was scheduled to give was probably meant to appeal to the NCCC’s largely white membership: “The Prevention of Crime among Colored Children. Manual Training as a Preventive of Delinquency.” But no sooner had he taken the podium than Benson revealed his bait and switch. “The crime record of the Negro is more apparent than real,” he declared, ginned up by the biases of police officers and judges. Nor had the helping hand of charities and correction yet reached rural Black communities.33 His and other schools were left to carve out their own understanding of “the dignity and success of labor.” And in so doing they drew not only on the rational precedent of charities and correction but also on the fugitive practices of economic autonomy developed by freed people like Benson’s grandfather.34

From educational value to civilizationist backstop, the difficulty of accounting for the noneconomic value of institutional labor led NCCC members to cycle through a host of explanatory rubrics. But each of these various cognates was ultimately a placeholder for the spiritual meaning that reformers continued to attribute to work—by turns implicitly, by turns explicitly—in this transitional moment in the history of US social welfare provision. No single figure better represented the residual spirituality of charity and corrections than Charles Richmond Henderson, who in 1899 became the only sociologist elected president of the NCCC. Trained as a Baptist minister, Henderson joined the faculty of the newly created University of Chicago in 1892. In 1895 and 1901 Henderson left Chicago to study in Germany, where he earned a doctorate in economics and statistics from the University of Leipzig.35 Over the course of an academic career that colleagues praised for touching “upon practically the whole of applied sociology, much of this work being of a pioneer nature,” Henderson published books on subjects ranging from prison reform to social welfare provision and eugenics.36 Among the most prominent titles were An Introduction to the Study of the Dependent, Defective, and Delinquent Classes (1893), The Social Spirit in America (1897), Modern Methods of Charity (1904), and Citizens in Industry (1915). Whatever the topic, Henderson’s writing often circled back to the transformative social value of work. When writing about prisons, for instance, Henderson argued that institutional labor
should be seen not as “a means of punishment for past vice, nor primarily for income,” but “a necessary condition of health, morality, and happiness.” Other institutions of social welfare faced much the same question: not whether inmates should work, but “what shall that employment be? No more serious problem can be proposed for thoughtful and reasonable people of any commonwealth.”

In the speech he gave at the NCCC after being elected president in 1899, Henderson made clear that the “serious problem” at hand was ensuring that institutional work had noneconomic value. Henderson’s speech, as reprinted in the Proceedings, begins by distinguishing the “employable” from the “unemployable” but goes on to suggest that such distinctions are moot: everyone should work. This imperative holds equally for “a certain refractory element which never in this world can be fitted into competitive society.” These “unhappy children,” Henderson argued, were to be given “the rational pleasure and education of regular productive industry and instruction and social fellowship” in institutional settings. This work would have all the hallmarks of productive labor, but it was in reality useful only in marking time before the supreme benevolence—for Henderson the true basis of charities and correction—could take over. Work performed in this way, Henderson assured listeners, remains educational. “This does not imply that we exclude [industrial] education from the care of those who are too feeble or deformed for the normal struggle of life. The home of the feeble-minded, even the asylum for lifelong State custody of irresponsible women, is still a school; and the educational process continues to that point where the dim lamps flicker and the angels on the luminous side have their brighter lights ready to guide the little pilgrim to the unseen.”

For Henderson and others in the transitional orbit of charities and correction, all work thus becomes spiritually meaningful with time. From this vantage, the bureaucratic protocols and documentary regimes mobilized by charities and correction fostered what might be called messianic busywork—a textual undertaking in which making the noneconomic value of institutional labor legible requires both professionalism and patience.

**Work and Rhythm**

Henderson is well known to historians of the early twentieth century, given how often he weighed in on the social issues of the day. Henderson’s name signposts many of the era’s most significant—and most objectionable—intellectual developments. Less well-known is Henderson’s contribution to
the comparative study of work songs published by his doctoral adviser, the Leipzig economist Karl Bücher. Starting with the 1902 edition, Bücher’s *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (Work and Rhythm) included an appendix of African American work songs compiled and annotated by Henderson’s students at the University of Chicago and by colleagues at the NCCC. *Arbeit und Rhythmus* might seem something of an outlier in Henderson’s oeuvre, a favor for a friend rather than a service to the profession. But the book does address many of the same concerns that shaped the agenda of charities and correction in the United States. Perhaps most prominently, Bücher’s romantic anticapitalism—his eagerness to find a more “authentic” relation to human labor in the music of “pre-industrial societies”—resonates with US reformers’ belief that all work is inherently meaningful. And just as US reformers sought to have it both ways, arguing that even the most abusive labor possesses moral value in and of itself, Bücher saw in “primitive” work songs a means of reenchanting the capitalist world. Not the anomaly they might seem, in other words, the transcriptions and commentaries that Henderson and his reformist colleagues contributed to *Arbeit und Rhythmus* take up the ideological project at the heart of the NCCC Proceedings. African American work songs are presented here not only as cultural artifacts in need of preservation but also as a means of accounting for the noneconomic value of work as such.

Originally published in 1896, *Arbeit und Rhythmus* was surprisingly popular in its day and went through six editions before 1925. Reviewers praised both Bücher’s accessible style and his ethnographic approach. While he never went into the field himself, Bücher drew together a prodigious bibliography of travelogues, ethnological reports, and imperial records, works that describe in enthusiastic detail a range of labor practices in Asia, Africa, and Australia, among other exotic locales. German- and later Russian-speaking readers were delighted by these portraits of working life on the other side of the globe. Many also found themselves in agreement with what *Arbeit und Rhythmus* had to say about their own experiences at work. In a narrative of evolutionary decline, Bücher pitted the preindustrial Naturmensch against the Kulturmensch of his own milieu. The latter, he lamented, had suffered considerably under the all-consuming rationality of industrial modernity. For the Naturmensch, on the other hand, work, art, and play were not distinct categories of human endeavor. Each of these interweaving domains was governed instead by the physiological rhythms of the body, and all were as such intrinsically pleasurable. The work song was for Bücher the epitome of this unity of purpose and expression, of
labor and leisure. It captured at once the joy of industriousness and the dignity inherent in “the possession and use of the products of one’s own labor.” Where the whirring of the machine rather than the song of the body set the pace of human endeavor, Bücher concluded, labor lost any such meaningfulness.

If *Arbeit und Rhythmus* spoke to armchair ethnographers, the book also addressed Bücher’s colleagues in the field of economics. Beginning with *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft*, published in 1893 and translated as *Industrial Evolution* in 1899, Bücher devoted much of his academic career to questioning the hegemony of classical economics. Because classical economics could not account for nonmarket kinds of exchange, he argued, the portrait of economic activity it delivered was reductive at best. Bücher instead studied a variety of exchanges he thought were hiding in plain sight: the giving of gifts, the borrowing of goods, and labor provided in return for future help, or *Bittarbeit*. Nonmarket exchanges of this sort, Bücher maintained, were especially prevalent among the “primitive” cultures that classical economists assumed to be disorderly, inefficient, and indolent. Taking issue with conventional images like these, Bücher sought to lay bare the rules governing a set of labor practices that, with regard to the meaningfulness of individual experience, far surpassed Western industrialism. Work of this sort, Bücher argued, “assured to primitive man a measure of enjoyment in life and a perpetual cheerfulness which the European, worried with work and oppressed with care, must envy him.” Büch-.er did not, however, advocate returning to an earlier stage of economic evolution. *Arbeit und Rhythmus* instead imagines a future in which the forces of industrial production could be reconfigured to produce a yet “higher rhythmic unity.” Such a unity was ultimately the best of both worlds, giving “the spirit back that joyous cheer, and the body that harmonious development, which characterizes the best of the primitive people.”

In theory, the evolutionary distinctions that Bücher draws allow him to imagine a mode of labor driven not by the demands of the market but by the rhythms of the body and the reciprocal ties of community. As illustrated in Bücher’s materials, however, these distinctions are hardly absolute. Many of the vignettes that make up *Arbeit und Rhythmus*, in fact, confuse the primitive and the modern in ways that lend Bücher’s descriptive foray a prescriptive feel. The *Naturmensch*, we are meant to understand, has much to teach the *Kulturmensch*. It is not always clear, however, what lesson readers should draw from these provocative comparisons. Bücher’s enthusiasm for the rhythms of preindustrial labor can at times seem
disingenuous, a willful misreading that finds in the Naturmensch merely an idealized image of the Kulturmensch. Consider, for instance, Bücher’s discussion of work songs used by “larger groups of people.” He begins by matter-of-factly likening industrial to preindustrial labor, observing among other similarities that the modern military march—a source of intrigue for Marey and Regnault as well, as we saw in chapter 3—finds a corollary in the rhythmic walking and singing of primitive peoples. Before long, however, the intimacy between modern and primitive seems to all but dissipate. Indeed, as Bücher goes on to quote from The Basutos: Or, Twenty-Three Years in South Africa (1861) by French missionary Eugene Casalis, preindustrial modes of labor and the musical forms they produce are described as unrelentingly strange (figure 4.2).

Bücher focuses in particular on Casalis’s description of how the Basuto prepare an oxen skin, a process that strikes Casalis as both comic and horrific: “A dozen men, in squatting position, seize it by turns, rub it between their hands, twist it, and toss it about with such rapidity, and in such a ridiculous manner, that it really seems as if their treatment had put life into it.” 48 Presenting these observations with little commentary, Bücher would seem to endorse the disdain Casalis shows for the Basuto workers. But Bücher is also at pains to underscore that music is the animating force by which this idolatrous labor is accomplished: “It is a mixture of nasal grunts, clucking, and shrill cries, which, though, most discordant, are in perfect time. One would imagine it to be a chorus of bears, boars, and baboons.” 49 Unsurprisingly, to French missionary and German annotator alike, these laborers soon begin to resemble in action the animals whose sounds they echo in song. “Beside themselves with the noise and the madness of their song,” some of the workers “imitate the graceful movements of the gazelle; others spring up on their prey with the fury of the lion; others, again, without discontinuing their work, amuse themselves with the corners of the skin, as a cat would with a mouse.” 49

With this anecdote, Bücher would seem to distinguish more or less absolutely between primitive labor and the disenchanted world of industrial modernity. But the episode to which he next turns suggests by contrast that “hellish noises” of this sort might well be recuperated for the modern colonial enterprise. Recalling the reportage of a Parisian illustrated magazine, Bücher describes how the French colonial authorities used Indigenous work songs in the construction of a railroad connecting Senegal with Nigeria. Local musicians hired to “entertain the black natives employed for the excavation project” whipped the workers into a frenzy. These
latter then “marveled at the locomotive and the railway with the same fiery imagination with which they had once praised the robberies and bloody deeds of their prince Samory.” 50 In Bücher’s telling, the railroad is the epitome of Western technological modernity, but its sheer force also recalls the fierce resistance to French colonial rule in West Africa led by Samori Toure. 51 But insofar as the Indigenous musicians hasten the building of imperial infrastructure, their songs are hardly opposed to colonial modernity—nor, for that matter, do they become a redemptive bulwark against the stultifying rhythms of the same. These songs, it would seem, are not work songs in the strict sense of the genre that Bücher develops at the outset of Arbeit und Rhythmus. More musical accompaniment than an intrinsic expression of the physiology of human labor, they become a tool of industrial management akin to music pumped into a locked factory. 52

This same ambivalence about whether “primitive” work songs are most valuable for encoding an authentic relation to work and to the body or for enforcing the rational discipline of industrial production likewise shapes how Arbeit und Rhythmus frames African American contributions to the genre. The appendix “Arbeitsgesänge der Neger in den Vereinigten Staaten von Noradamerika” presents this material in typically erudite fashion.
After a brief review of the relevant literature, Bücher begins by reprinting a handful of songs from popular US collections like *Cabin and Plantation Songs as Sung by Hampton Students* (1876) and *Plantation Songs for My Lady’s Banjo, and Other Negro Lyrics and Monologues* (1902). For the most part, Bücher’s commentary reproduces the prejudices of his sources. He begins by noting that these songs would be familiar to readers versed in the history of US slavery. The spirituals in particular needed no introduction, thanks to the global vogue that began with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and coalesced after the Port Royal Experiment and the international tours of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. In the postbellum era, though, even the most familiar of religious melodies could take on new life. As Bücher argues, many of the songs that had once voiced the fierce resilience of the enslaved—what the African American writer James Weldon Johnson called the “fiery spirit of the seer”—now coordinated Black labor “on the basis of free competition.” For Bücher, this development is far from objectionable. While the free Black laborer is industrious, Bücher concludes rather offhandedly, “he has not endurance, and we are given to believe those who assure us that he accomplishes less today as a free man than previously under slavery.” These kinds of racist commonplaces make clear that Bücher did not read his source material critically. But they also point up how much *Arbeit und Rhythmus*, in its desire to identify a mode of labor guided by the physiology of the body and perfectly synchronized with the demands of the market, shares with the agenda of charity and corrections.

The original transcriptions of previously unpublished work songs that Bücher commissioned from Henderson thus mark the convergence of two only ostensibly different approaches to (the cultural expression of) work. Though the German economist looked to the labor practices of so-called primitive people in the interest of reenchanting industrial modernity, his approach to the performance traditions documented in *Arbeit und Rhythmus* often highlights how this material could be used to reinforce the hegemony of capitalist rationality. By the same token, Henderson and his colleagues maintained that industrial labor was the only effective means of “readjusting” members of the “dependent, defective, and delinquent classes,” among whom they counted African Americans. But the US scholars and reformers who contributed to *Arbeit und Rhythmus* nonetheless held out hope that even institutional and other forms of coerced labor could be redeemed. In the book’s appendix, “Arbeitsgesänge der Neger in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika,” this ambivalence plays out in the commentaries produced by Henderson’s students and colleagues to ac-
company the transcriptions they made in the field. Adopting an expository style that meshes with Bücher’s own and represents a departure from the conventions of reformist debate, these commentaries argue by description rather than by proposition. But in their efforts to construct an ideological scaffolding around the transcriptions they supplement and surround, these commentaries inevitably foreclose the ambivalence they work so hard to maintain.

Typical in this regard are the songs transcribed and annotated by the Reverend Robert Lord Cave. Describing a song he overheard on a building site in Nashville, Cave delights in the harmony of movements that accompany each turn of the melody (figure 4.3). Whether mixing mortar or carrying bricks, the laborers sang and moved in unison, their voices summoning a commonality of purpose. The lead was provided by a foreman named Cotton who sang out each line in a voice loud enough for each of the widely scattered workers to hear. “They kept exact time,” Cave observes, “rocked their upper bodies back and forth, and sought to coordinate their movements so they brought down their hoes, let the bricks fall, and so on in time with the chorus’s song.”55 In all of this, as Cave learns from the overseer, Cotton was invaluable “because he encouraged the others to work through his song.” Cave pays no attention, however, to the words of Cotton’s song, even as he dutifully transcribes them. Indeed, in focusing exclusively on the collaborative momentum of the song, Cave misses its very meaning. The chorus—“Oh give me a hammer, / Oh, give me a hatchet, / Oh give me a hammer/ For to knock out my brains”—suggests a force of repetition building not to the completion of the house but to a violent end or, in a more figurative vein, to a collective articulation of grievance.56 It remains an open question, moreover, whether the lamentation in the chorus is imagined to be Judas’s or whether it belongs to the chorus of workers themselves. These and other questions are lost on Cave’s commentary, which ultimately shores up the orthodox economics of labor that Bücher sought to overturn. The song was most valuable, that is, insofar as it compelled workers to labor more efficiently.57 In so doing, however, Cave’s observations may also lay bare a fundamental contradiction within Bücher’s romantic anticapitalism. An emphasis on the work song’s rootedness in the physiological rhythms of the laboring body, it would seem, cannot help but reduce the semantic meaning of a given vocal performance to a series of embodied utterances. There can be little doubt that the words of many work songs serve as time-keeping vocalizations first and as bearers of semantic meaning only second, if at all. But here the desire to locate the
meaning of the song in the bodies of its performers obscures the critique of profit-driven labor that those singers seek to articulate.

If his commentary on the song of the construction workers in Nashville emphasizes form to the detriment of content, in other contributions to *Arbeit und Rhythmus* Cave endeavors to balance one with the other. Rather than achieving the fullness of inherently meaningful work prized by Bücher and US social reformers, however, these transcriptions transform vernacular work songs into diagnostic instruments. Consider, for instance, how Cave describes the song of a Black laborer loading a wagon with heavy crates. “The lifting and arranging of the boxes was necessar-
ily slow,” he notes, “and the quiet song sounded like an apology for the worker’s inability to move the crates more quickly.” To understand this song as an apology is certainly to misread the occasion of its enunciation. Because the singer had little idea he was being observed, he would not have addressed his lament to anyone but himself. Beyond the words of this self-consciously piteous refrain, however, Cave also reads the caesura in the middle of each line as an interruption that contributes to the worker’s slow pace: “He began a line while taking hold of one side of the crate to turn it around, and then finished this line once the movement was complete.” Far more likely, of course, is that the caesura marks a pause for the taking of a breath, hardly a physiological expression of apology.

The same disjointed rhythm that for Cave signifies incompetence is also underscored by Bücher’s annotative apparatus. The footnote markers that interrupt each line with translations of words printed in nonstandard English compound the sense of hesitation to which Cave’s commentary points. To understand this song as an apology thus means hearing in the singer’s rhythm not the unity of body and labor but the sound of the latter outstripping the former. As such, the relation between the physiological performance of labor and the musical performance of song in this work song does not index the universal moral truth of all labor, but rather the quantifiable truth of this particular body performing this particular task. The body thus becomes evidence that can be used against the laborer, the song a document proving that his work is neither efficient nor meaningful in and of itself. It would thus appear that the African American work songs annotated in Arbeit und Rhythmus do not bear out the ambivalent relationship between preindustrial and industrial labor that for Bücher lay at the heart of the genre. Instead of embodying the perfect synchronization of human physiology and market demand, these songs are primarily useful as diagnostic and disciplinary instruments. The fantasy that the work song might capture the inherent meaningfulness of all work, in other words, gives way to the necessity of ensuring that laboring bodies—and laboring bodies of color in particular—produce as efficiently and profitably as possible.

The contribution that Annie Marion MacLean made to Arbeit und Rhythmus is a striking exception to this pattern. A disabled PhD sociologist who had studied under Henderson, MacLean is an unsung forerunner of Chicago School sociology. Her obscurity today is due to the lack of opportunities for women in the academy in the early twentieth century, but also to the many leaves of absence she took for her often debilitating
rheumatoid arthritis. The transcriptions of and commentaries on African American work songs that she made for *Arbeit und Rhythmus* stand at the beginning of a wide-ranging scholarly agenda that aimed to rethink the (disabled, raced, and gendered) body’s relation to institutional spaces of work, from fields to factories and universities. MacLean’s groundbreaking studies of working women in the early twentieth century, for instance, abandoned the sentimental cast of existing scholarship by focusing on the strict division between work and leisure routinized by industrial labor practices. The ethnography “A Town in Florida” that MacLean published in a volume called *The Negro Church* (1903) edited by W. E. B. Du Bois, by contrast, explores how Southern Black migrants to the North sought to reclaim the pace and variety of their working day. Perhaps most trenchantly of all, MacLean’s contributions to *Arbeit und Rhythmus* provided a blueprint with which to recalibrate the rhythms of academic institutions to the rhythms of the disabled laboring body.

MacLean gathered African American work songs for *Arbeit und Rhythmus* while teaching at Florida’s Stetson University. While she was alone in focusing on matters of gender or transcribing the songs of Black women, in the main MacLean’s methods were similar to those of the other contributors. When describing the songs that accompanied the hoeing of cotton fields, for instance, she recounts how the workers spread themselves across the field in a diagonal line, with the lead hoe and the lead singer in front. The lead hoe, MacLean observes, “must be so competent and composed a worker that he can set the tempo of forward movement for the entire group of workers.” The lead singer is rarely also the lead hoe, a position that leaves one with no breath to spare. But if the lead singer translates the pace set by the lead hoe into song, the lead hoe contributes what voice he can, echoing in the anonymity of the chorus the rhythm his own labor creates. In other transcriptions, MacLean’s own research informs how she represents the rhythmic relation between labor and song even more clearly. In her commentary on the “Songs of the Washerwomen,” for instance, MacLean describes how the women rubbed their garments on the side of their tubs to establish a regular pace that saw them through the rest of their load. But rather than converging on a shared rhythm, each woman worked at her own tempo. The women did sing together, however, and the chorus of their voices created a unity of “contentment” by which the competing rhythms of eight washboards were transformed into an ambient hum. It was a collaborative process of competition and resolution that “ceased immediately once a stranger appeared.”
MacLean leaves it unclear whether the washerwomen left off when she entered the room or not. But whether she watched from afar or was invited to join, MacLean’s remarks about the community created by these Black women speak to many of the same concerns that guided her later efforts to make academic institutions responsive to the rhythms of her body, and not the other way around. After being passed over for several on-campus positions, MacLean joined the University of Chicago’s Home Study Department and taught sociology courses by correspondence for nearly twenty years. Her pedagogy involved sending lectures and individualized notes to students and corresponding with them about their writing and research projects. The flexibility was a boon for both students and teacher. “While students have a year in which to complete a course,” MacLean observed, “with a possibility of reinstatement, many do the work in a much shorter time, and their lessons come in with clock-like regularity. Others work irregularly…. Mail days can never be entirely dull to one who has lessons in Sociology coming in.” Gone was “the drudgery of mere book keeping,” replaced instead by “a pleasant association of congenial spirits.” But what MacLean valued most was how correspondence courses allowed teacher and student to encounter one another in mutual recognition of “the frailties of other human beings,” thus ensuring that intellectual labor was guided not by the unceasing demands of institutional life but by the rhythms of the individual body.

In a brief essay titled “This Way Happiness Lies,” MacLean extrapolates from these insights to contemplate how all work might be remade in the image of correspondence teaching. She begins by acknowledging that her path might strike readers as unconventional, given that a “few years ago all the seemingly desirable things in the world were wrested from [her] by disease.” Addressing a dismissive interlocutor, MacLean explains how her idea of happiness has changed. “Since life for me henceforth must be confined within infinitesimal physical limits, I sought re-adjustment. I who had gone through the world with winged feet must henceforth be only an onlooker with a narrow field of vision.” With fieldwork impossible, MacLean realized that her interest in academic work all along had less to do with “the enchantment of distance” than with “garnering glory from the commonplace.” Retooling the relation between work and happiness thus means engaging the world through networks of exchange. The “mere business of Life” in this way becomes altogether less businesslike; it is instead a process of “cultivating” community and creating “new patterns” and “combinations” that continually reconstitute the rhythms of working.
life. In this regard, MacLean brings to her own labor the same apprecia-
tion of the body’s role in determining the pace and the substance of one’s
work that she underscored in her contributions to *Arbeit und Rhythmus*. Unlike her mentor Henderson, for whom the noneconomic value of Af-

can American work songs was inseparable from their utility in enforcing
penal discipline and industrial competition, MacLean finds in Black song
a model for rethinking the disabled body’s relation to the labor it produces.

Ultimately, the history of how African American work songs came to
be included in *Arbeit und Rhythmus* is a story less about interdisciplinary
collaboration than about disciplinary overlap. In an era when the social
sciences were still in formation and the line between research and reform
more a matter of rhetorical preference than institutional organization, the
task of capturing the noneconomic value of work as such knew no bounds
and welcomed all comers. It is no surprise then that the romantic anticapi-
talism of a heterodox German economist would resonate with the coercive
discipline of charity and corrections (and vice versa) or that the written
record of an annual professional conference would share a set of goals—if
not also methods—with erudite transcriptions of vernacular musical per-
formance. But if this muddle of disciplinary and professional interests
created space for the dissident solidarities voiced by MacLean and oth-
ers on the margins of *Arbeit und Rhythmus*, for the heirs of charity and cor-
rections the genre of the work song pointed to a more methodologically
uniform future that was at the same time a return to Port Royal.

**Institution Building**

Published in 1925 in collaboration with Guy Benton Johnson, *The Negro
and His Songs* was based on materials that Odum collected in Georgia
and Mississippi from 1907 to 1909 and first wrote up in a smattering of
academic articles. The book begins with an odd anecdote. Listening to the
singing of a road gang outside his Chapel Hill home, Odum contemplates
the relation between the intellectual labor of institution building and the
physical work of building universities. “This dean accordingly sat himself
down on his rock wall to see if perchance he might not take down some
of the songs which he heard, the singing of which he so much enjoyed.
He was thinking how oblivious the workers were to his presence and to
all things else save their work. He marveled that [sic] the words of the
song he could not gather; nevertheless he would be persistent, he would
get them. And so he did, with the somewhat startling effect, approxi-
mately versed to meet the workman’s technique.” Describing himself at work watching others at work, Odum cannot help but draw comparisons. Rather than likening transcription to the laying of pavement, though, he seeks to capture the spiritual affinity his academic work shares with the labor extracted from the leased prisoners in front of his house. These latter find as much engrossing pleasure in their task, Odum believes, as he does in his. And just as road laborers match the pacing of their song to the rhythms of their bodies, Odum patterns his prose on the halting lilt of his comprehension: “Nevertheless he would be persistent, he would get them. And so he did, with the somewhat startling effect, approximately versed to meet the workman’s technique.” Odum is soon woken from this bookish reverie, however, by the very voice that first set him adrift. As if anticipating the narcissistic bent of Odum’s musings, the leader of the gang turns the ethnographic gaze back on the dean and on scholarly labor as such:

White man settin’ on wall,
White man settin’ on wall,
White man settin’ on wall all day long,
Wastin’ his time, wastin’ his time.

The singer’s improvised parody demonstrates how sharply his perspective differs from Odum’s: forced labor on the university grounds shares nothing with the leisurely intellectualism indulged in there. It is ultimately unclear, though, who has the last laugh. While the singer literally dictates the terms of his disidentification with the academy, for Odum this sneering performance nonetheless remains a work song. And as such, like each of the other entries in Odum’s anthology, it also embodies the inherent meaningfulness of all work.

The tension between cultural performance and scholarly gloss that Odum unwittingly stages in this anecdote is evident throughout The Negro and His Songs and probably contributed to the book’s falling out of favor among folklorists and musicologists. As Bruce Jackson has written, both The Negro and His Songs and its companion volume, Negro Workaday Songs (1926), are best understood as period pieces. Odum and Johnson “were so interested in sociology and causes and conditions that they failed to include the kind of information that might have made their texts of more general use.” For his part, Odum might not have disagreed with this appraisal, at least not entirely. It was no secret that Odum’s purpose in The Negro and His Songs was shaped less by recent trends in folklore and musicology than by a desire to bring the methods of social science to bear
on “race relations” in the South. Indeed, the book was the first volume to appear in UNC Press’s Social Study Series, a collaborative venture with Odum’s Institute for Social Research that was meant to establish Chapel Hill as a Southern outpost of modern sociological thought to rival New York and Chicago. Subsequent titles included *An Approach to Public Welfare and Social Work* (1926), *Public Poor Relief in North Carolina* (1928), and *The North Carolina Chain Gang: A Study of County Convict Road Work* (1927).

This wide-ranging research agenda was to signal a decisive break with both the provincial chauvinism that had long characterized the Southern academy and the paradigm of charity and corrections. To Odum and his colleagues, this latter tradition was begun with the best of intentions but lost its way before long. Instead of providing the “treatment and restitution” that would allow the socially disadvantaged to become self-supporting, reformers grew content merely to warehouse them in increasingly abusive institutions of “permanent care or custody.”74 The shift from charity and corrections to “social welfare” and “social work”—officially codified in 1917 when the NCCC was renamed the National Conference of Social Work—was thus at once a departure and a return. For UNC researchers, it announced an embrace of modern sociological research methods and a recommitment to the transformative power of labor that had long guided the efforts of social reformers.75 As Odum concluded, it fell to professional social workers to determine how best to return “the poor, ill, defective, perverse, or otherwise handicapped” to work.76 Echoing the sentiments ventured a generation earlier by Henderson, UNC researchers held that “self-respect, earning capacity, rebuilding of character and fortune are the normal and logical expectation of society’s unfortunates.”77 Such was at base the reformist agenda behind the Social Study Series.

For Odum, making the work song emblematic of this new ideal of social welfare provision also required updating his earlier approach to African American folk music. A decade or so before arriving at Chapel Hill, Odum took an interest in Black religious song and conducted ethnographic research in “fifty Negro communities in the South.” His aim was to prove that what passed for authentic Black folk expression in US popular culture was anything but. To be sure, Odum was not alone in this venture in the early twentieth century. Many Black writers and artists were engaged in similar endeavors, as were white folklorists, both amateur and professional. Unlike many other researchers, however, Odum was not interested in preserving Black religious music for its own sake. Instead, he argued that these songs contained valuable data for “students
of race traits and tendencies.” Odum’s first publication in this vein was a 1909 article that drew methodologically on his dissertation in psychology at Clark University. There Odum argued that the “insight into negro character gained from their folk-songs and poetry accompanied by careful and exhaustive concrete social studies may be accepted as impartial testimony.” To his peers in psychology, Black religious song was thus a neglected trove of objective social truths with which to flesh out the typology of racial “character.” Odum’s tone and occasional cultural allusions also suggest, however, that he had a white Southern lay audience in mind. For these readers, Odum hints, Black religious music promised to reveal “what the Negro thinks” and “what the Negro wants.” In either case, Odum’s exegetical authority is clearly grounded in racist paternalism. Where Black religious music encoded the “truest expression of the folk-mind and feeling,” neither white sociologists nor lay Southerners needed to engage directly with African Americans themselves. Just as crucially, Odum’s interpretative project also defined social welfare as a psychological endeavor. Improving the situation of those on the social margins, in other words, whether as a social welfare professional or an “interested” community member, required only knowing “the inner consciousness of a race.”

Anticipating his later embrace of the pragmatic agenda of social work, Odum’s next series of Black folk expressions swapped the work song for the spiritual and tempered his earlier focus on “race traits and tendencies” with qualitative social analysis. This shift, Odum explained, had as much to do with the musical practices he observed in the field as with his own disciplinary preoccupations, which now bore the influence of a second doctoral degree, completed in sociology at Columbia. Not only had religious music already been given its due, Odum claimed, but “social songs,” among which work songs were the most numerous, were of far greater relevance for Black life and postbellum racial politics more broadly. As Odum asserted, “The diminishing importance of the older religious themes” clearly indicated “that the Negro has finally outgrown the former disposition to sing himself away from a world of sorrow and trouble and is coming more and more to sing himself and his troubles through that world.” Whereas the spiritual captured the ethereal aspirations occasioned by the experience of slavery and gestured to a world beyond or other than that which presently existed, the work song announced a material commitment to the world as it was. This notion of materiality in turn demanded a new mode of interpretation. Rather than parsing work songs for evidence of the interior lives of formerly enslaved people, sociologists could use them to assess and
promote the economic integration of Black Americans on terms that did not challenge the social status quo. For Odum, singing through the world was thus a process of economic accommodation in which African Americans could find their place in a workforce stratified by hierarchies of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and class. Crucially, this process was not a Spencerian survival of the fittest. Instead, the physiological harmony of the laboring body and its task captured in the work song prefigures a social harmony of individual desires and collective obligations. From this vantage, in fact, the materiality of the work song was itself rather aspirational, if not outright immaterial. Just as these songs could be used to scrutinize particular labor practices and formations, in other words, they also embodied—materially or otherwise—the transformative power of all labor.

In this regard, Odum’s understanding of the work song as a genre should strike us as familiar. Like Bücher, Odum argued that the work song was defined above all by the organic unity it established between the rhythms of the body and the rhythms of work. And like Bücher, Odum’s preferred idiom is tautology: “As motion and music with the negro go hand in hand, so the motion of work calls forth the song; while the song, in turn strengthens the movements of the workers.”81 But if Bücher’s evolutionary approach distinguishes more or less absolutely between the “primitive” past and the “modern” present, Odum recasts the rhythms of the work song as a synchronicity of antebellum and postbellum racial regimes. Consider, for instance, the eagerness with which Odum assures readers that Black work songs are no less prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century than they had been under slavery. The white Southerners “who have ample opportunity for continued observation,” he acknowledges, “maintain that the negro is fast losing his cheerfulness and gayety, his love of song and practice of singing.”82 Although sympathetic to these kinds of concerns, Odum nonetheless offers his “objective” research as evidence to the contrary: “The negro still retains much of his disposition to sing while at work. Whoever has seen in the spring-time a score of negroes with hoes, chopping in the fields to a chant, making rhythm, motion, and clink of hoe harmonize; whoever has heard in the autumn a company of cotton-pickers singing the morning challenge to the day, and uniting in song at the setting of the sun and ‘weighing-time’—will not soon forget the scene. The negroes still work and sing.”83

Odum’s depiction of Black laborers clearly tempers the “rigor” of sociological description with apologist nostalgia. As gauzy recollections blur into ethnographic observation, the physiological harmony of body
and labor affirms the continuity of Black Americans’ economic and social subservience before and after the Civil War. This copresence of past and present in turn becomes a template for the future: “Song is conducive to good humor,” Odum observes, “and good humor brings better work.” As such, “both the direct and indirect effect of singing upon the worker make it advisable that his song continue as long as he works.” The advisability of the work song also lay in its utility for industrial discipline. Indeed, in a plainly instrumental turn Odum suggests that the genre’s fugue-like structure illuminates not only the physiological harmony between the laboring body and the task at hand but also how erstwhile agrarian workers might subordinate themselves to the demands of industrial production. As Odum writes of a subgenre he calls the “heave-a-hora”: “While they pull or work, the leader cries out ‘Come on menses!’ And while the ‘menses’ come, they work as a machine.” Far from achieving any sense of fully realized humanity, the workers here become interchangeable parts.

Odum’s Fordist recasting of agrarian labor finds a formal correlative in his own efforts to bring these performances to the page. All work songs, Odum argues, consist of a single phrase repeated as long as necessary and amended at will. This process of composition would seem entirely organic, much like the collaborative enterprise of collective labor itself. As Odum observes, “The harmony of the group of negroes working on the bridge, the house, the railroad, or at the warehouse and in the mind is typified by the union of the many work-song phrases.” Over time, “these exclamations become connected” and then form couplets and “distinct songs.” When Odum endeavors to reproduce this process by means of transcription, however, he ultimately streamlines the organic give-and-take of communal creation into a mechanically replicable template. The fifty-seven-line work song that Odum constructs from as many discrete phrases is a case in point (figure 4.4). Removed from the original context of its enunciation and divorced from the scene of labor that initially gave it shape, each line is placed in arbitrary sequence that becomes a discrete song only by virtue of having an identifiable beginning and conclusion. Not the product of an idealized mode of labor directed by the physiological rhythms of the body, Odum’s poetic mélange is a picture of rationalization. By means of citation and recombination, it orchestrates an act of generic retooling that underscores the malleability of the genre. A machine built to spec, the work song here reveals how the coherence of purpose created by a group of individual worker-musicians can be put in the service not of self-realization but of profit maximization.
corresponds to a high note, and the short foot to a lower one. While they pull or work, the leader cries out—

“Come on, menses!”

And while the “menses” come, they work as a machine. The leader repeats this as often as he works, or until he likes another phrase better. As a rule, the leader will use a single phrase an average of ten or fifteen times before passing to another. The examples that follow will indicate the free range which they cover, and the ease with which the negro composes them. It will be seen that there are no strict essentials which must belong to the song; the fitting words may be the invention of the moment. The harmony of the group of negroes working on the bridge, the house, the railroad, or at the warehouse and in the mine, is typified by the union of the many simple work-song phrases. They may be studied for themselves. Each line constitutes an entire work-song phrase, complete in itself.

Hey—slip—slide him—a—slip-slide him.
Ev’rybody bow down an’ put yo’ han’s to it.
Come an’ go wid me—come an’ go wid me.
Heavy—heavy—heavy—heavy—hank—back.
All right—all right.
Draw—back—draw—back.
Tear ‘em up—a-tear ‘em up.
Come hard ag’in—ba.
Work hard again it so.
Break it, boys, break it.
Hike, hike, hike-back.
Come on here.
What’s a matter? white-eyed.
What’s a matter—fagged out?
What’s a matter—monkey got you?
Haul it—haul it back.
Here—yeah—here, you.
Turn—turn it—turn her on.
Let’s turn ‘em over.
Turn it one mo’ time.
How ’bout it?
Knock down on it.
Up high wid it men.
Get up—get it up any way to git it up.
Yonder she go.
Put yo’ hands on it.
Lay yo’ hands on it.
Put ‘im up on it.
Get up Mary, Janie, etc.
Hello—hello—hello.
Yang ‘em—Yang ‘em. (Go ‘round an’ pick ‘em up.)

In *The Negro and His Songs* and his earlier research articles, Odum thus outlines two seemingly distinct roles for the work song in the print culture of social welfare. By synchronizing the rhythms of the body with those of economic production, the genre embodied the transformative potential of labor as such. But these same songs could likewise be used to assess specific performances of labor and to coerce individual bodies into industrial rhythms they had no part in shaping. This divergence of approach is borne out even more clearly in the “phonophotographic” studies of African American work songs reprinted in the follow-up to *The Negro and His Songs*, Odum and Johnson’s *Negro Workaday Songs*. Conducted by the
psychologist Milton Metfessel in partnership with the Institute for Social Research, these studies translated musical performances into visual representations. As Metfessel described the phonophotographic technique he developed with Carl Seashore at the University of Iowa: “The sound wave photograph is made on the moving picture film by three light points. The diaphragms pick up the vibrations of sound, and the mirrors translate the vibrations into an up and down flashing of the light. The light flashes at the same rate at which the vocal cords are sounding.” The movements of light are then traced onto a two-dimensional graphic field, the x-axis marking time elapsed and the y-axis, pitch (figure 4.5). Initially, Metfessel’s aims were aligned with the tradition of late nineteenth-century audio ethnography. Like Benjamin Ives Gilman and Jesse Walter Fewkes, Metfessel hoped that musical transcriptions made with the help of “mechanically neutral” recording technologies would succeed in capturing sounds that otherwise “resisted” written notation. Also citing the earlier writings of J. W. Work, Natalie Curtis-Burlin, H. E. Kriebel, and James Weldon Johnson, Metfessel strove to map out what Johnson called “the curious turns and twists and quavers and the intentional striking of certain notes just a shade off key, with which the Negro loves to embellish his songs.”

When Metfessel turned to work songs in particular, however, he and his collaborators at the Institute for Social Research imagined that phonophotography might produce not only more accurate representations of Black musical performance but also new insights into Black labor. For these studies, Guy Benton Johnson accompanied Metfessel and Seashore to Hampton Institute, where they recorded student performances. The team also made arrangements with a number of colleges and high schools in Chapel Hill and Raleigh to meet with students locally. In each of these settings, test subjects were asked to sing, solo and in groups, in front of two cameras. The first of these was a motion picture camera, the other a phonophotographic device. When Odum and Johnson recalled these phonophotographic studies in Negro Workaday Songs, they conjured Odum’s earlier typological interest in “race traits and tendencies.” Many of these songs, they wrote, were sung “by typical laborers, working with pick and shovel. There was the lonely singer, with his morning yodel or ‘holler.’ There were the skilled workers with voices more or less trained by practice and formal singing. There was the more nearly primitive type, swaying body and limb, with singing.” The conclusions that Odum and Johnson draw from Metfessel’s phonophotographic studies of these various performers are similarly descriptive, seeming to underscore the potential of a method
still in its infancy while also conceding their own inability to read the images of work produced in this manner. Typical of their tentative analysis is Odum and Johnson’s gloss of a holler or yodel performed by a man named Cleve Atwater. “The most remarkable thing about this record,” Odum and Johnson claim, “is the sudden changes of pitch which it portrays.”\(^{91}\) The “rapid rises and falls” in the singer’s voice lost to the human ear are made legible to the eye in the sloping lines of Metfessel’s graph. But although clearly amazed at being able to see what they cannot hear, Odum and Johnson can only speculate about what this “remarkable” change in pitch means for the work of social welfare.

The sociological promise of the new technology would be realized two years later, with the publication of Metfessel’s *Phonophotography in Folk*
Music, also part of the UNC Social Study Series. Phonophotography in Folk Music supplements Metfessel’s interest in charting the physiological rhythms of labor with attention to the putatively scientific measurement of emotion and innate musical ability. With regard to social welfare work, the central breakthrough of Metfessel’s book is how it juxtaposes phonophotographic renderings of a given vocal performance with still images from the cinematic film made of the movements of the vocalist’s body at work. Absent from Negro Workaday Songs, these stills seem to bear a straightforward relation to the abstract images they accompany, as if providing an explanatory key. Viewers are indeed encouraged to map the sequence of still images onto the x-axis of the phonophotographic image, such that we might see in the flexing of an arm or the curling of a lip the physiological provenance of a given dip in the curve. Just as often, though, the phonophotographic and filmic images in Metfessel’s volume seem to be at cross-purposes. The result is a sense of interpretative confusion that is also a contest over the materiality of the work song. On the one hand, the still images suggest that the meaning of the work song derives from the embodied performance of work. The accompanying phonophotographic images, on the other hand, locate the meaning of these songs not in the materiality of the labor they facilitate but in the materiality of writing and by extension the materiality of the device that makes this writing possible. Ultimately, competing ideas about the materiality of the work song point up larger questions about the genre’s role in the print culture of social welfare. How one identifies the materiality of the work song, in other words, depends on whether the genre is taken to embody the transformative power of all labor or whether work songs are used as diagnostic tools with which (materially) to enforce the mandate of the work society.

This conflict over the work song’s materiality—whether rooted in the physiology of labor or the technology of writing—is exemplified by the phonophotographic rendering of a song titled “You Ketch Dis Train” (figure 4.6). Performed by an unnamed laborer while clearing ground, this recording is of greatest interest to Metfessel for the tonal variation brought about by each iteration of the vocable huh but also for the subtle shifts in pitch with which the singer elaborates the melody. With regard to the latter, Metfessel offers this gloss: “You, graph 1, sec. 1, is mostly a rising intonation, as is dis. Farther on in the song, train, is falling, I’ll a long rise, ketch a short fall, it a short rise, and too a relatively slow rise.” This narrative translation would seem to read the phonophotographic rendering of “You Ketch Dis Train” as a portrait of virtuosity. The laborer would appear
to move from note to note with both grace and control, modulating the degree of rise or fall precisely and deliberately—and with variations of pitch so slight as to be “audible” only to the phonophotographic apparatus. But when this phonophotographic rendering is read against still images of the singer at work, the reciprocity that Metfessel’s prose suggests between the rhythms of work and those of song is interrupted by a cinematic gaze that reduces the work song to a spectacular moment of impact: “the *Huh!* as the pick strikes the ground.” This visual reduction of the singer’s rhythmic and melodic virtuosity to the materiality of a single moment in the labor he performs has the effect ultimately of shifting how we read these images together. No longer listening to the song or seeing how the phonographic representation of that song bears witness to the synchronicity of physiology and economy, we are rather placed in a position of managerial oversight. Our task is thus not to take an example from the labor being performed here, but rather to evaluate it.

This conflict, which in the context of the Social Study Series might be described as that between Black labor and white (scholarly) management, plays out even more dramatically in Metfessel’s reading of the photographic record of “I Got a Muly,” also performed by a series of unnamed singers (figures 4.7–4.9). The session would seem to begin well, and Metfessel praises the first singer’s first rendition of the song as a compelling exemplar of the “wide variability of the Negro vibrato.”94 The second version is likewise valuable, demonstrating “successively wider” shifts in pitch and tone and also exemplifying “a typical Negro attack.” Trouble begins, however, with the third version, which was evidently “sung under protest.” After Metfessel and his collaborators “pressed him to the task,” this third singer only “half-heartedly complied. The frown seen in the moving pictures and the queer sequence of notes and intonations in the song are expressive of the irritation he felt.”95 Metfessel would have readers believe that this last performance of “I Got a Muly” was ultimately unsuccessful, providing little useful information about the characteristics of Black song or the rhythmic intertwining of human physiology and human labor. Indeed, Metfessel’s description of the singer’s irritated “frown” and his “ queer” performance—one marked by “clipping,” “distortion,” and “slipshod” falsetto—would seem to frame this as a study rather of idleness and shirking. What Metfessel fails to see, however, is the effort that the singer puts into making his song illegible as work according to the standards of white sociology. Like the gang leader whom Odum encounters on his front lawn, the singer who refuses to sing “I Got a Muly” is concerned
to differentiate his endeavors from the labor of white social work and to show that the latter is not in fact inherently meaningful, much less socially transformative. White social work instead requires and projects a mode of repetition that can only tediously affirm what it claims to know in advance. Social work is drudgery. Not a failure of performance with regard to either vocal delivery or industrious output, in other words, “I Got a Muly” speaks across the various approaches and subject matters collated in the Social Study Series to the leased prisoner working outside Odum’s house. Theirs is ultimately a work song that refuses work in precisely the same terms that the UNC researchers praise it.

In the years to come, authors affiliated with Odum’s Institute for Social Research would continue to draw self-reflexive parallels between the modes of labor they studied and the work of sociology. Subsequent books in UNC Press’s Social Study Series also returned to the African American work song, though not by means of phonophotography. Rather, the next institute publications to explore the rehabilitative potential of Black folk music were part of a 1930 study of the economy and culture of the Gullah community on the South Carolina Sea Islands that was in effect an effort to assess the legacy of the Civil War-era Port Royal Experiment. As with Odum’s decision to launch the Social Study Series with *The Negro and His*
Songs, the question of why the institute turned to the Sea Islands in 1930 can be answered matter-of-factly. A researcher named Thomas J. Woofter had recently been arrested for driving under the influence in Chapel Hill, an incident that caused considerable friction between the university and locals. In an effort to appease the angry community, Odum sent Woofter to the Sea Islands, trusting that a long-term project would keep him out of sight and out of mind long enough for the controversy to pass.96

The necessity of temporarily banishing Woofter from campus was also an opportunity, of course. A growing number of academic researchers, both at UNC and elsewhere, had begun to worry that the distinctiveness of Gullah life on the Sea Islands was threatened by modernization on the mainland. And so the idea of launching an extensive study of the region—under whatever circumstances—was met with genuine enthusiasm. As Woofter himself noted in the book he wrote in exile, Black Yeomanry:
Life on St. Helena Island (1930), a bridge being constructed across the Beaufort River would remove “the last barrier of isolation.” Any effort to preserve “the unique culture of this place ... must be done quickly.”97 Not just a convenient means of closing ranks around an embattled colleague, in other words, the institute’s work on the Sea Islands was part of the social agenda that Odum had laid out in The Negro and His Songs and An Approach to Public Welfare and Social Work and that was fundamental as well to the earlier efforts of reformers in the National Conference of Charities and Correction. The three books that resulted from this collaborative undertaking—Woofter’s Black Yeomanry and two more by husband and wife Guy Benton Johnson and Guion Griffis Johnson—addressed not only the cultural heritage of the Sea Islands but also the economic patterns that had produced that heritage. But if the questions that drew researchers to the Sea Islands were much the same that first motivated the architects of the Port Royal Experiment, Odum’s colleagues found little reason for optimism. The reformative power of labor, they argued, had not yet had a chance to set in. The work of rehabilitation still lay ahead.

The books written by Woofter and Guy Johnson are detailed but often rather impressionistic accounts of life on St. Helena Island. In Black Yeomanry, Woofter dedicates a chapter each to “The People,” “Health,” “Breadwinning,” “Education,” and “Religion,” among other topics. His method combines ethnography, quantitative analysis, and institutional history, with a primary focus on the ongoing work of the Penn School, which was established on St. Helena by abolitionists during the Port Royal Experiment. Woofter touches only briefly on the role of folk music and culture, a task taken on instead by Guy Benton Johnson, Odum’s collaborator on The Negro and His Songs and Negro Workaday Songs. In Folk Culture on St. Helena Island, South Carolina (1930), Johnson added his voice to an increasingly heated debate about the origins of African American spirituals. Parting ways with the amateur musicologists and folklorists who, some sixty years prior, described to rapt readers in the North the captivating songs they had overheard on the same soil, Johnson argued that the musical forms preserved on the Sea Islands were Anglo-American rather than African in origin. He also claimed that the Gullah language was derivative of the English dialect spoken by the earliest colonists and not an African dialect. But while their approaches differed in method and subject, both Woofter and Johnson were ultimately concerned with judging the outcome of the social experiment in free labor that the federal government conducted during the Civil War. As Woofter wrote in a
concluding chapter on the fate of the Port Royal Experiment and its subsequent “world-wide significance in dealing with backward races”: “Two generations have been reared and the third is coming up since [Edward] Pierce wrote to President Lincoln that the people of the Sea Islands had in them great possibilities of improvement provided wise measures were adopted to ‘elevate them and prepare them to be self-supporting citizens.’ Enough time has elapsed to begin to see the results of the forces which have operated.”98 Although they posed the question with clarity and force, neither Woofter nor Guy Johnson ventured an answer as such. For his part, Woofter found evidence to support both sides of what he now saw as an either/or proposition: “In balancing the books on this experiment, a review of the preceding pages indicates many facts creditable to the community as a going concern and a few phases of life in which the Islanders have not adapted themselves to the American standards.”99 It would be left to Guion Griffis Johnson to bring the institute’s work on the Sea Islands to a meaningful conclusion, evaluating just what the rehabilitative effects of free labor had been.

Guion Griffis Johnson opens her discussion of the Port Royal Experiment with a stirring portrait of the naval maneuvering by which the Sea Islands came into Union possession. Passing by the two forts guarding the entrance to Port Royal Sound, the advancing fleet “turned and delivered, in their changing rounds, a terrific shower of shot in flank and front.”100 By day’s end, federal troops had taken possession of the area in its entirety, soon discovering that the planters had fled: “Not a white person of Confederate sympathies could be found in Beaufort or on the plantations.” As described by General William T. Sherman, in charge of the expeditionary corps that soon landed at Port Royal, “The wealthy islands of Saint Helena, Ladies, and most of Port Royal are abandoned by the whites, and the beautiful estates of the planters, with all their immense property, left to the pillage of hordes of apparently disaffected blacks.”101 This scene of chaos and disarray is for Johnson ground zero for Port Royal’s “rehearsal for Reconstruction.” In the pages that follow, she details the competing efforts of abolitionists, missionaries, federal agents, and contraband slaves themselves to structure the organization of free labor on the Sea Islands. In the end, Johnson concludes that this social experiment in free labor was every bit as much a failure as Reconstruction would itself be. The “character of the Negro as a hired laborer,” she observes, “had been injured by the inflated prices which the soldiers paid them for their wares and by the injudicious policy of their well-meaning friends of the North.”102 Nor did
the mandate of the Freedmen’s Bureau to protect formerly enslaved men and women from planters have any positive effect. Rather, such efforts to insulate the freed men and women from the market changed the nature of the work they could accomplish. Theirs was not free labor and, as a result, neither was it rehabilitative. In the words of a missionary enthusiastically cited by Johnson: “Their freedom had come too easy for them.”

Du Bois came to a markedly different conclusion when describing the failure of the Port Royal Experiment in *The Souls of Black Folk* some thirty years earlier. Black labor, he suggested, was never given a chance to be free, at least not in the way that the formerly enslaved men and women on the Sea Islands understood that term. The latter organized themselves against the demands made by returning planters and then by their erstwhile advocates in the Freedmen’s Bureau, but ultimately to little avail. For Du Bois, the scene that came to exemplify the devastating betrayal that brought the rehearsal for Reconstruction to a close took place on Edisto Island in 1864. General Oliver Otis Howard, soon to be commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau, had come to tell the freed men and women that the confiscated lands they had been promised would be returned instead to pardoned Confederates. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, this event provides the dramatic backdrop for Du Bois’s most harrowing gloss of the sorrow songs. “Ten master songs, more or less, one may pluck from this forest of melody,” he writes. “One of these I have just mentioned. Another whose strains begin this book is ‘Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.’ When, struck with a sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfill its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept.”

Du Bois’s description of this devastating scene—the spiritual become an expression of solidarity in the face of an unprecedented loss that would, in time, be repeated over and again—is justly famous. But it is not the last word. Indeed, the historical record on which Du Bois draws presents a slightly different picture. Many of the freed people on Edisto Island, particularly those who had taken up arms in anticipation of Howard’s visit, seem to have felt far more anger than sadness at the scene they knew was about to unfold. And nor was their song spontaneous. As a missionary present recalled, “A committee of black men goes out to consult. Meanwhile, what shall be done with the silent assembly, whose fierceness flashes from their eyes like that of a tiger in the jungle? Judge Whaley talks. The general proposes they sing. No response. ‘How shall we sing the Lord’s song
in a strange land!”105 The freed men and women do eventually give in to Howard’s wishes and begin singing. But if their song illustrates for Du Bois the origins and power of the slave spiritual, it is worth remembering that this command performance is requested by a general eager to cajole the singers to accept their economic disenfranchisement. The song they sing, in other words, is no longer an exemplar of the genre of the spiritual as the general and others on the Sea Islands had come to appreciate it.106 It is also and more immediately a work song. Crucially, though, this command performance manifests not the meaningfulness of all work but the freed people’s desire to reclaim the varieties of endeavor written off as idleness. “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” thus sounds a forceful note of dissent against the work society being reconsolidated on the Sea Islands and beyond.