

## Document 8.5 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Negro Spirituals" (1867)

African American slaves appropriated and adapted the liberation themes of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures. By means of biblical typology, they imagined themselves to be the recapitulation of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, awaiting a Moses who would lead them to a new promised land, or they borrowed the apocalyptic language of the Book of Revelation and saw themselves as the Church awaiting the return of King Jesus. These consoling messages, and in some instances coded subversive messages, were employed in the classic spirituals. In 1867, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson published several of these songs. Higginson served as colonel of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally-authorized army regiment to be comprised of former slaves, and here describes the all-black regiment singing spirituals while in camp, also interpreting the lyrics.

*Often in the starlit evening I have returned from some lonely ride by the swift river, or on the plover-haunted barrens, and, entering the camp, have silently approached some glimmering Ore, round which the dusky figures moved in the rhythmical barbaric dance the negroes call a "shout," chanting, often harshly, but always in the most perfect time, some monotonous refrain. Writing down in the darkness, as I best could-perhaps with my hand in the safe covert of my pocket, -the words of the song, I have afterwards carried it to my tent, like some captured bird or insect, and then, after examination, put it by. Or, summoning one of the men at some period of leisure,- Corporal Robert Sutton, for instance, whose iron memory held all the details of a song as if it were a ford or a forest, -I have completed the new specimen by supplying the absent parts. The music I could only retain by ear, and though the more common strains were repeated often enough to fix their impression, there were others that occurred only once or twice....*

*"My army cross over,  
My army cross over.  
O, Pharaoh's army drowned!  
My army cross over.*

*"We'll cross de mighty river,  
My army cross over;  
We'll cross de river Jordan,  
My army cross over;  
We'll cross de danger water,  
My army cross over;  
We'll cross de mighty Myo,  
My army cross over. (Thrice.)  
O, Pharaoh's army drowned!  
My army cross over."*

*I could get no explanation of the "mighty Myo," except that one of the old men thought it meant the river of death. Perhaps it is an African word. In the Cameroon dialect, "Mawa" signifies "to die."*

*The next also has a military ring about it, and the first line is well matched by the music. The rest is conglomerate, and one or two lines show a more Northern origin. "Done" is a Virginia shibboleth, quite distinct from the "been" which replaces it in South Carolina. Yet one of their best choruses, without any fixed words, was, "De bell done ringing," for which, in proper South Carolina dialect, would have been substituted, "De bell been a-ring." This refrain may have gone South with our army.*

*"Ride in, kind Saviour !  
No man can hinder me.  
O, Jesus is a mighty man !  
No man, &c.  
We 're marching through Virginny fields.*

No man, &c.  
O, Satan is a busy man,  
No Man, &c.  
And he has his sword and shield,  
No man, &c.  
O, old Secesh done come and gone !  
No man can hinder me."

*Sometimes they substituted "hinder we," which was more spicy to the ear, and more in keeping with the usual head-over-heels arrangement of their pronouns.*

*Almost all their songs were thoroughly religious in their tone, however quaint their expression, and were in a minor key, both as to words and music. The attitude is always the same, and, as a commentary on the life of the race, is infinitely pathetic. Nothing but patience for this life,- nothing but triumph in the next. Sometimes the present predominates, sometimes the future; but the combination is always implied....*

*These quaint religious songs were to the men more than a source of relaxation; they were a stimulus to courage and a tie to heaven. I never overheard in a camp a profane or vulgar song. With the trifling exceptions given, all had a religious motive, while the most secular melody could not have been more exciting. A few youths from Savannah, who were comparatively men of the world, had learned some of the "Ethiopian Minstrel" ditties, imported from the North. These took no hold upon the mass; and, on the other hand, they sang reluctantly, even on Sunday, the long and short metres of the hymn-books always gladly yielding to the more potent excitement of their own "spirituals." By these they could sing themselves, as had their fathers before them, out of the contemplation of their own low estate, into the sublime scenery of the Apocalypse. I remember that this minor-keyed pathos used to seem to me almost too sad to dwell upon, while slavery seemed destined to last for generations; but now that their patience has had its perfect work, history cannot afford to lose this portion of its record. There is no parallel instance of an oppressed race thus sustained by the religious sentiment alone. These songs are but the vocal expression of the simplicity of their faith and the sublimity of their long resignation.*

Source: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1867: 685–94.