The African American vocal tradition encompasses different genres and styles falling both within and outside the African American Music Timeline. While there are many Black men who are widely recognized for their singing, African American women have a particular singing tradition that is especially emotionally powerful and virtuosic. Even in countries where there are few African Americans, gospel-influenced singers like Whitney Houston, for example, might be the only image and representation of African America. Aretha Franklin was named number one in Rolling Stone Magazine’s “100 Greatest Singers.” The Black woman’s vocal tradition demarcates an African American identity that originates in the Black church, which began during slavery. It descends from the earliest days of African America, going back to the arrival of the first Africans. In order to understand the power of Black women’s vocality in the contemporary, we must explore its beginnings.

Mother tongue

It may be possible to trace the “mother tongue” of Black vocality back to African Americans’ ancestors who arrived in the United States from West, Central, and even Southern Africa. As such, Black women’s vocality descended from African mothers. Lorenzo Dow Turner’s discovery in the early 1900s of the A waka song in Amelia Dawley’s Georgia Sea Island family is a powerful example of this. A waka is a Mende funeral dirge from Northern Sierra Leone that is performed only by women. It was passed down in Dawley’s family as a girl’s hand-clap game. It is significant not only because it is the longest text in an African language discovered to date in African American culture but also because it is an example of an African woman passing down her vocal tradition to her African American daughters. This kind of generational transmission is also in Maya Angelou’s family story. She learned her singing style, and a huge repertoire of African American spirituals, from her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. We can assume, since Angelou watched her grandmother sing in church several times a week, that she absorbed and imitated her grandmother’s singing style in her own performances. Angelou later discovered the Ewe lineage of her grandmother’s vocal timbre when she traveled in the early 1960s to Keta, in the Volta Region of Ghana. These examples offer a hint of the “mother tongue” that has passed through generations.
Singing power/sounding identity
down through generations of Black women. Due to its African descendancy, the Black woman’s vocal tradition is an ethnic identifier that powerfully “sounds” African American identity.

The aesthetics of Black women’s vocality developed during slavery in Hush Arbors – secret meetings held by enslaved Blacks. Black women’s vocal tradition has been foundational to a music of resistance for African Americans since the tradition developed in these sites. I will first examine the space of the antebellum Hush Arbor as a site of resistance. Through this, we can understand how the music performed in those spaces was also used to resist racial oppression. I will then discuss how the internal Hush Arbor song tradition bridged into public spaces that led to the global impact of Black women’s vocality in the twentieth century and beyond.

The African American Hush Arbor as resistance, or freedom spaces in slavery

Within the context of slavery, African Americans formed a culture of secrecy that existed outside the white gaze of slave holders and their allies. Hush Arbors were spaces of refuge, central in this secret culture. They were surreptitious night meetings that were usually held deep in the woods that abutted plantations. This practice was ubiquitous all over the South. During these meetings, words could be openly voiced for freedom: words that could reap violent consequences if uttered openly before slave holders. These meetings concealed, or “hushed,” such words and other activities that resisted bondage. Survival sounds and silence are sometimes called coded language, double entendre, or the “hidden transcript,” a term coined by James C. Scott. He defines the “hidden transcript” as the non- hegemonic, subversive discourse generated by subordinate groups and concealed from certain dominant others. Scott juxtaposes the hidden transcript with the “public transcript,” which is information that is deemed safe to reveal to the dominant group. The meetings, which were hidden from cultural outsiders, facilitated a powerful emotional release, which often happened through song. The music that was central in these meetings was grounded in liberationist Christian worship practices.

Secret Christian worship provided a way for enslaved African Americans to assert their humanity against slave holders’ crushing view of them as chattels. The vocal music they created during these times gave expression to their humanity. In this environment, the first forms of African American music were developed. These were the spirituals and the ring shouts.

Hush Arbor meetings usually took place in a four-part format. “After the first hymn or spiritual came prayer, a major focus of the hush harbor service … (prayer) was an essential community action … prayer had overtones of liberation.” Many narratives revealed that “any member of the congregation could lead prayers, but the lesson and sermon were conducted by a preacher, chosen by the community for ability to interpret the sacred word.” “After the sermon came the ring shout.” Silvia King was interviewed when she was 100 years old for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Slave Narratives. During her interview, she described the ring shout: “Dey gits in de ring dance … (it was) jes’ a kind of shuffle, den it git faster and faster and dey gits warmed up and moans and shouts and claps and dances … sometimes dey sings and shout all night.” One example of a slave-era ring shout still performed by the Seniorlites shouters of South Carolina is “You Gotta Right to the Tree of Life.” The song’s main lyric “Run Mary run, Run Martha run, tell Mary run I say, You got the right to the tree of life.” This was resistance – singing songs that asserted their right to be free.

Hush Arbor meetings also helped enslaved Blacks to reclaim freedom because they served as a way for them to exercise control over their own bodies. Slave owners attempted to exert complete control over them. Their secret lives directly defied this control: “Bondspeople, who had their own plans for their bodies, violated the boundaries of space and time that were intended
Maya Cunningham
to demarcate and consolidate planters’ … power over plantation households.” 11 Stephanie M. H. Camp calls these freedom spaces “enslaved people’s rival geography.” Toni Morrison gives a vivid image of this “rival geography” in her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel Beloved. Within the gruesome and violent picture of slavery presented in Beloved, hope and freedom come through the character of Baby Suggs, who preached in a Hush Arbor space called “the Clearing.” During these meetings, Baby Suggs encourages the recently freed Black community in Ohio to celebrate themselves. In Beloved’s Hush Arbor, the “sacred word” was given by Baby Suggs, a woman preacher, in a role usually served by men. And her message? Love your body, love your heart.

In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees … After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently … They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, “Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her. “Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. “Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet. Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose. It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath.12

With these admonitions, Baby Suggs was healing the psychological damage of chattel slavery by affirming her congregation’s humanity. She was teaching them to love the very bodies which slave-owning whites had commodified and abused. This was the work of the Hush Arbor.

The Black woman’s voice, the aesthetic of catharsis, and the Black revolutionary song

It is no wonder that these Hush Arbor meetings resulted in the powerful African American vocal tradition. Although both men and women participated, Black women’s voices were central to the emotional power of these meetings. African American autobiography and the WPA slave narratives detail how women’s voices were used to utter fervent prayers for protection and freedom. Their voices were used to utter prayers, praises, and songs, which became African American spirituals and other sacred song types.

Maya Angelou offers a striking testimony of Hush Arbor activity used to resist slavery. Her third autobiography details the oral history passed down by her paternal great grandmother: “my great-grandmother (who had been a slave), told me of praying silently under old wash pots, and of secret meetings deep in the woods to praise God … Her owner wouldn’t allow his Negroes to worship God (it might give them ideas) and they did so on pain of being lashed.”13 William Ford III, a Texas-based African American minister, has a Hush Arbor “prayer pot” as a family heirloom:

It begins with a 200-year-old black kettle pot, used by my Christian slave forbearers in Lake Providence, Louisiana. While used for cooking and washing clothes during the day, this kettle was secretly used for prayer. Forbidden to pray by their slave master, my ancestors were beaten unmercifully if found doing so. However, in spite of their master’s cruelty,
and because of their love for Jesus, they prayed anyway. At night, sneaking into a barn, they carried this cast iron cooking pot into their secret prayer meeting. As others looked out, those inside prayed. Turning this pot upside-down on the barn floor, they propped it up with rocks – suspending the pot a few inches above the ground. Then, while lying prostrate or kneeling on the ground, they prayed in whispers underneath the kettle to muffle their voices. The story passed down with the kettle is that they were risking their lives to pray for freedom for ensuing generations. One day, freedom did come. \(^{14}\)

The WPA slave narratives also document the stories of others who participated in these meetings. Amanda McCray testified that on her Florida plantation, there were praying grounds where “the grass never had a chance to grow for the troubled knees that kept it crushed down.” \(^{15}\) Andrew Moss remembered that on the plantation where he grew up, all the slaves had their private prayer grounds: “My Mammy’s was a ole twisted thick-rooted muscadine bush. She’d go in dar and pray for deliverance of de slaves.” \(^{16}\) Patsy Larkin recalled that on her plantation, the slaves would steal away into the cane thickets and pray in a prostrate position with their faces close to the ground so that no sound would escape. \(^{17}\) On a Louisiana plantation, enslaved Blacks would gather in the woods at night, form a circle on their knees, and pray over a vessel of water to drown out the sound. \(^{18}\) Richard Carruthers remembered:

Us (negros) used to have a prayin’ ground down in the hollow and sometime we come out of the field, between 11 and 12 at night, scorcin’ and burnin’ up with nothin’ to eat, and we wants to ask the good Lawd to have mercy. We puts grease in a snuff pan or bottle and make a lamp. We takes a pine torch, too, and goes down in the hollow to pray. Some gits so joyous they starts to holler loud and we has to stop up they mouth. I see (negros) git so full of the lawd and so happy they draps unconscious. \(^{19}\)

Kalvin Woods, a slave preacher, described how women would take old quilts and rags and soak them before hanging them up in the shape of a small room, “and the slaves who were interested about it would huddle up behind these quilts to do their praying, preaching and singing. These wet rags were used to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air.” \(^{20}\)

All these testimonies describe the cathartic function of the meetings. The praying, preaching, and singing provided those who participated with a powerful emotional release. Hush Arbor meeting initiated the emotional power of the Black woman’s vocal tradition. A recording curated by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon of the Blue Spring Mississippi Baptist Delegation, called “Traditional Prayer with Moan,” \(^{21}\) captures what sung prayers in these meetings might have sounded like. While a male leader speaks a prayer, the congregation hums in the minor mode. The women give impassioned responses with “yes” and “well” and “oh yeah.” Reagon calls these responses “moans.” The praying man sometimes sings his speech in a type of preaching that is called a “squall.” After the prayer, the group repeats phrases like “Lord Have Mercy” and “Come by Here.” In the women’s singing, we hear the cathartic aesthetic, which is called soul in the contemporary. It is a singing style that comes from the heart, sounded with open, passionate vocals that are melodious, sometimes rough textured, and with wide vibratos. This recording demonstrates the way the collective prayers during Hush Arbor meetings might have sounded.

The songs of the women quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama also exemplify the sound of prayers and moans. Gee’s Bend is an isolated community of African Americans descended from enslaved Blacks who worked on an immense cotton plantation. Their vibrant quilts have been exhibited all over the world. When quilting together, the women often sing African American
congregational songs. On *How We Got Over: The Sacred Songs of Gee’s Bend*, we hear many *spirituals* in the way they may have been performed during slavery’s Hush Arbor meetings. Just as Silvia King and Richard Carruthers reported, the Gee’s Bend women also moan, clap, and shout when singing. The quilting and singing traditions were passed down by their mothers and grandmothers. Mary Lou Bendolph recorded a *moan* called “Oh, please (Lord, have mercy)” that descends from the Hush Arbor. Like the “Traditional Prayer with Moan,” Bendolph sings the prayer from the depths of her soul with broad, textured, and emotionally charged vocals.

The Black revolutionary tradition in song

*Spirituals* evolved from the prayer-moan. Levine suggests that postbellum accounts are contemporary evidence that attest to the “presence of a compelling communal ethos at slave religious meetings.” He also suggests that *spirituals* were collectively composed from the emotional fervor of prayer moans and worship. Clifton Furness witnessed this process on an isolated South Carolina plantation in 1926.

In the midst of increasing intensity, a black man … suddenly cried out: “Git right-sodger! Git right-sodger! Git right—wit Gawd!” Instantly the crowd took it up, moulding a melody out of half-formed familiar phrases based upon a spiritual tune … A distinct melodic outline became more and more prominent, shaping itself around the central theme of the words, “Git right, sodger!” Scraps of other words and tunes were flung into the medley of sound by individual singers from time to time, but the general trend was carried on by a deep undercurrent, which appeared to be stronger than the mind of any individual present, for it bore the mass of improvised harmony and rhythms into the most effective climax of incremental repetition that I have ever heard. I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us along, call it mob-mind, communal composition, or what you will.

Spirituals like “Steal Away,” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” and many others were composed through this collective process of communal prayer and song. The lyrics of the songs, and the different ways they were used in resistance to slavery, signaled the start of the Black revolutionary tradition. In his study of Alabama Blacks’ engagement in the Communist Party, Robin D. G. Kelley states that “party theorists … not only described black spirituals as America’s most potent strain of protest music, but they discovered that the Negro church had a rich history of revolutionary traditions.” He also observes that the Black working class “shared … a grassroots understanding of exploitation and oppression based more on scripture than anything else.” This understanding was “forged in yesterday’s slave quarters … this prophetic interpretation of Christianity had informed black resistance for nearly three centuries.” The *spirituals* formed the foundation of this theology of resistance, which paralleled enslaved Blacks to the “Hebrew Children” of the Biblical exodus story, implored God for deliverance like Daniel from the lion’s den, and issued sonorous warnings to slave owners of the “final judgement.” In addition to their worship function, these songs, like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Steal Away,” are well known to have been used by enslaved Blacks as code songs to communicate plans for escape.

Harriet Tubman’s use of the *spirituals* to advance her liberation activities perfectly exemplifies the Black revolutionary tradition in song. Tubman, in a desperate attempt to signal to her friends and family her plans to escape, encoded the message by singing “Bound for the Promised Land”:

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I’m sorry I’m going to leave you,
Farewell, oh farewell;
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But I’ll meet you in the morning
Farewell, oh farewell;
I’ll meet you in the morning.28

The Promised Land could mean either going to heaven or going to freedom in the North. Tubman also used *spirituals* with coded messages to help others escape during her return journeys South. She would sing an appropriate spiritual to warn her party of danger or to guide them to the next safe place.29 She used different hymns and spirituals, including “Go Down Moses,” to communicate that danger had passed by.30 Tubman’s use of the *spirituals* to help fugitives to freedom was the Black woman’s voice enacting the Black revolutionary tradition through song.

**The Black woman’s voice: from hidden to public**

The song tradition of emotional power and revolutionary action that was forged in Hush Arbors remained a hidden aspect of Black culture almost until the postbellum period. Only cultural insiders knew the songs. They were eventually revealed to cultural outsiders through three different streams: Harriet Tubman’s public lectures, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and the postbellum African American Church.

Shortly before the Civil War, Harriet Tubman began to give public lectures in 1859 to raise funds to support her parents, whom she rescued from slavery in Maryland. She told her abolitionist audience stories of her enslavement, escape, and eight journeys back to the South to free others.31 She became well known for her storytelling ability. Biographer Kate Clifford Larson reports that Tubman also had a beautiful singing voice.32 Larson’s statement indicates that Tubman might have also performed *spirituals* and hymns during her public lectures. Tubman certainly sang *spirituals* during an intimate visit with Agnes Garrison and Eliza Wright Osborne in 1899. Encouraged by Osborne, Tubman told her “narrative” and “acted out parts of it” … “singing one of the old songs in a curious, nasal, mournful voice.”33

While Tubman might have shared Black vocal traditions with abolitionist audiences, the Fisk Jubilee Singers shared them on a national and international scale. Fisk University was founded by John Ogden, Reverend Erastus Cravath, and Reverend Edward Smith to educate newly freed African Americans in 1865. The university faced major financial troubles early on. George L. White, the university’s treasurer, who was also a musician, founded the choir in 1871 to raise funds, inspired by the “beautiful voices of the formerly enslaved.”34 The group initially performed popular songs of the day and repertoire from the European classical canon, but without success. However, the singers often gathered privately to sing *spirituals* like “Steal Away.” Ella Sheppard, a student and assistant choir director, recalled:

> The slave songs were associated with slavery and the dark past and represented things to be forgotten … they were sacred to our parents … we did not dream of ever using them in public. It was only after many months that gradually our hearts were opened to the wonderful beauty and power of our songs.35

Sheppard confirms that up to this point in 1871, the *spirituals* had remained hidden within African American culture. Seven of the final group of nine that embarked on the first national tour along old abolitionist circuits had been slaves. On the tour, they initially performed European *cantatas* with a few *spirituals* as an encore. However, at an Oberlin College performance, they finally made the decision to give a full concert of the *spirituals*. Musicologist Horace Clarence Boyer offers insight on this turning point:
At Oberlin College at a convention of influential ministers, they reached ... back to the secret music they’d sung behind closed doors ... the sacred songs of their mothers and fathers. They started to sing steal away – then all of the sudden there was no talking. Then they said you could hear soft weeping and the faces of people reddened. And I’m sure the Jubilee Singers were joining them in tears because if you are about what you’re singing, particularly if you believe it, you can’t help but be moved.36

Through prayer, George L White was inspired to name the group the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The group continued to perform concerts of spirituals to ever increasing popularity nationally and internationally.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers initiated the tradition of concertizing spirituals. It is important to note that the Fisk Jubilee Singers did not perform these songs using traditional Black vocality, like their forebears, but in the European operatic tradition. They sang with an operatic timbre, with pre-arranged vocal parts. The Jubilee Singers, and similar choirs at other Black universities, act as crucibles that preserve the songs performed in slavery’s Hush Arbors.

The Black church continued Hush Arbor vocal traditions and gave rise to public performances by Black women. Known as the “invisible institution,” the secret Hush Arbor congregations that comprised the Black church became visible during freedom. Congregations often met outdoors in “Brush Arbors” on Sunday mornings and sometimes joined Methodist congregations.37 The emotional intensity, expressive singing, and soulful musicality that have become the hallmark of Black women’s vocality passed down through the generations in the Black church, which became a fixed component of African American culture. The Black female specialist singer emerged out of church choirs and Sunday services. Spirituals and other congregational song forms connected to forms that emerged after slavery, like the blues.

Amiri Baraka discusses the development of the blues in the late 1800s as a storytelling form that gave voice to new freedom and individual expression, compared with forms that developed during slavery, which were an expression of African Americans’ collective experience.38 From the blues flowed all other forms of Black popular music. However, the musical life of many African American women singers still began in the Black church. Childhood experiences in the Black church nurtured the talents of the first Black female pop stars: blues women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. It was Ma Rainey’s pianist, Thomas Dorsey, who in the 1930s, fused the blues aesthetic with the Black spiritual tradition to develop a new genre known as gospel. The emotional expression of older forms of Black congregational music fused with Dorsey’s gospel. Gospel offered new songs as storytelling vehicles for the individual singers. The Gospel music genre created one of the most powerful musical outlets for Black female vocality. While many Black women singers performed with the local church, many professionalized into both sacred and secular genres. These professional singers of different Black popular traditions, from jazz to rhythm and blues to soul, who trained in church-based gospel, are the Black women known all over the globe for their vocal prowess: Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, Chaka Khan, Jennifer Holliday, Patti Labelle, Aretha Franklin, and many others.

These Black women’s voices echo the songs of those first African mothers and the enslaved women’s shouts and prayers for survival in those secret meetings in the woods. The vocal tradition for which they are so well known is a 400-year-old lineage, formed through the Black experience and the revolutionary traditions of old. For this reason, Black women’s vocality still serves as a clarion call of Black freedom.
Notes

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18 Ibid., 42.
19 Vol. 16 Texas, Part 1, 199.
22 How We Got Over: Sacred Songs of Gee’s Bend, 2002, Tinwood Media.
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31 Ibid., chap. 8.
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