

Conducting the Coded Message Songs of Slavery:

Context, Connotations, and Performance Preparation

Lecture Recital by Rebecca Raber & Recital Choir

Thursday, July 26
6:00pm

Mandan Rehearsal Hall - Clairmont Center - University of Mary

GREEN TREES ARE BENDING, THE TRUMPET SOUNDS WITHIN MY SOUL I AIN'T GOT LONG TO STAY HERE.
IF I COULD I SURELY WOULD STAND ON THE ROCK WHERE MOSES STOOD
STEAL AWAY TO JESUS LET ME FLY I'M NO WAYS WEARY
DIDN'T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL? O, GET YOUR TICKET READY!
KEEP YOUR LAMPS TRIMMED AND BURNING THIS IS THE DAY OF JUBILEE
MY HOME IS OVER JORDAN IT RUNS TO HEAVEN AND RIGHT BACK

“I’m no ways weary, I’m no ways tired.

Oh, glory, hallelujah!

Just let me in the Kingdom when the world catch on fire!

Oh, glory, hallelujah!

Oh, get your ticket ready, the ship will soon be leaving!

Oh, get your ticket ready to go!”

—The Old Ship of Zion by Richard Harrison Smith

Period Sources

“Slave Songs of the United States” (Allen, Ware, and Garrison)

“Befo’ de War Spirituals: Words and Melodies” (McIllhenny)

“Negro Folk-Songs: The Hampton Series Books I-IV” (Curtis-Burlin)

“The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs” (Marsh)

“American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs & Spirituals, Religious & Secular” (Work)

Modern Sources

“Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual” (Thomas)

“Black Song: The Forge and the Flame; the Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out” (Lovell)

“Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals” (Jones)

“In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals” (Guenther)

“Intolerable suffering becomes tolerable
when the end is in sight or when
something beautiful transforms ugliness.”

— Christa Dixon, *Negro Spirituals: from Bible to Folk Song*

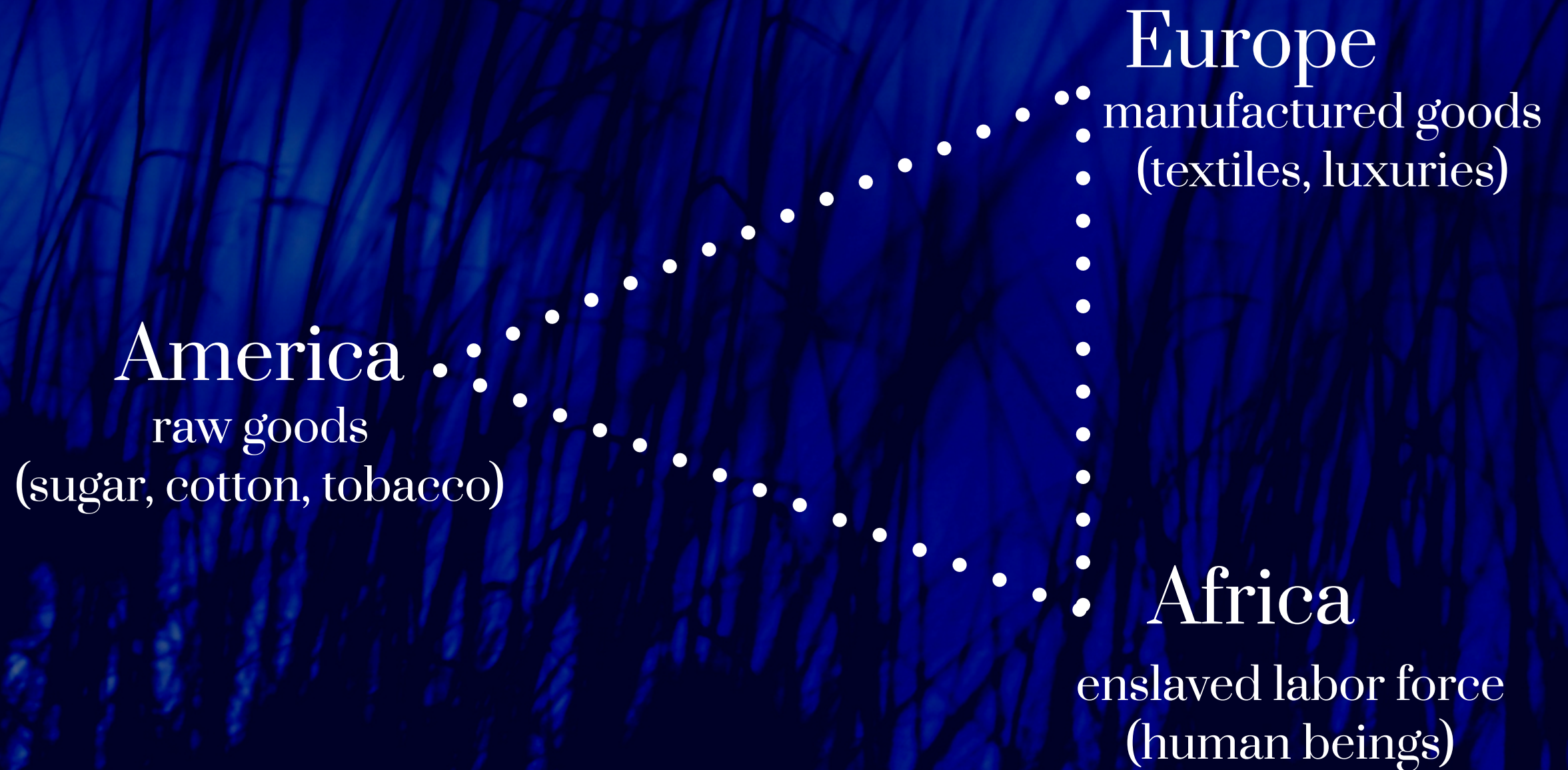
SLAVERY IN AMERICA

Historical Context

Slavery in America: Timeline

- Late 15th century: slave ships arrived in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of South and Central America.
- 1619: slavery began in North America, in the colony of Jamestown, Virginia (indentured servants).

The Atlantic Slave Trade



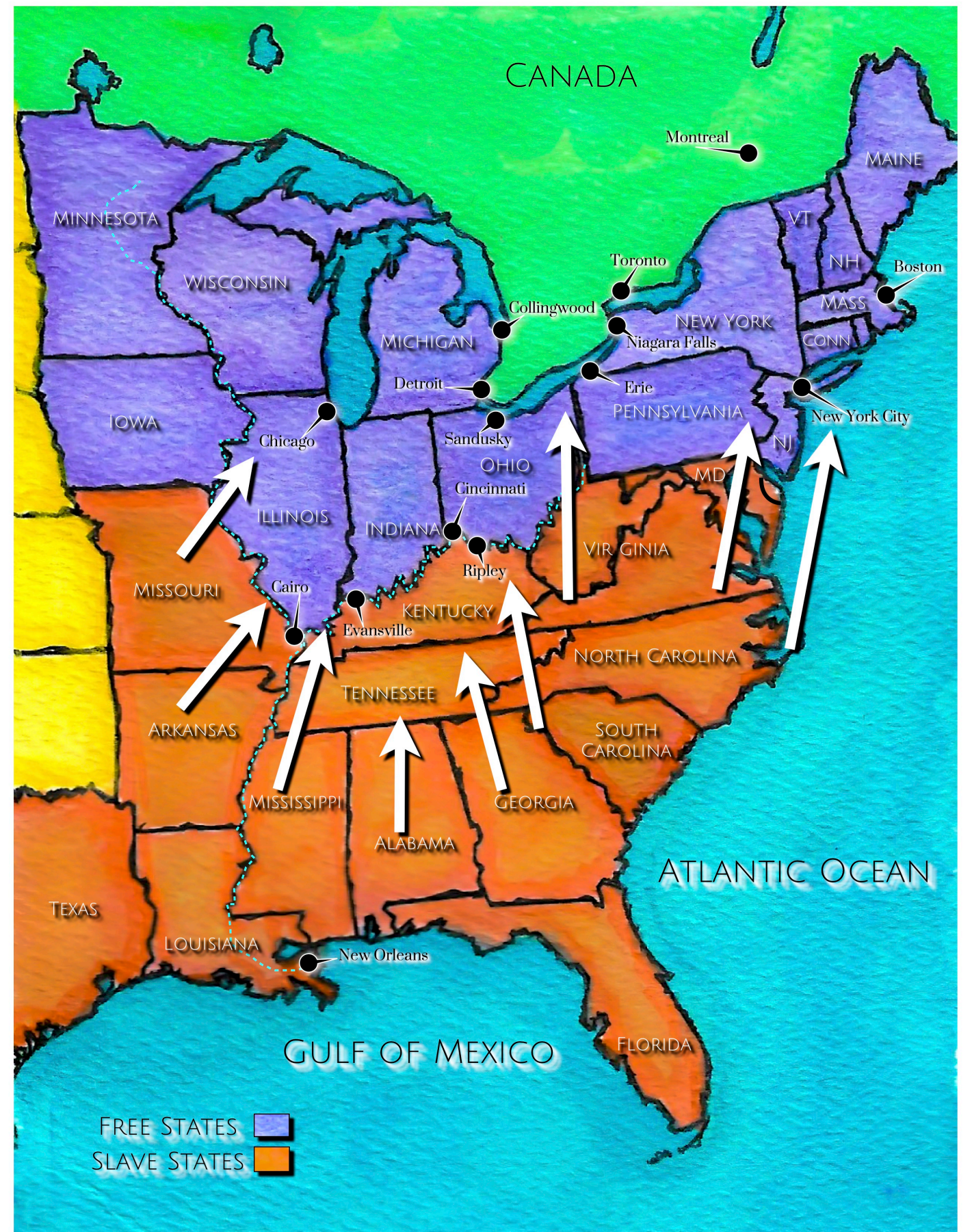
Slavery in America: Timeline

- 1793: Fugitive Slave Act, to preserve the “business interests” of the South by guaranteeing an owner’s right to recover any escaped slaves.
- 1808: The Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves, prohibiting the importation of any new slaves to the United States. Domestic slavery persisted.
- 1850: The Fugitive Slave Law, to ensure that any escaped slaves, upon capture in any state, were to be returned to their plantations under penalty of law.

The Atlantic Slave Trade

PROFITS

Underground Railroad Routes



Harriet Tubman—"Moses"

- A fugitive, and a friend of the fugitive.
- She is credited with having assisted over 300 fugitives in their quest for freedom.
- Rewards reportedly reached \$40000 for her capture, a staggering figure in that time period.

COLLECTIONS, COMMUNICATION, & CODED TEXT

Folksong & Oral Tradition

“Time and ‘group editing,’ are the two greatest known purifiers of folk song.”

—John Work, *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs & Spirituals, Religious, & Secular*

Folksong & Oral Tradition

"It is practically impossible to identify the author of a spiritual and to find its original form. The song is a stone, polished by the river of oral tradition. It is modified according to circumstances."

—Eileen Southern

Early Collections of Spirituals

- **Slave Songs of the United States**
William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, 1867.
- **The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs**
J.B.T. Marsh, 1880.
- **Negro Folk-Songs: The Hampton Series Books I-IV, Complete**
Natalie Curtis-Burlin, 1918.
- **Befo' de War Spirituals: Words and Melodies**
E. A. McIlhenny and Henry Wehrmann, 1933.

"“Slaves must not be seen talking together, and so it came about that their communication was often made by singing, and the words of their familiar hymns, telling of the heavenly journey, and the land of Canaan, while they did not attract the attention of the masters, conveyed to their brethren and sisters in bondage something more that met the ear.”

— Sarah Bradford, recalling Tubman’s words

"A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of "O Canaan, sweet Canaan. I am bound for the land of Canaan," something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the north—and the north was our Canaan."

— Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage & My Freedom*

COMMON THEMES/TEXT in CODED MESSAGE SPIRITUALS, CONTEXT & CONNOTATIONS

(found on page 6 of your program)

MUSICAL DEVICES, INTERPRETATION, & AWARENESS

"Many of the stories and scenes in the Bible gave the Negro bards great play for their powers of graphic description. The stories are always dramatic and the pictures vivid and gorgeously colored. It might be said of them that every line is a picture."

—James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson.
The Books of American Negro Spirituals

Filters:

spiritual—arranger—publisher—conductor—audience
|
collector
|
performer

—Alice Parker, 2017 National ACDA Conference

“Over the years there has been much debate over the extent to which dialect should be preserved in performance of spirituals today, whether the use of dialect could be perceived as demeaning, or whether its elimination could be perceived as demeaning. The Johnson brothers, Anton E. Armstrong, André J. Thomas, and numerous others have argued for the retention of dialect as integral to the historical authenticity of the songs. Dialect has its own beauty and power. It strengthens the listener's connection to the originators of spirituals by conveying the thoughts of the originators in their original language.”

—Eileen Guenther, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals*

CODED MESSAGE SPIRITUALS

- Steal Away, arr. Clayton White
- Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?, arr. Moses Hogan
- Keep Your Lamps!, arr, André Thomas
- Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit, arr. William Dawson
- Deep River, arr. René Clausen
- Have You Got Good Religion?, arr. Phillip McIntyre
- Elijah Rock, arr. Moses Hogan
- Let Me Fly, arr. Robert DeCormier
- The Old Ship of Zion, arr. Richard Harrison Smith

CODED MESSAGE SONGS

- Additional information for each piece has been included in your recital program.
- Some recurring information will simply be listed on slides, and not reiterated.

STEAL AWAY

“Steal Away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.”

- Announcing that a meeting was to be held.
- Announcing plans of escape or bidding farewell.
- Literal: dying and reaching heaven.

“I want to cross over into campground.”

- long-awaited news of emancipation.

“The trumpet sounds within my soul. I ain’t got long to stay here.”

- A longing for freedom (the free states, Canada, a return to Africa).

“Green trees are bending, poor sinner stands a tremblin’.”

- Bush arbors created in the woods to have their prayer meetings.
- Breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected meeting spot.

DIDN'T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL?

“Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, then why not every man?”

- Since Daniel was delivered, why shouldn’t they also be delivered?
“Why not every man?”
- The rescues of Daniel, Jonah, and the trio, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not ordinary acts of deliverance. But the Lord had proved He was equal to the occasion.

“I set my foot on the Gospel ship, and the ship it begin to sail.”

- Gospel ship” refers to a means of escape, the Underground Railroad.

“It landed me on Canaan’s shore, I’ll never come back anymore.”

- Canaan refers to the free states, Canada, or Africa.

KEEP YOUR LAMPS

“Keep your lamps trimmed & burning, the time is drawing nigh.”

- Be ready for the moment when you have an opportunity to escape.
- "They would carry with them iron lamps, with a sharp spike to the lamp to stick it in a tree. In this way they would light up the swamp, while they held their meeting.” (Guenther)

“Children don’t get weary ‘til your work is done.”

- Don’t allow yourself to get physically or spiritually weary.

“Christian journey soon be over, the time is drawing nigh.”

- The time of bondage & misery will end...either on this earth, or in heaven.
- Be ready for the time of the great journey (escape).

EV'RY TIME I FEEL THE SPIRIT

"Jordan River is chilly an' cold, it chills the body, but not the soul"

- Represents the Ohio River, Atlantic Ocean, or any other river or body of water that needed crossing to attain freedom.

"There ain't but one train upon this track, it runs to heaven an' right back."

- The Underground Railroad.

"Upon the mountain my Lord spoke, out of His mouth came fire and smoke."

- What else breathes fire & smoke and is a sign of deliverance? A train.

"Ev'ry time I feel the spirit, moving in my heart, I will pray."

- Movement referenced a means of escape.

DEEP RIVER

“Oh, deep river, my home is over Jordan, I want to cross over into campground.”

- "The deep river is a constant, difficult barrier between our desert pilgrimage here and the fulfillment of all desires in the 'promised land.'" (Dixon)

“Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast, that promised land where all is peace?”

- Throughout life's struggle, the great hope of finally joining in the “gospel feast” offered enough to sustain the hopes of the enslaved.

HAVE YOU GOT GOOD RELIGION?

“Have you got good religion/redeemed/baptized?”

- Being redeemed, converted, or baptized refers to being ready to start again. Baptism was significant, being washed clean and starting again—life after the bonds of slavery were loosed. Also, baptism/water suggested that fugitives travel through water to avoid detection.

“I’ve never been to heaven, but I’ve been told the streets up there are paved with gold.”

- Dreaming of the treasures of being free.

“The gospel plough is in our hands, good Lord, we’re bound for the promised land.”

- In Luke 9: 62, Jesus says, “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.” In order to become free, the enslaved would have to sacrifice everything to reach the promised land—family, safety, all things that were familiar.

HAVE YOU GOT GOOD RELIGION?

"This is the year of jubilee, when Jesus set his people free."

- The reference to the year of jubilee draws us into the book of Leviticus 25: 8-10, which comments why the year of jubilee was so celebrated and often mentioned in spirituals:

"Seven weeks of years shall you count—seven times seven years—so that the seven cycles amount to forty-nine years. Then, on the tenth day of the seventh month let the trumpet resound; on this, the Day of Atonement, the trumpet blast shall re-echo throughout your land. This fiftieth year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when every one of you shall return to his own property, every one to his own family estate."

"We want no cowards in our band, praise God, we're bound for the promised land."

- This phrase speaks of courage—courage in the face of adversity.
- Several sources report that Harriet Tubman carried a small revolver for the purpose of "encouragement" in case any fugitives had second thoughts about escaping and wanted to turn back. (Clinton).

ELIJAH ROCK

“Oh Elijah, oh Elijah. Elijah rock, comin’ up Lawdy.”

- In 2 Kings 2:11, Elijah ascends to Heaven in a triumphant whirlwind of flaming horses and chariot. Modes of transportation, such as the chariots in the spirituals, were used over and over again, and could refer to wagons, trains, and other such means to travel to freedom.

“Come on sister help me to pray, tell me my Lord done pass dis way.”

- Asks whether deliverance (the Underground Railroad) is at hand.

“Satan ain’t nothin’ but a snake in the grass. He’s a conjur. He’s a liar.

- Was a delightful but dangerous way for the enslaved to speak ill of their masters in their presence.

“If I could I surely would stand on the rock where Moses stood.”

- If given the chance, the enslaved would certainly take the opportunity to escape to freedom, as Moses did. Moses fought in an epic battle for his own freedom and that of his people, the Israelites.

LET ME FLY

“Way down yonder in the middle of the fiel’, angel a-workin’ at the chariot wheel.”

- The enslaved—those converted, those redeemed—are represented by the angel who is working on the chariot wheel (towards freedom).

“Oh let me fly, to Mount Zion, Lord, Lord.”

- Mount Zion, the Promised Land, Canaan, and Heaven all refer to freedom.

"Meet that hypocrite on the street, first thing he do is show his teeth. Next thing he do is tell a lie. Well, the best thing to do is pass him by."

I want wings, I want to fly, oh Lord, I want to fly

- Who was the hypocrite? The slave owner? The slave master? It is veiled insult to slave owners, who would righteously go to church on Sundays, and then continue to mistreat their slaves on Mondays.

LET ME FLY

"I got a mother in the Promised Land. Well, I ain't gonna stop 'til I shake her hand. Not so partic'lar 'bout shakin' her hand, but I just wan' to get to the Promised Land."

- References to family and friends in heaven may have been literal—that these loved ones and friends had passed away before them—but more likely, it symbolized those that had already made their way to freedom. These references to loved ones were a tribute, a repeated prayer that they had escaped slavery.

"I heard such a rumbalin' in the sky, I thought my Lord was passin' by. Twas the good ol' chariot drawin' nigh, shook the earth, swept the sky."

- The rumbling Underground Railroad would sweep you upward to freedom.

"I want wings, I want to fly, oh Lord, I wan' to fly."

- The use of "wings" represented those wishing to escape (to fly).

THE OLD SHIP OF ZION

“Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah!”

- Modes of transportation refer to the Underground Railroad, whether it be a train, a chariot, or a ship.

“I’m no ways weary! I’m no ways tired! O glory hallelujah!”

- Even though they were weary and tired, when it came to escape, they had to muster all their courage and energy for the cause of freedom.
- If they were not planning escape, they still needed the great hope and perseverance just to survive.

"Just let me in the kingdom when the world ketch a fire!"

- Heaven, which represents freedom amidst the fire (hell) of slavery.

THE OLD SHIP OF ZION

"She has landed many thousands, hallelujah!"

- May refer to Harriet Tubman, the famous Underground Railroad conductor, who inspired a legend of “landing many thousands” of fugitives toward freedom.

"She is rollin', jes rollin'. She is coming in the harbor, hallelujah! She will land you safe in heaven, hallelujah!"

- Symbolizes the constant movement of the people of the Underground Railroad from slavery to freedom.

"O get your ticket ready, the ship will soon be leavin'. O get your ticket ready to go!"

- A signal, a ringing call to action—that whoever was planning to escape had better be ready when the time comes to do so!

CONCLUSION