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"Go in de Wilderness": Evading the "Eyes of Others" in the Slave Songs

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Abstract:

This essay explores the trope of the wilderness in the slave spirituals, arguing that it functions to recreate symbolically the natural landscape into which slaves regularly took refuge in order to elude white surveillance. Drawing on a variety of sources, it considers the unique surveillance culture in the antebellum South, its effect on the everyday lives of the slaves, and the ways in which the slaves used their natural surroundings to avoid it. It then uses a close analysis of the song "Go in the Wilderness" as a point of departure for a broader discussion of the way the wilderness becomes central, both thematically and structurally, to the spirituals as a whole.

> If you want to find Jesus, go in de wilderness,
> Go in de wilderness, go in de wilderness
>
> — Unknown author, "Go in the Wilderness"

In the late summer of 1831, for weeks after he staged the most notorious slave rebellion in United States history, Nat Turner became a man of the wilderness. After he and nearly 70 other slaves had spent two days massacring white families across the Southampton, Virginia, countryside, his rebellion was quelled and Turner was forced to take refuge in the Great Dismal Swamp area in order to avoid capture (Aptheker, 1993, p. 298). In the final days of his life, the wilderness was integral to his survival, providing a natural retreat and place of camouflage, just as it had for the many slaves before him who escaped the bonds of slavery.

As it turns out, the wilderness was integral to more than just Turner's survival; it was the place where he found inspiration for his rebellion and the place he returned to often in order to plan it. In his confession, as published in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Turner (1832) recounts that several years earlier, he escaped his overseer and took refuge in the woods for thirty days,

during which time he was inspired to turn his attention to "the things of this world, and not to the kingdom of heaven" (p. 8). From the point of his "wilderness moment" onward, Turner began reading and interpreting his natural surroundings for signs about when and how to conduct his rebellion. When his plan had finally revealed itself, he then began using hidden spots in the woods as private meeting places, often under the cover of darkness, to plan his attack with his conspirators.

It is believed that one of the ways Turner summoned fellow conspirators to the woods was through the use of particular songs (Jones, 1993, pp. 79-80). One such song, the one whose lines begin this essay, was "Go in the Wilderness," which reminded its listeners that

> If you want to find Jesus, go in de wilderness,
> Go in de wilderness, go in de wilderness,
> Mournin' brudder, go in de wilderness,
> I wait upon de Lord.

The provenance of the song is uncertain. It is most likely an adaptation of a Methodist hymn entitled "Ain't I glad I got out of the wilderness!" but who adapted it and when is impossible to verify. Some believe it was

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Turner himself who inverted the song to instruct co-conspirators to "Go in the wilderness" for clandestine meetings (Blake), while others have hypothesized a longer lineage of rebellion for the song, tracing it back to the 1823 Vesey Plot in South Carolina, when it may have been used in a similar way to summon rebellious slaves to secret gathering spots. In the end, while we cannot be certain about its actual use in slave revolts, we can be certain about the lore that it has generated; as James Kelley (2008) reminds us about the stories surrounding the spirituals and how they were used, sometimes "the story itself, not the proof of it, is what makes the story true" (p. 275). With this in mind, my goal is not to prove that "Go in the Wilderness" was used in a particular way, but to use the stories surrounding its use as a point of departure for a closer analysis of how the song's call to the wilderness, widely regarded as part of a broader clarion call for resistance found throughout the spirituals, functions within the songs overall.

Indeed, it is their capacity for hidden expression and masked rebellion that makes the spirituals so central to African American cultural expression generally. Nowhere is this clearer than in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. In *Souls*, Du Bois sets out for himself the lofty goal of defining "the spiritual world" in which African Americans "live and strive" (1993, p.5). His dominant metaphor for the entire work is that of the "veil," the ever-present partition that separates African Americans from the world around them, and in doing so, separates them from themselves as well. This self-dissociation is what Du Bois goes on to call "double consciousness," a concept that has, since (and because of) Du Bois, become central to African American scholarship and literature (for more on Du Bois's sources for the term "double consciousness," see Bruce, Jr., 1992; Adell, 1994, p. 13; Siemerling, 2001). He describes double consciousness this way:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings...(p. 9)

Of particular interest is Du Bois's suggestion that the veil — and the double consciousness that it effects — emerges from African Americans' awareness of a second presence, the "eyes of others" that look on "in amused contempt and pity."

We should notice that as he elaborates on the veil,

he constantly returns to the slave spirituals — what he terms "sorrow songs" — in order to do so. In the epigraphs of each chapter, he includes an unaccredited bar from one such song, and he concludes the book with a chapter called "The Sorrow Songs" in which he identifies the source of some of the songs (leaving others *veiled*) and, more important, explains their profound importance in understanding the souls of black folk: "the true Negro folk-song still lives in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung and in the hearts of the Negro people" (p. 199). What he repeatedly hints at when he uses words like "hidden" and "mysterious" to describe them is that the songs function as a kind of veil themselves, one through which African Americans speak to the world around them, but in a way that simultaneously shields them from the inescapable gaze that "the eyes of others" represent. Here I would like to take up where Du Bois leaves off by examining more closely the relationship between the slave songs and the veil that, according to Du Bois (and many others to follow) has come to define African Americans' adaptation to their often hostile environment. To do that, I will look more closely at the songs themselves — beginning with the circumstances under which they were created — in order to illustrate that the unique conditions of North American slavery created a unique kind of music, one predicated on the dialectic between the close surveillance of the "eyes of others" and the need to escape it. As I will show, the synthesis is found in the trope of the wilderness, the place that for centuries offered literal protection to Turner, Vesey, and countless others and is symbolically recreated in the songs' themes, structures, and aesthetic features, forming the kind of veil that Du Bois makes so central to *Souls of Black Folk*.

"The eyes of others" in antebellum America

The institution of slavery in America (or the colonies that would eventually become America) was in many ways atypical of the New World overall. In the rest of the Americas there was a stark divide — spatially, linguistically, and culturally — between slaves and slave owners. This was partially due to the nature of slavery in places like the Caribbean and South America, areas that relied on economies of scale to be profitable in sugar production, a complex and labor-intensive industry. To make money, plantation owners had to import far more slaves than their American counterparts did, often creating massive plantations of hundreds of slaves. The result was that in much of the Caribbean, blacks outnumbered whites dramatically, often by a ten-to-one margin. As

Melville Herskovits (1968) points out, many African traditions managed to survive in places like Brazil and the Caribbean precisely because of the relative lack of contact between slaves and slave owners (p. 120; see also Baraka, 1963, pp. 13–15). In America, however, the demographics were very different. Because crops like tobacco and cotton could be produced on a much smaller scale, plantations were considerably smaller and so, too, was the slave population relative to the white population. At their peak numbers, blacks constituted a minority of the population overall (35%) and even in states in the deep south like South Carolina where they comprised a majority, they never outnumbered whites by more than two to one (Kolchin, 1993, pp. 29–30). As a result, unlike elsewhere in the New World, American slaves had relatively frequent and regular contact with the white population generally and slave owners in particular, who inserted themselves into virtually every aspect of their slaves' existence. Peter Kolchin (1993) puts it this way:

> [American] slaves suffered an extraordinary amount of interference in their daily lives...Of course, such interference was rooted in the very existence of slavery, for masters everywhere assumed the right to direct and control their slave property. But the unusually close contact that existed between masters and slaves in the antebellum South meant that whites there impinged to an unusual degree on slave life...The pervasive presence of white Southerners shaped the everyday lives of the slaves. (p. 118)

The effect of this interference on the everyday life of American slaves cannot be overstated, and it gives us an important glimpse into what made the American institution of slavery so unique. The rules that governed slave life were beyond oppressive, dictating everything from when slaves went to sleep at night to what words they could speak. For the slaves of the American South, these were not regulations in the abstract; the constant presence of the slave owner or his overseer meant that they were enforced regularly, often by means of brutal physical abuse if they were broken. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass offers this perspective on the extent to which even the smallest transgression might be punished:

> The man, unaccustomed to slaveholding, would be astonished to observe how many *floggable* offenses there are in the slaveholder's catalogue of crimes; and how easy it is to commit any one of them, even when the slave least intends it. A slaveholder, bent on finding fault, will hatch up a dozen a day, if he chooses to do so, and each one of these shall be of a punishable description. A mere look, word, or motion, a mistake, accident, or want of power, are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does a slave look dissatisfied with his condition? It is said, that he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out. Does he answer *loudly,* when spoken to by his master, with an air of self-consciousness? Then, must he be taken down a button-hole lower, by the lash, well laid on. Does he forget, and omit to pull off his hat, when approaching a white person? Then, he must, or may be, whipped for his bad manners. Does he ever venture to vindicate his conduct, when harshly and unjustly accused? Then, he is guilty of impudence, one of the greatest crimes in the social catalogue of southern society. To allow a slave to escape punishment, who has impudently attempted to exculpate himself from unjust charges, preferred against him by some white person, is to be guilty of great dereliction of duty. (p. 261)

In this litany of "floggable" offenses, Douglass's emphasis on the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of punishment on the plantation is particularly important. As he points out, the whip was difficult to avoid, and a slave might find himself having broken a rule "even when [he] least intends it." The effect of such arbitrary punishment was the sense among slaves that somebody always *could* be watching and that their behavior at any moment *might* be judged unfavorably. And if they were to be disciplined, the punishments inflicted on them were often specifically designed to maximize their visibility, with slaves' (often naked) bodies frequently serving as the sites on which whites inscribed their presence by leaving "undecipherable markings on the captive body...a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). Throughout *My Bondage*, Douglass consistently returns to nakedness in his depictions of slave life, using the words "naked" or "bare" over 30 times, in the process revealing the significance of nakedness to the psyche of the slave and the significance of the body as the site of the master's own visibility. Hence, slaveholders managed to multiply their presence—even in their absence—in the minds and on the bodies of those they attempted to control. Speaking of this tendency in colonial power structures generally, Frantz Fanon (1963) puts it this way: "The settler pits brute force against the weight of numbers.

He is an exhibitionist. His preoccupation with security makes him remind the native out loud that there he alone is master" (p. 53; see also Bhabha, 1986, p.171).

That, of course, was the point—to make the slaves feel as visible as possible at all times—to create a "climate of 'collective insecurity'" in order to control their activities (Fry, 1969, p. 72). This propagation of a kind of "collective insecurity" in the American South represents an effective, efficient, and distinctly modern form of social control, a subject Michel Foucault takes up in *Discipline and Punish*, in which he discusses the way that, over time, punishment evolved to function as it does in Douglass's account. Social control began to follow a model based upon *discipline*, a mechanism of power that relies upon regularized surveillance. Foucault's well-known discussion of Bentham's Panopticon illustrates the effects of this disciplinary model. The Panopticon is Bentham's concept for a prison that is constructed in such a way that observers can watch and monitor prisoners from a central tower, but because of the way the complex is constructed, prisoners never really know the particular moments when they under surveillance because they can never actually see the observers who may (or may not) be watching. The result is that, over time, the prisoners come to assume that they are being watched at all times, even when observers are not present, giving the Panopticon its major effect: "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." This disciplinary model is both automatic and highly efficient because inmates are "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers."

Inducing a "state of conscious and permanent visibility" was the primary method by which slaveholders exerted their power, most evident in the way they controlled their slaves' movements and punished their disobedience. In virtually every jurisdiction, for example, slaves were forbidden from leaving their master's property without some sort of written pass indicating that their absence was sanctioned (Camp, 2002, p. 550). States often enforced this rule by organizing patrol systems, comprised of white men (often referred to as patterrollers or paddyrollers) who typically rode in groups, especially at night, looking for slaves who were off their plantations without permission or who were congregating in secret. When they found violations, their cruelty was legendary: they often gave severe beatings, sometimes resulting in death, and perpetrated a reign of terror upon slaves regardless of whether or not they were breaking the law. As one ex-slave put it, "Pad-

dyrollers was mean ez dogs" (qtd. in Kolchin, 1993, p.122). Their cruelty, combined with their seeming omnipresence on the roads and on plantations, left the slaves with little doubt that their every move was subject to punishment. W.L. Bost, a former slave from North Carolina, expresses a frustration that most slaves felt at life under such strict surveillance: "the paddyrollers they keep close watch on the pore niggers so they have no chance to do anything or go anywhere. They jes' like policemen, only worser" (WPA, North Carolina, 11.1).

It would be very difficult to overstate the importance of these patrols to the everyday lives of the slaves (Hadden, 2001, pp.105–129). Their constant presence in the slaves' lives is mirrored by their constant presence in slave narratives (and in some rare instances, even the spirituals). In narrative after narrative collected and complied by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), for instance, former slaves discuss the pervasiveness of the patrollers and their attempts to evade them. Lizzie Williams of North Carolina recounts the following story of her father's near miss when he was off the plantation without written permission:

> I mind a tale my pappy tell 'bout one time he see de paddyrollers comin'. He scared to death cas he did'n had no pass. He kno' iffen dey finds him whut they do. So pappy he gets down in de ditch an' throw sand an' grunts jes like a hawg. Sho' nuf dey thinks he a hawg and dey pass one, cept one who was behin' de others. He say: "Dat am de gruntin'es ol' hawg I ebber hear. I think I go see him." But de udders day say: "Jes let dat ol' hawg lone an' min' yo own business." So day pass on. Pappy he laff 'bout dat for long time. (WPA, North Carolina, 11.2)

Sadly, many others never lived to laugh about their encounters with the patrollers. Fannie Moore, another ex-slave from North Carolina, recalls the fate of one man who tried to resist punishment when he was caught at an unauthorized dance:

> I remember one time dey was a dance at one ob de houses in de quarters. All de niggers was a laughin an' pattin' dey feet an' a singin', but dey was a few dat didn't. De paddyrollers shove de do' open and sta't grabbin' us. Uncle Joe's son he decide dey was one time to die and he sta't to fight. He say he tired standin' so many beatin's, he jes can't stan' no mo. De paddyrollers start beatin' him an' he sta't fightin'[.] Oh, Lawdy it war tubble. Dey whip him wif a cowhide for a long time den one of dem take a stick an' hit him over de head, and jes bus his

head wide open. De pore boy fell on de flo' jes a moanin' an' groanin. De paddyrollers jes whip bout half dozen other niggers an' sen' em home and leve us wif de dead boy. (WPA, North Carolina, 2.2)

The culture of terror instilled by the patrollers—and taken up postbellum by the Ku Klux Klan—created an "all-pervading anxious fear" in the American South that often had a paralyzing effect on blacks, even once they were emancipated (Fry, 1969, p. 72). Describing the postwar environment, W.L. Bost notes the persistent fear: "Then after the war was over we were afraid to move. Jes like tarpins or turtles after 'mancipation. Jes stick our heads out to see how the land lay" (WPA, North Carolina, 11.1). Bost's metaphor of the turtle is an apt one. A turtle is defined by its shell and owes its survival over thousands of years to the protection that it affords, but at the same time, a turtle is burdened by the very thing that allows it to thrive: it is a constant, heavy presence that, try as it might, the turtle can never escape. Here we find an important paradox of freedom achieved through confinement.

One of the most useful illustrations of this paradox can be found in Harriet Jacobs' well-known *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a work in which Jacobs depicts a distinctly Panoptic form of social control, but also the use of her own kind of shell in subverting it . At one point, describing the inescapability of Dr. Flint, her master, she writes:

> My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there. (p. 38)

What is striking about this passage is that, rhetorically, it underscores the way power functioned on the plantation. Notice that in her first sentence, Jacobs describes her master's literal presence when she says, "My master met me at every turn." But by the next sentence, his literal presence in the narrative gives way to metonymy, as it is his "footsteps" that "dog" her, thus establishing his figurative presence. (It's worth noting that by using the word "dogged," Jacobs evokes the image of tracking dogs that were routinely used to locate slaves who escaped into nearby forests—clear foreshadowing of Flint's determination to track her later in *Incidents*.) This transmutation from corporeal to metaphorical is complete by the final sentence, when it is his "dark

shadow" that follows her to even her most private of moments. This rhetorical transformation mirrors the effect of such close surveillance—as in Jacobs' account, the slaveholder achieves a kind of omnipresence by invading the psychological world of his slaves, and in doing so, manages to multiply his presence exponentially, even when he might be physically absent.

And yet, later in her account, we see that she begins to break free of her slaveholder's grasp, beginning when she decides to escape. At one point, as her determination to run away wavers, she enters the woods to visit her parents' gravesite and finds that her spirit is "overawed by the solemnity of the scene" (p. 138). As she is increasingly moved by her natural surroundings, she recalls Nat Turner, and like him, experiences a "wilderness moment" in which her resolve to act is steeled, and when she finally leaves the forest, she says she "rushed on with renovated hopes" (p. 139). Sure enough, in just a matter of days, she sets out on her years-long escape from Flint, and soon the tranquil expanse of the wilderness gives way to a series of confined spaces, "station[s] on her journey to freedom" (Smith, 1990, p. 213), that she must take refuge in. The most notable of these is her grandmother's garret, what she calls her "loophole of retreat," where she confines herself for seven years to elude Dr. Flint's relentless hunt for her. It is here that she endures some of her most acute physical discomfort, yet at this point in the narrative, "Jacobs controls her own situation, as she does at no other point in the text, as well as controlling those vying to impose hostile authority on her" (Barrett, 1995, p. 434). Forced to live under a shell—manifest in the form of cramped garret—Jacobs finds a way to turn her isolation into power, taking full advantage of her voyeuristic position and turning the tables on Dr. Flint by manipulating his movements through trickery and watching him from an unpleasant and confined, but ultimately safe, space (Smith, 1990, p. 213). From her perch atop her grandmother's house, she is symbolically placed out of Flint's reach, and simultaneously given an elevated position that is representative of her new vantage point, one from which she can surveil the surveillant.

At first glance, Jacobs' hideaway spot—a musty and enclosed indoor space in the upper reaches of a house—might seem to have little in common with the place in the forest that she visited before her escape or with the places in the wilderness that would have served as most escaped slaves' "loopholes of retreat." Yet what's intriguing about Jacobs' descriptions of the garret, most of which occur at the structural center of the narrative (Burnham, 1997, p.149), is that she often

dwells on the incursions of the natural environment into a space that, on its surface, seems so far removed from it. She complains, for example, about "the little red insects, fine as a needle's point, that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning," she endures the rats and mice running over her bed, and she goes on to note that the extreme summer heat was unabating because "nothing but thin shingles protected me from the scorching summer's sun" (p. 176). Here and elsewhere, she depicts a space that is only narrowly separated from the outside elements, and with her consistent references to it as her "den," she begins to describe an environment that is surprisingly analogous to the literal dens that many other escaped slaves would've sought to elude capture.

In counterpoising the interiority of the garret with images and metaphors that draw upon the natural environment beyond its walls, Jacobs not only suggests the enduring power of her "wilderness moment" but also the importance of the wilderness to slave resistance. Indeed, as she frequently notes in *Incidents*, many slaves sought out private spaces in their attempts to escape slavery, often, like Nat Turner, finding them in the nearby forests and swamps (Blum, pp. 250–251). Jacobs' frequent attempts to use nature to describe the garret, a space so ostensibly removed from nature, allows us to view Jacobs within a much broader tradition of slave resistance, as well as to situate her narrative within a broader tradition of black art that frequently locates spaces of autonomy and freedom within the wilderness. Her work is particularly useful here because it demonstrates the functioning of a Foucauldian model of surveillance-based control and, at the same time, works as a fitting point of departure for a more detailed consideration of way the slaves turned to nature in order to subvert it—allowing for a kind of resistance that Foucault himself probably never would have (Burnham, 1997; see also Fraser, 1981; Habermas, 1990; Pickett, 1996). As Jacobs makes clear, given the constant presence of a hostile society, slaves were forced to maintain a shell of their own, something akin to the "veil" that Du Bois returns to over and over, if they were to have any hope of carving out an autonomous space in which to live and, as we will see, create. Ultimately they did, and through a closer analysis of their music in particular, we can see how integral the wilderness was in creating an identity within the music—shrouded from view within a diffuse and pervasive system of power—that could take refuge in a metaphorical landscape that protected them from "the eyes of others."

The vale as veil

Just as the "eyes of others" came to define slave existence in the New World, so too did the attempts to avoid those eyes. Despite the likelihood of getting caught—and the tortures they could expect if they were—slaves regularly sought the refuge of secrecy to find a way to experience something that was solely theirs. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the clandestine religious meetings that slaves frequently held in what is now commonly referred to as the "invisible institution" or the "invisible church" (Southern, 1983, p. 166). In many cases, the slaves sang and worshipped in secret, often late at night or very early in the morning when their masters were asleep and when the cloak of darkness would most likely shield them from the prowling patrollers. Their secret meetings typically took places in deep woods, remote ravines or gullies, or in isolated thickets called "brush harbors" or "hush arbors"—any "loophole of retreat" that would keep them invisible. Andrew Ross recalls that his mother's private prayer spot was "a ole twisted thick rooted-muscadine bush," but when she and a group of slaves wanted to pray together, they "cleaned out knee-spots in de cane breaks. Cane you know, grows high and thick, and colored folks could hide de'selves in dar an nobody could see an pester em" (WPA, Tennessee, XV). Ross's story is far from exceptional; indeed, for every story in the WPA slave narratives that includes a reference to the patrollers or the Klan, there is at least one other that recounts slaves' attempts to evade them and meet in secret, usually for the purposes of private prayer.

It is in secret, then, that many of the slave spirituals were born. Slaves would gather in a hidden spot during the middle of the night, singing and praying with the vigor and enthusiasm that white observers often prohibited. Sometimes the noise got so loud that, despite being hidden, these groups were likely to be discovered. Becky Ilsey remembers that it often fell to the elder slaves to quiet things down: "when dey'd sing a spiritual an' de spirit 'gin to shoult some de elders would go 'mongst de floks an' put dey han' over dey mouf an' some times put a clof in dey mouf an' say: 'Spirit don talk so loud or de patterol break us up'" (qtd. in Levine, 2007, p. 41). In most other cases, the slaves took proactive approaches to contain the noise. In many narratives, former slaves speak of turning a pot upside down and gathering around it, believing that it would contain the sound created by their singing. Others, like slave preacher Kalvin Woods, describe how women

would often soak old quilts and blankets in water and then hang them on trees in the shape of a small room "to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air" (qtd. in Cade, 1935, p. 331). Still others describe meetings in which slaves would gather in a circle, intended to contain their voices, and then pray over a vessel of water to drown out the sound.

As they were often born in secrecy, the spirituals became among the first in a tradition of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988a) says is a discourse that African Americans have always engaged in "far away from the eyes and ears of outsiders, those who do not speak the language of tradition" (xxi). Nevertheless, as with all other forms of slave song, they were regularly performed in more public venues as well—while working under the eye of the overseer, in church after the official proceedings had concluded, or outside of their houses at the end of the day. While in secret—or "outside the intimidating gaze of power" (Scott, 1990, p. 18)—slaves could openly contemplate their desire for freedom, their resentment at the abuses of a cruel master, and, in general terms, the "longing toward a truer world," but in public, any of these sentiments, if voiced, would certainly have been punished. Rather than remain silent, however, the slaves used the spirituals as the site of negotiation between their public and private discourse, allowing them to serve as "partly sanitized, ambiguous, coded version[s]" of their otherwise hidden communication (p.19). The effect is what Edouard Glissant (1989) terms *opacity*, a kind of resistive mechanism that can "conceal itself by its public and open expression" (pp. 124–125) by making the image of the slave "visible but *unreadable*" (Britton, 1999, p. 24). One image that Glissant emphasizes in his discussion of opacity is that of the forest (pp. 82–83), an important symbol of concealment for the slave, and as we will see, the opacity in the spirituals was created in part by reproducing in symbolic form the literal invisibility provided by their hidden meeting spots in the wilderness. Put another way, the dense thicket of bushes or the walls of wet blankets that enveloped the spirituals in their nascent form never disappeared; instead they were transformed into what John Lovell, Jr. (1972) refers to as "mask and symbol" (pp. 190–193). Indeed, a close examination of the extant spirituals reveals the extent to which they are, in fact, defined by mask and symbol—by the constant awareness of the "eyes of others" and the need to subvert them. And so it is to the spirituals themselves that we turn.

Many spirituals manifest "the mask," both structurally and thematically. However, I would like to return to "Go in the Wilderness," the song that began this

essay, in order to focus on the ways in which its appropriation of the "wilderness" is characteristic of the spirituals generally and their concern with reproducing the autonomous spaces that the slaves relied upon so heavily in their creation (Dixon, 1987, p. 20). Here are the full lyrics, as reproduced in William Francis Allen's 1867 volume entitled *Slave Songs of the United States*:

I wait upon de Lord
I wait upon de Lord,
I wait upon de Lord, my God,
who take away de sin of the world.

1. If you want to find Jesus, go in the wilderness,
Go in de wilderness, go in de wilderness,
Mournin' brudder, go in de wilderness,
I* wait upon de Lord.]

3 *You want to be a Christian.*
4 *You want to get religion.*
5 *If you spec' to be converted.*
6 *O weepin' Mary.*
7 *'Flicted sister.*
8 *Say, ain't you a member?*
9 *Half-done Christian.*
10 *Come, backslider.*
11 *Baptist member.*
12 *O seek, brudder Bristol.*
13 *Jesus a waitin' to meet you in de wilderness.*
(p.14)

The central message of "Go in the Wilderness"—that the Lord can be found in the wilderness (rather than in a church)—places the song squarely within the tradition of spirituals that link religious worship and conversion with the forests, rivers, swamps, and hidden valleys common throughout the rural south. Even a casual glance at collections of slave songs quickly reveals that the slaves' natural surroundings formed the creative matrix from which the spirituals sprang and are therefore thematically central to many of the songs. Sometimes, as we see here and in other songs like "I'm Going Home," the wilderness in general provides the protective cover for worship, while others focus on a "lonesome valley" or a river bank as the place of refuge or religious deliverance. These spots form an integral part of what Edward Said (1993) calls "rival geographies," places where slaves, in asserting their autonomy, undermined their enslavers' control of space and movement (p. 22; see also Camp, 2002, p. 535). Given the special protection afforded by these hidden spots, a protection that allowed many of the spirituals

to come into being in the first place, it should come as little surprise that they are so lyrically prominent and make up what Eileen Southern (1983) refers to as "wandering" phrases that reappear consistently within them (p. 198).

Their prominence in songs like "Go in the Wilderness" can also be explained by their second function — as coded markers that slaves shared with one another, through song, as they prepared to meet secretly or escape. If the song did actually operate as a kind of code, then "wilderness" would have two distinct functions: as metaphor for the place of spiritual salvation and as the literal meeting place to which the song called all of the slaves who were listening (for purposes of worship, insurrection, or both). Moreover (and this is missed in all of the scholarship I have seen related to the song) the phrase "Mournin' brudder," though correctly transcribed, also contains a possible hidden instruction to go to the wilderness in the "morning," the early morning hours being the time the slaves could expect their masters to be sleeping and the patrollers to be off duty.

In the end, whether "Go in the Wilderness" in particular was used to summon secret meanings in the forest is unclear. However, what we can be relatively certain about is that many of the spirituals were used in this manner, while many others, in a broader sense, included veiled expressions of the desire for freedom. In many of these songs, the wilderness does not appear lyrically, but its protective function nevertheless remains operative in their structure. Take, for example, Frederick Douglass's discussion in *My Bondage* of the hidden meanings within the songs. He asserts that the songs were "jargon to others, but full of meaning to themselves" (p. 98) and then goes on to cite specific examples of this meaning:

> A keen observer might have detected our repeated singing of
>
> "Oh 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
> "I thought I heard them say,
> There were lions in the way,
> I don't expect to stay
> Much longer here.
> Run to Jesus—shun the danger—
> I don't expect to stay
> Much longer here,"

> Was a favorite air, and had a double meaning....
> in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant, a
> speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.
> (pp. 278–79)

We should notice that Douglass's example involves Biblical references, as does our exemplar, and that worship is depicted as a personal, rather than communal, activity. Indeed, many of the spirituals represent worship as deeply individual, emphasizing spatial privacy and often focusing on a lone actor (evident in the numerous songs that prefer the first person "I/me" to the collective "we"), yet their structure nevertheless reveals how communal they really are. Like Douglass's example here, the vast majority (including "Go in the Wilderness") employ a call-and-response structure, borrowed directly from their African predecessors (Johnson & Johnson, 1925, pp. 25–26; Floyd, 1995, pp.44–45; Levine, 2007, p.33). Antiphonal structures, still very much the norm in modern black music, function to replicate, symbolically, the protective "wilderness." As Lawrence Levine (2007) explains it, "the form and structure of slave music presented the slave with a potential outlet for his individual feelings even while it continually drew him back into the communal presence and permitted him the comfort of basking in the warmth...of those around him" (p. 33). I would add to Levine's metaphor—while basking in warmth, I would also suggest that the slaves were basking in one another's shadow, allowing themselves to be drawn into a communal environment that ultimately allowed the individual to recede into the group, creating a protective "wilderness" that enabled individuals to hide within the multitude. In "Go in the Wilderness," we can see how the repetition of the word "brudder" serves this end. "Brudder" emphasizes the familial relationship among the slaves, and in doing so, insists that even in the most solitary of moments, a slave is never acting alone. Hence, even though the song's lyrics tend to focus on the individual ("if *you* want to find Jesus," not *we*) that individual is reminded that he is still somebody's "brudder" and that he is therefore acting with the collective support and protection of his family.

As we have already seen, Southern whites were well aware of the potential for resistance involved in any kind of collective action and therefore took numerous measures to guard against it. As James C. Scott (1990) points out, one of the more dangerous aspects of assembly was that it provided protective cover for individual acts of resistance: "an assembly provides each partici-

pant with a measure of anonymity or disguise, thereby lowering the risk of being identified personally for any action or word that comes from the group" (p. 66). An assembly also has the more obvious "visual impact of collective power" that a group of "subordinates conveys both to its own number and to its adversaries" (p. 65). This begins to explain the function of the spirituals' structural emphasis on call-and-response. Even if a lone slave sings a song like "Go in the Wilderness" in the presence of a white person, the song's antiphonal structure (which, being alone, the slave would have to reproduce him or herself) symbolically reproduces the protective environment of collectivity—a kind of "wilderness"—and in doing so provides a glimpse at its veiled threat of *group* resistance to any observers. The "visual impact of collective power" is transformed through song to a similar "aural" impact, which is not only intended for white observers, but also for individual performers, reminding them that they are not acting alone at all—that they have resisted becoming the isolated, atomized individuals that Foucault depicts in his analysis of surveillance-based power. In short, the slaves appropriated an African tradition and put it to new and subversive use on the plantation.

The slaves also made subversive use of their appropriated material by extending far beyond it, and effecting some striking inversions in the process. Take our exemplar, "Go to the Wilderness," which uses as its source material the Methodist hymn "Ain't I glad I got out of the wilderness!" (the italicized portion of the lyrics, which is not always reproduced in texts of the song, is thought to be a carryover from the Methodist original). The original hymn portrays the wilderness in keeping with the Judeo-Christian view that the wilderness typically represents a place of spiritual darkness or confusion (hence the term *bewilder*, which the *OED* traces back to *wilderness*). If the slaves had been interested in simply reproducing Biblical themes, they would undoubtedly have portrayed the wilderness in a similar way; after all, some of the Bible's most prominent passages depict the wilderness as a place of temptation or wickedness (the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years before reaching the Promised Land, Jesus' forty days in the wilderness as he's tempted by Satan, etc.) (Williams, 1959, p. 4; Cone, 1972, p.75). But in "Go in the Wilderness" and the many other songs that locate spiritual *revival* in the slaves' rural landscape, we see a profound shift, one that rejects typical formulations of the wilderness, instead associating the rural landscape with the privacy and autonomy needed for true religious conversion.

And here emerges the importance of the "eyes of others" to the slave songs—in their recurring themes and structures, they bear the stamp of surveillance to the extent that they have evolved in particular ways because of a constant public gaze. In some rare instances, the weight of that gaze is so heavy that it blatantly intrudes upon the songs. Take "Pray all de member," which begins with an exhortation to pray, followed by an invocation of the Biblical story of Jericho. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the listener is wrenched back to the everyday reality of surveillance:

> Jericho da worry me, O Lord!
> Jericho da worry me, Yes, my Lord!
> Jericho, Jericho
>
> …
>
> Patrol aroun' me.
> Tank God he no ketch me.

As it concludes, the song returns to Jericho, a popular Biblical story for the slaves because of its representation of a triumph of the Israelites (slaves) over their oppressors, but it's abundantly clear here that the slaves are not fully confident in the symbolic protection afforded by the Biblical metaphor, and so for two lines, their everyday reality tears through the song's fabric. In most songs, this doesn't happen, but "Pray all de member" is nevertheless instructive because it reminds us of how deeply intertwined the eyes of others really were with creation and evolution of slave songs—and how many songs like "Go in the Wilderness" shrouded themselves in the veil of the wilderness to make themselves visible yet impenetrable, public but private.

Conclusion

I began this essay with an account of Nat Turner's final days as a fugitive in the Great Dismal Swamp, a place that is in many ways emblematic of the liberating function of the natural landscape in slave life—and slave music. It was the home to countless escaped slaves who exploited its inaccessible terrain to elude capture, and once Turner's rebellion brought the area to public view, the image of the runaway slave finding freedom in the Great Dismal even became popularized in literary works such as Longfellow's poem "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp" and Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*.

Whereas Longfellow's poem depicts a slave on the run, opening with the lines "In dark fens of the Dismal Swamp / The hunted Negro lay," Stowe's novel pres-

ents us with Dred, a figure descended from Denmark Vesey and clearly inspired by Nat Turner, who leads a far more permanent existence in the Great Dismal Swamp. He lives and dies there with his family, along with a settlement of escaped slaves who call the area their home. While there is no evidence to suggest that Turner himself lived there the way Stowe's Dred did, for many slaves it was in fact the site of a similar, more permanent escape. Indeed, the Dismal Swamp was home to maroon settlements that, according to Herbert Aptheker (1979), included roughly two thousand fugitive slaves and their descendents (p. 152). Far from the frantic, migratory life of fugitives, these settlers often led a "much more tranquil, domestic, and permanent lifestyle," with many of them building homes, planting gardens, raising animals, and leading a relatively peaceful existence for years (Cowan, 2005, p. 52; Hinks, 1997, p. 42). When they needed supplies, many used their secluded position to coordinate night raids on nearby white farms to steal provisions, while some others—especially those who lived near the borders of the swamp—actually established illicit trading relationships with their white neighbors. Ironically, it was this primal swampland that offered a glimpse into the future, one in which blacks would ultimately gain their liberty and begin their uneasy relationship with white America.

Of course, that was a future that most whites in the antebellum south resisted vigorously, and so among slaves and slaveholders alike, the Great Dismal Swamp emerged as a unique (and contested) symbol of black power, a protected space that engendered resistance and autonomy (Nelson, 2005, p. 36; Wagner, 2009, p.71). For the vast majority of slaves across the American South, the freedom provided by the Great Dismal Swamp was unattainable, but they nevertheless utilized the surrounding wilderness to carve out a similarly private space, and it is within that space that the spirituals—what Richard Wright (1957) calls "the single most significant contribution of folk and religious songs to our national culture" (p. 90)—were born. It should come as no surprise, then, that the wilderness is arguably the most significant secular trope to emerge in them and that it insinuates itself not only into many of

the songs' themes and lyrics, but also into their structure. It functions as a kind of veil described by Du Bois, a partition separating blacks from the "eyes of others" that is reproduced symbolically within the songs themselves and provides metaphorical protection in the same way a thicket of bushes or a hidden ravine would have veiled a performance in a more literal sense.

Although Du Bois frequently depicts the veil as a curse, it is worth noting that he does imbue it with this kind of protective power as well—what he calls the gift of "second sight in this American world" (p. 9). What the black man loses in his ability to see himself, he gains in his hidden space behind the veil; he can see that "the white [man] cannot see him" and that he has a "special identity" that "is kept special, private, by the veil" (Hale, 1994, p. 450). Indeed, after emancipation, as blacks became more and more integrated into white society, this protected space—what Gates Jr. (1988b) calls a "cleared space" for a "black and sufficient self" (p. 132)— became even more vital to preserving a black aesthetic in an environment largely controlled by whites. While the southern landscape still endures as such a "cleared space" for black autonomy throughout a wide range of African American literature and music, it endures even more prominently in the various ways that African American art has retained mechanisms of insulation against the normative white gaze that has always followed it. Houston Baker Jr. (1987), for example, uses the figure of the mask in his description of cross-cultural exchanges throughout much of the 20th Century, demonstrating through a variety of works that black political figures and authors regularly wore a mask for the white population, one that they could operate behind covertly. More recent scholarship has also demonstrated the sophisticated ways that such mechanisms function in contemporary musical forms like rap music (Nielson, 2010). Although it has manifest itself in different ways, it seems that the call to the wilderness heard in the slave spirituals is still being heard loud and clear today.

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