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“Come Through the Water, Come Through the Flood”

Black Women’s Gospel Practices and Social Critique

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Abstract

This article explores gospel music created by Black women as a form of protest that critiques social injustice. Using the tragic circumstances the 1927 Mississippi River Flood, the author argues that in the first half of the twentieth century the emergent gospel music became a vehicle through which African American women could circumvent the restrictive gender dictates of Black churches. In music created immediately following the flood and years later, Black women challenged the rhetoric and practice of hegemony through an alternative oral discourse that recognized the whole self as integral to spiritual and subjective fulfillment, and simultaneously critically assessed their cultural milieu.

Introduction

Victory, victory shall be mine.
 Victory, victory shall be mine.
 If I hold my peace,
 Let the Lord fight my battles,
 I know victory, victory shall be mine (“Victory Shall Be Mine,” traditional spiritual).

[1] This article takes its title from a recording by Sister Ernestine Washington, a Gospel singer based in Newark, New Jersey. Although the song was recorded in 1943, many African Americans living in the Mississippi Delta and those from the Delta living in urban cities, North and South, were so affected by the flood of the Mississippi River in 1927 that the recording echoes the despair experienced in the wake of the disaster. Along with mournful lamentation, Washington’s voice is filled with the spirit of stoicism and triumphant survival

held by many African Americans and that the lyrics of the Spiritual “Victory Shall Be Mine” expresses as well. Indeed, for performers of the sacred counterpart to Blues – Gospel music – the miseries caused by the flood and the abuses fostered by the South’s racially segregated society were articulated in lyrics that were at once traditional and radical. While some would disagree, I argue that Gospel is Blues’ sacred counterpart because both originate out of the same experience of struggle. They are both an idiom of survival and uplift – whereas the Blues celebrates tragedy to raise one’s spirit, Gospel reminds us to praise the bounty of God and salvation in order to transcend worldly sorrows. Throughout this text I use the terms Gospel(s) and Spiritual(s) to denote genres of African American religious music. Agreeing with Alan Young (xix), who states, “‘Gospel music’ without a qualifier is African American,” I identify these genres as the sacred music created by African Americans that grows out of Judeo-Christian tenets, the continuity of African aesthetic traditions, and Black experience in America. Other forms of sacred music – such as Southern Gospel, which Young identifies as “songs performed by whites and based on folk and country music” – may hold commonalities with Gospel and Spirituals but are produced from a different set of historical, communal, and aesthetic configurations, thereby establishing diverse musical forms.

[2] Just as Angela Y. Davis argues, Blues allowed African American women to express themselves on issues that were deemed transgressive by conservative middle-class Blacks; similarly, in the first half of the twentieth century the emergent Gospel became a vehicle through which African American women could circumvent the restrictive dictates of Black churches, particularly Baptists, that barred women from preaching. Gospel’s performative and spiritual elements created a space wherein African American women could “speak in tongues” and serve the church in traditional roles as vocalists and proselytize in a manner that was equally, or more, powerful than male preachers. I use the phrase “speak in tongues” or “speaking in tongues” in the same manner as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson to denote both glossolalia, as the ability to speak in unknown languages given by the Holy Spirit, and heteroglossia, as a discourse that communicates in known multiple languages simultaneously. While Henderson applies the term to analyze writings by Black women that “account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity” (117), I examine Gospel recordings by Black women to understand the complexity of race, gender, and class difference and identity within the culture of Black religious and civil rights activism in the early twentieth century. I use the term “discourse” in the sense that Lee Quinby does, as “a ‘system of dispersion’ of statements that define, designate, circumscribe, and sometimes eliminate certain objects of its authority” (xv). In this sense, then, women who sang Gospel challenged the discourses of hegemony through an alternative oral discourse that recognized the whole self as integral to spiritual and subjective fulfillment.

[3] Because they neither wholly identified with the values of middle-class Black women of the Talented Tenth whose restrained religious practices were too confining, or the mores of Blues women whose practices of drinking, smoking and sexual freedom were too “worldly,” Gospel performance offered working-class African American women a degree of power in the church through an oral discourse that is the descendant of the liberation narratives of slave Spirituals. Thus by speaking in tongues, using lyrics of traditional Spirituals about the biblical flood as a metaphor for the 1927 Mississippi River flood, African American women Gospel singers could take a radical position and “preach” against injustices and

discrimination African Americans routinely experienced at the hands of White Americans. Taking both floods as their text, these women adopted an “apocalyptic vision grounded in the reality of the crisis of Black life,” in the vein of womanist theology, which “offer[s] an alternative picture of reality and point[s] the community in that direction” (Townes: 123, 128). Womanist theology (sometimes identified as womanist God-talk, or womanist spirituality) is a spiritual approach conceptualized by Black women religious scholars and clergy that emphasizes love and appreciation for Black women, our history and culture, and all life. I am using this philosophy because it recognizes oppression and injustice in all its forms, race, class, gender, etc., seeks equality, and “holds together the individual and the community in a soulful relationship that cannot dwell more on one than the other partner of the relation but holds both in the same frame” (Townes: 11). The Gospel songs I examine recognize the injustices to African Americans in the wake of the 1927 flood and interpret the catastrophe through an apocalyptic vision that promises justice and equality. This apocalyptic vision is a “theo-ethical, sociopolitical manifesto that refuses to accept or tolerate injustice. It seeks to overcome the discrepancy (and attendant craziness) between what is and what should be – the discrepancy between empirical reality and legitimate expectations” (Townes: 121). Singing of the Mississippi River flood of 1927 through this approach, Black women reject suffering and pain, and accept hope and justice.

More than Water, a Flood of Despair

[4] While flooding is a cyclical occurrence of the Mississippi River, the flood of 1927 was the most voluminous and destructive in recorded history. Indeed, in his epic account of the flood, John M. Barry compares the 1927 flood with the 1993 flood of the Mississippi River. He points out that at the height of the 1993 flood, the river at St. Louis carried one million cubic feet of water per second; at the break of the levee at Mounds Landing, Mississippi, on April 21, 1927, “the Mississippi River [carried] in excess of three million cubic feet of water each second” (16). After a series of torrential rains beginning in August 1926, the Mississippi River and its tributaries began flooding in December 1926. The most catastrophic flooding occurred, however, in the spring of 1927 from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico, a distance of over one thousand miles. Millions of acres of land in the lower Mississippi River valley flooded, causing hundreds of millions of dollars in property, agricultural and industrial losses and the deaths of hundreds of people (Mississippi River Flood Control Association; Daniel). As memorable as the statistics are, the lived experiences of the flood and its aftermath provided material for a discourse of economic, political, and spiritual struggle and protest infinitely more powerful and unforgettable.

[5] For Blacks living in the Mississippi Delta region, the horrors of the natural disaster were compounded by the circumstances of racial discrimination, humiliation, and violence inflicted by White National Guardsmen, plantation owners, and those managing refugee camps both while fighting the flood and in cleanup and relief efforts after the waters receded. In Greenville, Mississippi, White women and children were evacuated, leaving thousand of Blacks stranded on the levee facing hunger and homelessness (Barry). Already in dire economic straits, many African Americans who lived in the area lost all their worldly possessions and the means with which to regain them. The peonage system of sharecropping, the economic arm of Jim Crow segregation, effectively relegated African

American farmers to lives of perpetual debt and poverty. The source of cheap labor for White planters, Black sharecroppers escaping encroaching floodwaters with little more than the clothes on their backs were forced, often at gunpoint, into “concentration” camps with inhumane conditions that produced death and disease.

[6] Like herds of cattle, African American refugees bore tags on their clothing indicating whether they had received typhoid shots, job assignments, and from what plantation they came. Will Percy, chairman of the Washington County Relief Committee, proclaimed, “No able-bodied negro [sic] is entitled to be fed at all unless he is tagged as a laborer” (Barry: 314). Relief supplies that were freely distributed to Whites affected by the flood by the American Red Cross were “resold” “to penniless Blacks to create new debts” (Woods: 119). Percy further declared,

1. No rations will be issued to Greenville Negro women and children unless there is no man in the family, which fact must be certified by a white person.
2. No Negro man in Greenville nor their families will be rationed unless the men join the labor gang or are employed.
3. Negro men . . . drawing a higher wage [more than \$1 per day] are not entitled to be rationed (Barry: 316).

As the waters receded African American men were conscripted to dispose of debris, dead bodies, and rebuild the levee and town. Men who refused conscription faced beatings, jail, and even death. Abuses of African Americans were so heinous that – after vehement complaints and criticisms from the leading Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, and N.A.A.C.P. officials – Herbert Hoover, then Commerce Secretary in the Coolidge administration, selected sixteen African American men and women to form the Colored Advisory Commission to investigate Black flood victim complaints and conditions in refugee camps. The Commission’s final report in December 1927 detailed instances of theft of supplies designated for Black tenant farmers, refusals to distribute supplies to Black landowners, and beatings of tenants who attempted to leave plantations (Barry: 389). The devastation produced by the 1927 flood on African American communities – including both the flood and the aftermath of human and civil rights violations that state and federal governments did little to halt – became legendary in Black secular and sacred circles.

[7] The flood catastrophe inspired numerous memorials and commemorations. Among African American communities flood remembrances took various forms: oral and written (poetry, short stories, novels, folktales, and ethnography), and musical. Countless Blues songs were recorded that recount the sheer destruction caused by the floodwaters. Artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson (“Rising High Water Blues” 1927) and Big Bill Broonzy (“Southern Flood” 1937) sang of the homelessness and helplessness the flood engendered. These recordings represent what James Baldwin called “the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate” (131). As a product of Black communities where economic constraints dictated residents occupy substandard housing that floodwaters blithely swept aside, these Blues are filled with “[i]mages of destruction as opposed to damage or mere inconvenience . . . a testament to the social status and living conditions of much of the southern black community in the early 1900s” (Morrison: 274). Blues men Charley Patton (“High Water Everywhere” and “High Water Everywhere, Part Two” 1929), Walter Roland (“Red Cross Blues” 1933), and Lonnie Johnson (“Backwater Blues” 1927 and “Flood Water

Blues” 1937) not only documented the anguish and humiliation of forced labor and physical threats, they expressed resistance to this oppression (Briggs). Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues” (1927) “is one of many Blues songs in which natural disaster provides the metaphor for the homelessness, no-exit meaninglessness, and arbitrary violence of life as perceived by much Blues music” (O’Meally: 2749). The “Empress of the Blues,” Smith is roundly acknowledged by Black feminist theorists as an empowered voice of Black women’s resistance to gender oppression (Carby; Davis). Yet Blues artists of the secular world were not alone in adapting flood experiences to creative musical expression.

[8] In contrast to the multiple Blues recordings recounting flood experience, there are few surviving Gospel recordings that explicitly refer to the flood of 1927. One recording, titled simply “The 1927 Flood,” by Elders McIntorsh and Edwards with Sister Bessie Johnson in Chicago, December 1928, is performed in the nascent Gospel tradition of fusing congregational style singing, lined-out hymns, and upbeat percussive rhythms. Unlike Sister Ernestine Washington’s mournful tone, “The 1927 Flood” has a celebratory quality that translates into reverence for God’s power. Although the recording is billed as by McIntorsh and Edwards, Johnson’s powerful gritty voice dominates throughout. She leads most of the verses with driving intensity that enhances the text beyond its literal meaning. The chorus correlates the river’s destruction with God’s wrath as a result of man’s sin.

He sent a flood to the land
And it killed both beast and man
‘Cause people got so wicked
Wouldn’t obey God’s command
They was prayin’, welcome to deal
But God didn’t have no deal.
So He pour down His flood upon the land

However, the real significance of the song lies in its assertion of equality as a divine right and the flood as retribution for violation of rights. Part of God’s command is human equality. Verse three contends:

The evil cause of men
Have brought this land to sin
But God looked down from heaven
To make it the same.
This misery people sung
When God didn’t have no sun.

Following the tradition of identifying earthly circumstances with divine intervention, “The 1927 Flood” conceptualizes the event as an act of divine justice in the face of injustice. Similarly, “The Latter Rain Is Fall” (1928), also recorded by McIntorsh, Edwards, and Johnson, speaks of the flood as an act to move and change people.

The latter rain is fallin’
Fallin’ from on high
O, the latter is fallin’
Fallin’ from on high

Make you just like Jesus
Fallin' from on high

Using the present tense, this Gospel song implicitly references the biblical flood and parallels it with the contemporary event. Like the biblical flood, the 1927 flood brings judgment and retribution but not necessarily death. It means to affect change and righteousness.

[9] While there are limited Gospel songs that explicitly reference the latter-day flood, the presence of the Mississippi River flood can be found in Gospel lyrics that are ostensibly about the biblical story of Noah and the flood. Like the subversive coding of Spiritual lyrics of past generations, these songs demonstrate that while superficially about Noah, the biblical flood, and retribution, in actuality, they point to an event that contemporary audiences would have recognized. For many the biblical proportions of the 1927 flood immediately called to mind Noah's flood. In fact Keith Briggs relates the assertion of a woman trapped for three days by floodwaters. She exclaimed, "I didn't know it was gonna be no Norah's [sic] Flood." According to Jerry McAfee, Black religious leaders consistently return to biblical events in response to natural, and even man-made, disasters (personal communication). Thus Gospel women, too, metaphorically used the biblical flood for social analysis. The heritage of African American sacred music and the history of marginalization of women in Black churches demanded these artists adopt alternate means "to tell a free story." In order to understand the full meaning of these lyrics, it is necessary to illuminate the institutional contexts and aesthetic matrices that gave rise to Gospel music.

Liberation Spirituals and Gospel Liberations

They're not spirituals because they don't have the tradition behind them. They weren't born of slavery. But they express another kind of slavery from which we want escape (Mahalia Jackson, quoted in Laughton and Hayes: 37).

[10] The musical heritage of African Americans affected by the 1927 Mississippi River flood is fraught with pain and struggle. Performer, composer, and scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon maintains, "The story of African American sacred music . . . is the story of a people under stress searching for a more fertile ground for survival in a strange land" (4). African American slaves created the sacred music known as "Spirituals" in rural spaces of plantation slave communities. In opposition to slave-owners who prohibited slaves from worshipping together, African American slaves met in "praise houses" or "hush harbors," which might have been a cabin in the slave quarters or even a secluded area under a tree in the woods. These clandestine places became sacred spaces where slaves worshipped stealthily but freely (Jackson). W. E. B. DuBois called Spirituals "sorrow songs" that expressed the soul of African American slaves and were "not simply . . . the sole American music, but . . . the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas" (156). Representing a worldview that sees little distinction between the sacred and the secular, enslaved African Americans sang Spirituals to transcend their physical environment while laboring in plantation fields and homes as well as in worship meetings.

[11] Spirituals are a uniquely African American art form in that they are grounded in oral traditions from West and Central African cultures and the American experience of the slave

institution.¹ Although many enslaved Africans adopted the tenets of Christianity for moral and spiritual guidance, their religious worship practices and beliefs reflected African rhythms, structures, and worldview. For instance, many Spirituals are adaptations of Protestant lined-out hymns in which “one recites the words in an oratorical fashion in order to give text, and then the congregation sings them in time and in tune” (Boyer: 84). This practice was particularly effective for the African American oral culture.² However, in the tradition of African American Spirituals, the hymns are infused with distinctly African characteristics. These elements include: call and response, which demonstrates a relationship between the leader and the group; complex rhythms with syncopation and polyrhythms of hand-clapping, foot-tapping, exclamations, and percussive sounds; often a five-note pentatonic scale that is African based as opposed to the eight-note scale found in much of European music; an existentialist religious outlook concerned with day-to-day lived experience; concreteness of abstractions such as death viewed in everyday experience; a lack of distance between God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and humans, which, though blasphemous by European standards, is reflective of an African worldview of gods not being “Sunday gods” but involved in day-to-day situations; and, a philosophy in which feeling can take priority over meaning, that is, religion is not only a philosophical or theological system but an emotional experience (Shaw).

[12] The significance of the African aspects of Spirituals culminates in the yearning for liberation they express. The oral tradition of Spirituals is embedded in the slave experience and the desire for freedom and deliverance – freedom to own the self, to worship and live autonomously, and deliverance from the dehumanizing practices of forced labor, rape, familial separations, and the arbitrary violence of slavery. American slave-owners institutionalized illiteracy to prevent slaves from challenging their authority on the premise

¹ The issue of African traditions and rituals surviving in African American culture is complex and disputed by various critics. In the introduction to his book, *Slave Culture*, Sterling Stuckey examines the evolution of African cultural practices within the American cultural landscape. Particularly, Stuckey draws out the modifications of religious practices by kidnapped Africans in America because of the prohibitions and restrictions by slaveholders on traditional African rituals. Through his studies of West African cultures, Melville Herskovits determined Africans and African Americans shared a “culture area” illustrated by cultural similarities that prove direct continuities survived from African cultures transmitted to African American culture. However, anthropologists Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price contend, “In considering African-American cultural continuities, it may well be that the more formal elements stressed by Herskovits exerted less influence on the nascent institutions of newly enslaved and transported Africans than did their common basic assumptions about social relations or the workings of the universe” (11). Similarly, Lawrence Levine states, “with Africans, as with European and Asian immigrants, aspects of the traditional cultures and world view they came with may have continued to exist not as mere vestiges but as dynamic, living, creative parts of group life in the United States” (5). Although identifying African survivals in African American culture is a complex and controversial project, the similarities cannot be ignored or discounted.

² Walter Ong designates primary oral cultures as “oral cultures untouched by writing” (31). Yet he often uses the phrase oral culture interchangeably with “primary oral culture.” For this reason, I identify the slave communities from which these narrators emerge as oral cultures. The institutionalized illiteracy of slaves combined with the oral traditions transferred and transfigured from African cultures created a culture whose members primarily relied on oral communication. While non-literate slaves were aware of writing, the systematic denial of education and punishment for acquiring literacy increased the incentive to develop a complex oral culture.

that illiterates could not participate in legal or public discourses. Yet not only did many slaves gain literacy, in developing an active, powerful oral discourse slaves appealed to a higher authority to challenge the very inhumane practices of and racist ideology supporting the slave institution. Some Spirituals contain lyrics explicitly about freedom:

Oh, freedom,
Oh, freedom,
Oh, freedom over me!
An' befo' I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free (Gates et. al.: 15).

Other lyrics were more covert and implicit. Biblical stories of deliverance and freedom often were sung to express faith in ultimate justice. Often the complexity of these allusions rendered powerful speech acts of agency and insurgence. For example, "Mary Don You Weep" (Ward: 5) combines two seemingly disparate stories, Jesus's resurrection of Lazarus in the New Testament and the Old Testament's story of the Israelites' deliverance from Egyptian slavery – a situation commonly paralleled with African American enslavement – in a celebration of life (freedom) and triumph of justice (defeat of an enemy).³

Mary, don you weep and Marthie don you moan,
Mary, don you weep and Marthie don you moan;
Pharaoh's army got drownd-ed,
Oh Mary don you weep.
I thinks every day an I wish I could,
Stan on de rock whar Moses stood,
Oh Pharaoh's army got drownd-ed,
Oh Mary don you weep

The lyrics are consoling, celebratory, and subversive. The lines, "I thinks every day an I wish I could/Stan on de rock whar Moses stood," suggest slaves take an active role in the defeat of slavery. Just as Moses was empowered by God to destroy Pharaoh and his army, this

³ The 1972 recording of "Mary, Don't You Weep" by Aretha Franklin, backed by the Southern California Community Choir and directed by Reverend James Cleveland, exhibits all the African characteristics of Spirituals Arnold Shaw highlights combined with Gospel's driving percussive rhythms to produce an intensely moving rendition. The relationship between the leader (Franklin) and the group (the choir and congregation) exemplifies the call and response tradition, particularly when Franklin directly addresses the group. For instance, after the choir sings, "Pharaoh's army," she confirms, "I know you know that story of how they drowned in the sea one day." The shared knowledge of a founding narrative demonstrates the relationship of collectivity between the leader and group that is non-hierarchical. As she emphatically sings, "Jesus said, 'For the benefit of you who don't believe/Who don't believe in me this evening/I'm gon' call him three times/Oh, yes I am/Oh, yes I am,'" Franklin's voice embodies so much power that it is as if she is the voice of God, illustrating a unity between humans and deities held in African worldviews. With the full range of Franklin's contralto voice supported by various percussive sounds with multiple timings that build to a crescendo of sound and emotion, Shaw's second, third and seventh elements are fully realized. Listening to this recording the seeming incongruence of the biblical narratives disappears. The relationship and subversiveness of the text becomes compellingly clear. Excerpts of my discussion of Spirituals were previously published (Fulton Minor and Pitts; Fulton 2006).

Spiritual calls enslaved African Americans to be agents in slavery's abolition. This is the tradition out of which Gospel songs concerned with the 1927 Mississippi River flood come.

[13] With emancipation, Spirituals took on a more public presence that was less threatening to the American sociopolitical landscape. In 1871 at a fund-raising concert in Oberlin, Ohio, the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University stunned the audience with their rendition of Spirituals (Reagon: 12). The economic success of the tour convinced Fisk, Hampton College and other Black colleges that concert choirs with a repertoire of Spirituals was a lucrative enterprise to fund Black higher education. These choirs adopted both the vocal tonalities of European classical choirs and physical deportment of restrained motion with members firmly holding their arms at their sides or clasping their hands. In this more rigid format Spirituals – exuding the proper amount of “dignity” and restraint – became an acceptable musical genre to be performed before mainstream audiences, that is, both Black and White middle-class Americans of the late Victorian era.⁴

[14] The Victorian era's ideals of decorum and dignity did not escape African Americans. In particular, Blacks striving for economic, educational, and social equality endeavored to represent themselves as respectable citizens worthy of American integration. In opposition to the prevailing racist ideology of Black immorality and lack of civility, many African-Americans adopted middle-class bourgeois values. These values included not only a desire to accumulate wealth, material goods, and education, but extended to essentialist notions of gender proprieties. Masculinity constituted, among other things, rationality, courage, aggressiveness, self-control, and the ability to protect women and children. Conversely, femininity prescribed spirituality, motherliness, modesty, gentleness, and dedication to the home. These virtues circumscribed the concept of civilization in the Victorian era. Gail Bederman demonstrates that this concept depended not only on gender dichotomies, but was intimately linked to racial hierarchy. “In the Darwinist 1890s,” Bederman asserts, “‘civilization’ had become a racial concept. Rather than simply meaning ‘the west’ or ‘industrial advanced societies,’ ‘civilization’ denoted a precise stage in human evolution – the one following the more primitive stages of ‘savagery’ and ‘barbarism’” (9). “Savage” or non-White races were understood to have minimal or nonexistent gender distinctions. By blurring the demarcation of gender characteristics, White supremacists pronounced non-White males unmanly, non-White females unfeminine, and “naturalized white male power by linking male dominance and white supremacy to human evolutionary development” (Bederman: 9). Understandably, the conflation of racial ideology with “civilization” problematized African Americans' adoption of bourgeois values. Nevertheless, middle-class African Americans chose the accoutrements and behaviors of the hegemony while simultaneously protesting racial discrimination and agitating for civil rights. In this manner, many Blacks held middle-class values without necessarily accepting this racialized notion of civilization.

⁴ Indeed many African Americans gained prominence on the concert stage singing Spirituals. Artists such as Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Marion Anderson garnered world-wide attention with Spiritual repertoires. The success of Black college choruses gave rise to many community-based groups called “jubilee quartets” who performed Spirituals after the manner adopted by Black college chorales (Reagon: 14).

[15] However, this value system did not hold true among rural and working-class African Americans. As Reagon points out, in African American churches whose congregations mainly constituted Blacks living in rural or working-class urban areas, African aesthetics remained an integral part of worship service.⁵ Reagon contends, “The expression of unity while maintaining the individual voices; the freedom to move the body as it experienced the song; the growth of the song directly out of the sermon rather than as a separate part of the service; the open-endedness that could result in improvisation, changing leads, varying moods and spiritual states of the entire congregation; the nurturing and feeding of the soul; and the unleashing of emotions through the power of sound on the body – these were all part of the work of Black congregational singing” (12-13). The genre of Gospel music grew out of this form of sacred music.

[16] As opposed to the more formal performance style of Spirituals by Black college choirs and stage performers, members of traditional Black churches in the rural South continued to praise and worship in song and service with African aesthetics. Yet the dawn of the new century saw the beginnings of the Great Migration of African Americans from rural southern areas to urban centers; African Americans responded to the constraints and opportunities of migration through sacred music. With labor demands in manufacturing industries increased by World War I, many African Americans sought greater economic, social and cultural opportunities in cities, north and south. By 1927 the Great Migration had grown from a steady stream to a full river of African Americans flowing out of the rural South to the urban South and up to northern cities. In contrast to the flow of Mississippi River from north to south, African Americans struggled to move out of the Delta region to what seemed more promising land in the North. Migrants looked to cities not only for what was offered materially, they desired relief from the most debilitating aspects of Jim Crow segregation. Separate and unequal education and public facilities, racial threats and violence, political disenfranchisement and employment largely limited to agriculture or domestic service convinced Blacks that survival and progress in northern cities were imminently more possible. Unfortunately, the change in geography did not mean change in socio-economic and political structures.⁶ In urban spaces African American migrants struggled with racial subjugation, economic deprivation, and housing discrimination. Moreover, life in cities presented a differing set of strains that many migrants saw as fostering moral degradation and degeneration not faced in the country. High under- and unemployment, living in substandard and inadequate housing in ghettos that were nearly impossible to move out of and in close proximity to displays of wealth – circumstances that screamed the implication “look but don’t touch” – contributed to increased rates of alcoholism, prostitution, crime, and other vices in Black communities. In spite of and to combat these circumstances, African Americans “confronted their difficulties through the process of consciously recreating rituals, continuing certain performance practices, and maintaining those values

⁵ These African American denominations of were mostly Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal (including Holiness, Sanctified, and Church of God in Christ) churches.

⁶ In his historical monograph on the Great Migration, Nicholas Lemann documents the journey of Black sharecroppers in rural Mississippi to Chicago. Lemann shows that for Blacks life in northern cities was not “the promised land” many previously imagined but filled with economic strife and more covert forms of racial discrimination.

which were at the focal point of their mental and physical survival in the rural South” (Jackson: 189). Concurrent with the development of Blues and Jazz in the secular world, the birth of Gospel represents the continuum of cultural traditions in the quest for freedom and wholeness in a repressive environment.

[17] Gospel was nurtured in “the African American folk church – not the middle-class oriented, mainstream establishment churches, but the small ‘storefront’ churches which served as the contemporary counterpart to the ‘praise houses’ of the institutionalized slavery era” (Jackson: 189). Founded on a theological philosophy that promoted emotional expressions and physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit as evidence of godliness, these churches permitted congregants to worship freely and praise vocally – in the forms of testimonials, prayers, and invocative interjections – and physically – through hand-clapping, foot-stomping, hand raising, body swaying, and dancing.⁷ Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston reasoned, “The [S]anctified church is a protest against the high-brow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations as the Negroes gain more education and wealth” (quoted in Woods: 112). Primarily the domain of Black Pentecostal denominations, gospel music founded on this form of worship is evidenced in Black Baptist and Methodist churches as well. Hurston argued that Gospel originated in Sanctified churches but migrated to other Black church denominations. “These songs by their very beauty cross over from the little storefronts and the like occupied by the ‘Saints’ to the larger and more fashionable congregations and from there to the great world” (quoted in Woods: 113).⁸

[18] In addition to bodily involvement, Gospel songs were accompanied by musical instruments – guitars, pianos, tambourines, drums – played with lively rhythms and driving intensity. Often acknowledged as the “father of Gospel music,” Thomas A. Dorsey, in the late 1920s, “began adapting Blues and Jazz rhythms to the writing of sacred verse and coined the term *Gospel* to differentiate the new song form from what was the current sacred music” (Reagon: 15). However, Kalamu ya Salaam observes, “It is instructive to note that initially [Mahalia] Jackson, Dorsey, and others who practiced this new Gospel form were rejected and, in fact, prohibited from performing in some churches because they were accused of ‘jazzin up’ religious music or of bringing ‘the Blues’ (i.e., the ‘devil’s music’) into the church” (363). In the early twentieth century congregations of these churches consisted mainly of Black migrants struggling to find personal, social, and political fulfillment within a harsh and unrewarding landscape. Out of this context Gospel became accepted as a more liberating musical form based on performance meant to inspire spiritual transcendence and individual

⁷ While physical expression is encouraged, within this context there are demarcations between religious and secular expression. In the church acceptable dancing, sometimes called shouting or getting happy, refers to specific physical movements (including running and jumping) performed in the moment of spiritual possession as manifestations of God within the person – not conscious movement performed in rhythm or timed to a beat. Likewise, though hand-clapping is acceptable, generally finger-snapping, which is considered a sign of “worldliness,” is not.

⁸ The term “Saint” is used to denote a congregant in Sanctified churches. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes maintains that adopting this term represented a challenge to white racism. “At the time when white Americans were calling black people a nation of ‘thieves, liars, and prostitutes,’ Sanctified Church members were calling each other ‘Saints.’ They perceived themselves to be set apart for sacred purposes; these men and women were confident that God ‘had raised them up’ for a special calling” (47).

wholeness. "Gospel music," Young states, "is firmly based in religion, but it is composed and/or arranged with performance in mind" (xx). The musical representation of the original philosophy of Bishop Charles H. Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ denomination, Gospel brought "the totality of [African American] experience in song, so that you have songs to make merry in your heart and to live and get by" (David Hall, quoted in Young: 232).

[19] This philosophy called for liberation themes as well as style. The tradition of Spirituals as liberation texts that are multivalenced informed the new Gospel musical form. For African Americans in the early twentieth century, freedom from slavery did not mean freedom from despair, and so the desire for deliverance from racial, economic, social, and political subjugation is evidenced in Gospel songs for spiritual and communal uplift. Far from being the passive lamentations of a victimized people, Gospel songs functioned as an active oral discursive method of historiography and socio-political analysis. As such, Black women Gospel singers became arbiters empowered to interpret African American experience and American injustice in a biblical context of sin and redemption.

(En)gendered in the Church: Black Women's Work in the Black Church

If Mary the mother of Jesus could carry the Word of God in her womb, why can't holy women carry the word of God in their mouth? (Bishop Ida Robinson, quoted in Best: 58).

[20] Throughout African American history the Black church has been a core institution that has sustained African American communities. At the turn of the nineteenth century, African Americans struggled to create organizations where they could worship unmarginalized and independent of White-dominated denominations (Wilmore). Beginning with the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church by Richard Allen in 1816, African American religious institutions have facilitated African American protest, self-representation, and self-determination. Moreover, African American women have been an integral source in the substantiation and support of the church. "Throughout all varieties of black religious activities," sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes declares, "women represent 75 to 90 percent of the participants" (44). For Black women the church presented a forum at once receptive and exclusionary. The experiences of Maria W. Stewart and Jarena Lee are cases in point. "[B]oth women were forced to contend with the prohibitions placed on black women by the power structures of black male institutions and, as a consequence, needed to devise strategies through which to test and overcome these limits" (Peterson: 57). For example, in 1832 Stewart, acknowledged as the first American woman to speak before mixed-gender audiences, addressed members of the First African Baptist Church and the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston. "Using Biblical references and the values set forth in the U.S. Constitution, she both denounced slavery and asserted African Americans' rights to freedom and full participation in American democracy. . . Unfortunately, Maria Stewart's career as a public speaker was short-lived. Because of social constraints impeding women's activities in the public sphere and insufficient responsiveness to her addresses, Stewart chose to end her speaking vocation in 1833" (Fulton 1997: 610). Similarly, after his initial refusal in 1811, Richard Allen accepted and invited Jarena Lee to preach both at Mother Bethel AME Church and at conferences. However, after Allen's death in 1831 and facing strong opposition from ministers in the AME Church, which "prohibited the licensing and

ordination of women preachers,” Lee became an itinerant minister who traveled to Black communities throughout the northeast to “promulgate the gospel of Christ” (Peterson: 74-76). Barred from speaking in the very institutions from which they found religious fulfillment, these women represented the time-worn dilemma of the “woman preacher’s literal search for a locus from which to speak” (Houchins: xli).

[21] The doctrine of the Black Baptist church, though opposed to the racist practices of White Baptist churches from which it derived, relegated women to subordinate roles as well. Although prohibited from the pulpit, women in Black Baptist churches comprised an indispensable component in the enterprise of religious and racial uplift. During the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras, thousands of Blacks matriculated in and graduated from schools founded by northern missionaries. Whether focused on industrial or liberal education, these institutions stressed what E. Franklin Frazier called the Puritan values of piety, thrift, and respectability. Liberal arts institutions produced an elite class of Blacks, the “Talented Tenth,” which W. E. B. Du Bois later championed. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham illustrates that the concept of the “Talented Tenth” grew out of “northern white [Baptists’ hopes] to transform – albeit indirectly – the illiterate and impoverished black masses into American citizens who valued education, industriousness, piety, and refined manners” (25). Northern White religious organizations, particularly the American Baptist Home Mission Society’s sponsorship of educational institutions for African American men and women, attest to their level of commitment to this transformation. Higginbotham demonstrates that White Baptist leaders saw the Talented Tenth not only as a group that would transform Black masses, but also as a buffer between White and Black Americans in the event of racial disturbance. According to White Baptist leaders, the Talented Tenth would control and restrain the majority of African Americans through the espousal of White middle-class values.

[22] Moreover, Talented Tenth females were central because of the belief in women’s “role in spreading ‘correct’ values throughout black communities” (Higginbotham: 28). Through the formation of mission schools, Talented Tenth females were taught and then themselves disseminated White middle-class values and morals regarding homemaking, hygiene, and temperate expressions in religious worship. Spelman students were encouraged to work among rural and non-literate African Americans in order to disseminate these values.

[23] Female members of this elite class formed secular and religious organizations for the expressed purpose of “racial uplift.” From its inception in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) advanced middle-class values in its efforts to reform and uplift the race. In fact, Paula Giddings parallels the NACW to the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, NACW’s White counterpart. Giddings contends, “Neither group questioned the superiority of middle-class values or way of life, or had any romantic notions of the inherent nobility of the poor, uneducated masses; education and material progress were values that Black and White women shared” (95). However, unlike their White counterparts, Black clubwomen were forced to confront racist gender ideology that castigated Black women because they were believed to lack virtue and exhibit “low and animalist urges.”⁹ Likewise,

⁹ Black women’s lack of morality was a foregone conclusion for many whites at the turn of the century. In 1902, a writer for the magazine *The Independent* declared, “I sometimes hear of a virtuous Negro woman but the

Black men were condemned as weak brutes, lacking self-control and lusting after White women. Based on these beliefs, Whites propagated what Ida B. Wells termed the “thread-bare lie” as a rationale for lynching Blacks.¹⁰ Indeed this propaganda became so widely accepted that by 1894 the number of Blacks lynched in that year rose to 134 without condemnation and intervention by U.S. federal or state governments or the mainstream American public.¹¹

[24] Black women were propelled to defend themselves and the race in response to this increased racial violence. Giddings asserts, “Black women activists believed that their efforts were essential for reform and progress, and that their moral standing was a steady rock upon which the race could lean” (81). These women concentrated on what Higginbotham calls “the politics of respectability,” which included a discourse that “emphasized manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest, such as petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice” (187). Consequently, Black “race” women formulated a multi-purposed activism that aimed to refute racist gender assumptions, uplift the race through education, economics and morals, and fight for African American civil rights.

[25] Mired in the same racial and gender circumscriptions, Black women in the Sanctified church worked for racial uplift and also adopted the “politics of respectability.” For instance, to combat stereotypes and assaults on their person and character that African American women routinely encountered from the White public, Sanctified women were admonished to “dress as becometh holiness,” which included wearing long skirts and dresses with long sleeves (Gilkes: 49). Unlike women in Baptist and Methodist denominations, in various degrees, Sanctified churches accepted women in the pulpit as teachers, evangelists, and missionaries, though some organizations – including the Christ of God in Christ – steadfastly refused to ordain women as pastors, elders, or bishops. A parallel leadership structure developed in Sanctified churches that afforded women autonomy and power. According to Gilkes, the initiation of this structure was a conscious ontological act that expressed opposition to patriarchy found in organizational structures of Euro-American religious institutions (44).¹² Alongside the male structure of superintendents, bishops, elders, and pastors, Sanctified churches incorporated a structure that empowered women in religious work. “The political skill of the early Women’s Department of the Church of God

idea is inconceivable to me . . . I cannot imagine such a creature as a virtuous Negro woman” (quoted in Giddings: 82).

¹⁰ In 1892, Ida B. Wells repudiated Black men and disdained the repeated justification of lynching as Black men’s punishment for raping White women. In an editorial in her newspaper *Free Speech*, Wells displays cynicism and insight. “Nobody in this section believes that old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women” (65-66).

¹¹ Robert L. Zangrando provides lynching statistics for Whites and Blacks from 1882 through 1968. Data shows that throughout these years 3,445 Blacks were lynched in the United States.

¹² Unlike Methodist and Baptist churches organized by Blacks, Gilkes maintains, “When black people were first making choices about their cultural strategies as free women and men, the Sanctified Church rejected a cultural and organization model that uncritically imitated Euro-American patriarchy” (44).

in Christ was such that nearly all women's roles, including that of 'laywoman,' were eventually included in that denomination's official definition of ministry" (Gilkes: 48). Despite the opposition to women in the pulpit, one ministry in which women have not been excluded is music.

[26] Across denominations, African American women have pioneered Gospel through composing, singing, and performing. In the Church of God in Christ, Arizona Dranes's up-tempo piano style Gospel, mixing ragtime and barrelhouse forms, influenced other Gospel and Blues artists as varied as Sisters Ernestine Washington and Rosetta Tharpe and Aaron "T-Bone" Walker (Young). "The first female religious soloist to record extensively on 'race records' in the 1920s" (Young: 105), Dranes, born blind in Dallas, Texas, composed songs and traveled to churches throughout Texas, Tennessee, Oklahoma and Missouri.¹³ More significant to the development of Gospel, Lucie E. Campbell composed over one hundred songs that have become standards in the repertoire of Black religious institutions.¹⁴ Although Thomas A. Dorsey is often called the "father of Gospel music," Campbell introduced Dorsey to the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the world's largest organization of African American Christians with over six million members (Reagon). Elected the music director of the Baptist Training Union Congress in 1916, Campbell commanded great influence on the National Baptist Convention's musical program from 1919 to 1962. Second in popularity only to Dorsey's "Precious Lord," the lyrics of her 1933 composition "He Understands; He'll Say, 'Well Done'" are so powerful that once when performed by her protégé, J. Robert Bradley, "one hundred persons united with the church immediately afterwards" (George: 118). While Campbell preferred to write Gospels in the classical choral tradition, later compositions like "Jesus Gave Me Water" (1946), recorded by Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers in 1951, and "In the Upper Room" (1947), recorded by Mahalia Jackson in 1952, have assured Campbell's place as, if not the mother, at least the midwife of Gospel music (Boyer; Laughton and Hayes).

[27] Composing aside, African American women have made the greatest impact on Gospel in the church through performance. As members of choirs, duet and quartet groups, and soloists, women performers wield authority and power, spiritually moving listeners to consider not just their souls in relation to eternity, but – as Gospel is born of African American experience – to recognize the assaults on both their bodies and souls caused by racial injustices. Gospel performance then allowed women to take center stage, so to speak, as voices inveighed against subjugation and discrimination and for liberation and social justice in America.

¹³ In the early development of the recording industry, major companies like Paramount, Columbia and Victor created labels that exclusively recorded Black Blues, Gospel artists and preachers. These recordings were distributed to African American markets and were thus called "race records" (Carby; Woods).

¹⁴ Horace Boyer clarifies that only forty-six of Campbell's compositions are currently in print, though she is reputed to have composed over one hundred (82).

Black Women Preaching the Flood through Song

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering (Morrison: 305).

[28] As shown in the previous sections, Gospel music became a powerful medium through which African Americans “[put] back into Negro religion those elements which were brought over from Africa and grafted onto [C]hristianity” (Zora Neale Hurston, quoted in Woods: 113). Moreover, Gospel performance was a space in which African American church women could command attention and authority in institutions and communities that excluded them. The tragedy of the 1927 Mississippi River flood occasioned such attention. Discursively “speaking in tongues,” Gospel women affected the cultural memory through Black collective memory of the flood. These speech acts represent a form of activism – much in the same way as more well-known middle-class Black social activists like W. E. B. DuBois and Ida B. Wells – by situating a specific historical event in the context of the larger African experience in America to comment on the present and affect change for the future.¹⁵ That this activism was performed by Black women in the religious discourse of the biblical flood and the discursive expression of Gospel, arguably the domain of working-class Blacks, signals these women’s position as cultural purveyors of biblical knowledge and social analysis.

[29] Although there are few Gospel songs recorded immediately following the flood that referenced the event, the trauma of the flood so affected Black communities that later recordings resounded with the experiences of destitution and struggle. If, according to Lotman and Uspensky, “culture is memory or, in other words, a record in the memory of what the community has experienced, it is, of necessity, connected to past historical experience. Consequently, at the moment of its appearance, culture cannot be recorded as such, for it is only perceived *ex post facto*” (214), then identifying the 1927 flood experiences of African Americans in later recordings exemplifies how culture gets inscribed. Amiri Baraka’s states, “there are all kinds of freedom, and even all kinds of spirits. We can use the past as shrines of our suffering, as a poeticizing beyond what we think the present (the ‘actual’) has to offer. But that is true in the sense that any clear present must include as much of the past as it needs to clearly illuminate it” (196). Baraka’s statement speaks to the retrospective power of later Gospels to analyze contemporary social inequities. The circumstances surrounding the 1927 flood were on the minds and in the pens of many African American artists years after the event. In 1937, Richard Wright published “The Man Who Saw the Flood,” and in 1938, “Down By the Riverside,” which significantly takes its title from the Spiritual with the same name. Both short stories “are about men, individuals, and the existential aloneness and numbness they feel as they are confronted with both an

¹⁵ I am using the term speech act in reference to oral texts that empower the individual to resist or subvert hegemony. This definition is similar, though not identical, to Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the nature and role of the subaltern means of communication. Spivak centers her discussion on the subaltern’s use of rumor as a method of resistance. She contends that because the original source of a rumor is unknown, it is an illegitimate form of writing and is thus “accessible to insurgency.” While I agree with Spivak’s assessment of rumor, my purpose for examining speech acts here is to cite specific oral texts and their sources that are acts of agency and moments of insurgency. Elsewhere I have called these acts Black feminist orality (Fulton).

oppressive society and a frightening natural catastrophe” (Howard: 47). It is my contention that the hurricane in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is also informed by the 1927 Mississippi River flood and depicts situations identical to African American experiences in 1927. Thus singing of the 1927 flood through biblical flood lyrics of Gospel song recorded long after 1927, African American women entered the discourse of protest against injustice and warn of retribution, while still staying within the context of religious prescriptions for females.

[30] Achieving success and fame as no other Gospel singer, male or female, has ever done (forty years after her death, she is still roundly regarded as the greatest Gospel singer), Mahalia Jackson epitomized Black women Gospel singers with the authority to move, if not mountains, then people to spiritual and social action.¹⁶ Although she migrated to Chicago in 1927, because she was born and raised in New Orleans, it is very likely Jackson witnessed the 1927 flood first hand, or at the very least personally knew others who witnessed and were affected by it. I argue her 1953 recording of the traditional Spiritual “Didn’t It Rain” is informed by this experience. “Didn’t It Rain” is an act of “speaking in tongues” that articulates heteroglossia of the known language of biblical narrative with the glossolalia of the unknown language of Gospel performance. This is not to say that Gospel is unknowable or nonsensical. But, as an expression of Black experience with African cultural and spiritual aesthetics, Gospel was (and still is) unknown, that is unacknowledged and devalued by mainstream American culture. Likewise “Didn’t It Rain” represents African American experience of the 1927 flood and beyond as both heteroglossia and glossolalia; the experience was known in the collective memory of Black communities and unknown and unacknowledged in American cultural memory. The lyrics of the traditional text simply remind us of the biblical flood.

O, didn’t it rain, children,
Didn’t it rain!
Didn’t it rain, children,
Didn’t it rain!
Didn’t it rain, children,
Didn’t it rain, children,
Didn’t it rain, children,
Didn’t it rain! (Peters: 267).

The implication of judgment is unmistakable. Including this text in his collection, *Lyrics of the Afro-American Spiritual*, Erskine Peters contextualizes the song in African enslavement and argues, “The lyrics insist that slavery is not the end of things. The end of things will be the meting out of justice – retribution” (263). Jackson extends this notion for African Americans in the twentieth century and demonstrates how songs that were “learned in the womb” were recast to reflect contemporary tragedy.

¹⁶ In making this statement, I reference the Gospel song “Lord, Don’t Move My Mountain” whose lines, “Lord, don’t move my mountain/But give me the strength to climb” demonstrates the cultural sentiment of the divinely inspired spirit of struggle, survival, and stoicism in African American communities.

[31] Jackson's "Didn't It Rain" has a fast-paced melody that compliments the power of her contralto voice. The recording exhibits African aesthetic features of call and response, complex rhythms, existentialism, and emotional primacy. First, the call and response pattern is evident throughout the recording. Her enunciations, in effect, call for confirmation of historical narrative. Following the first verse, she asks,

Didn't it?
Didn't it?

In a live performance this question would elicit responses of concurrence in the forms of "amens" and "hallelujahs." Call and response substantiates the relationship between Jackson and her listeners; both as Christians share knowledge of the biblical flood narrative and as witnesses, they share the collective memory of the 1927 flood. While the recording is not meant to rejoice in the terror of the event, the up-tempo arrangement celebrates the flood as justified and solicits movement for spiritual intensity and praise. Indeed at one point a single handclap, probably Jackson's, is heard on top of the musical instruments. Jackson amplifies the biblical text with an existentialist concept of the flood circumstances.

Rain forty days, forty nights without stopin'
Noah was caught when the rain stop droppin'
Knock at the window, knock at the door,
Holler, "Brother Norah [sic] can't you take on more."

This imaginative narrative makes the flood real for contemporary listeners. It transfers the flood from the realm of the abstract into the more concrete realm of human action and vernacular speech, thereby recalling the more recent 1927 flood experience. Most significantly, Jackson mixes past and present tenses and conflates the known biblical narrative with the unknown African American recent past and present circumstance. After verses that expound on the biblical flood of the past, Jackson sings in a lower pitch,

Just listen to rain,
Just listen how it raining,
All day and all night.
All night and all day.

Once again, the existential is palpable. She recognizes the day-to-day existence of her audience and demands they do the same. Changing to the present tense, she uses the scriptural past to indicate the American present and unending storm of social injustice.

[32] The recording follows the pattern of analogical reasoning found in traditional Black folk sermons. Gary Layne Hatch observes the rules of inductive and deductive logic are too restrictive; thus, "The appeals to reason in Black folk sermons are embedded in the narratives, examples, comparisons, and biblical references chosen by the preacher. These narratives establish a series of relationships that appeal to the intellect and imagination as well as to the emotions" (228). The relationships between Jackson and the listeners as well as the Great Flood and the 1927 flood are implicitly established. As a religious text, this Gospel song draws parallels between the faithful Noah and contemporary believers, and the unfaithful and contemporary non-believers. As a liberation text, "Didn't It Rain" correlates the just Noah and victims of injustice, and the unjust and contemporary perpetrators of

injustice.¹⁷ Listeners familiar with analogical reasoning of Black folk preaching would recognize these relationships in “Didn’t It Rain.” That the song does not explicitly reference the 1927 flood does not negate my argument. Rather it is indicative of the multivalenced quality of liberation texts in Spirituals and the Black folk sermon tradition.

[33] With “Didn’t It Rain” Jackson “preaches” a “sermon” that recalls injustice but promises justice and places the 1927 flood in the apocalyptic narrative, but an apocalyptic narrative with a difference. If as O’Meally claims Blues used the flood as a metaphor for the greater despair of life, then this Gospel song used the biblical flood as a metaphor for the calamity of the Mississippi River flood, which then represented the degradation of spiritual as well as physical existence. However, this metaphor adds a dimension that the Blues lack; notably, the apocalyptic narrative of sin, retribution, and destruction. The apocalypse is generally understood in Judeo-Christian texts as the prophetic destruction of the world. Lee Quinby demonstrates apocalyptic thought historically has dominated American political, artistic, technological, and social rhetoric and action. Quinby believes, “Decision-making suffers when it takes apocalyptic form” (162), and apocalypticism fosters inaction, violence, hatred, and oppression. On the whole, I am inclined to agree with Quinby; however, apocalyptic visions do not have to be so restrictive and absolute. Then too, in either a linear or cyclical worldview, injustice has to be addressed and judged. For African Americans facing both the historical and empirical reality of oppression in America, apocalyptic narratives sustain faith in a future devoid of injustice and discrimination. Apocalyptic narratives are embedded in African American culture, and therefore are a “language of culture.” Lotman and Uspensky find:

In order for any historical event to be placed in a specific category, it must first of all be acknowledged as existing; that is, it must be identified with a specific element in the language of the organization which is committing it to memory. Then it has to be evaluated according to all the hierarchic ties of that language. This means that it will be recorded; that is, it will become an element of the text of memory, an element of culture. The implanting of a fact into the collective memory, then is like a translation from one language into another – in this case, into the “language of culture” (214).

By using the apocalyptic narrative of the biblical flood, Jackson commits the 1927 flood to cultural memory.

[34] In contrast to the apocalyptic narrative of certain death that inspires stasis and resignation, Jackson’s narrative promises justice that commands social and personal change. Jackson’s apocalypse parallels womanist apocalyptic vision that “demands a cold hard womanist stare at suffering[,] rejects its inevitability and chooses life over extinction” (Townes: 122). Womanist apocalyptic vision holds the apocalypse and eschatology in tension. More than concerned with a prophecy of destruction and death, “For womanists,

¹⁷ The story of the flood in the Bible relates God’s dissatisfaction with humans and decision to destroy the world. However, Noah found grace in the eyes of God because he was a just man (Genesis 6:8-9). In my experience growing up attending Black Baptist and Sanctified churches, this point was constantly made. Thus there is no reason not to assume that Jackson’s listeners would at least be familiar with this idea.

eschatology does not have to do with the 'last things' or 'end time' in any far off, abstract, otherworldly sense. Rather, eschatological hope and envisionment have to do with the daily moment-by-moment business of living" (Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher: 286). The existential element of "Didn't It Rain" falls in line with this vision. While the lyrics point to past flooding, Jackson implores listeners to consider present hardship as analogous to the past. Furthermore, Jackson's "Didn't It Rain" calls for critical and reflexive evaluation of personal actions. Classifying "Didn't It Rain" as lyrics of judgment and reckoning, Peters contends songs of this order express the belief that "each individual must stand ready to make his own personal and moral account before the bar of judgment" (263). Womanist spirituality is self-reflective and critical. "It cannot assume the universal in considering the particular – however, empirically real it may be – if there has been no critical reflection on the scope of praxis utilized" (Townes: 122). Jackson's rendition requires listeners consider their spiritual and moral affairs. Although she warns of justice and retribution, there is opportunity for human agents of change in the current moment.

[35] African American experience of the Mississippi River flood of 1927 became just one instance in the series of inequities African Americans have experienced in America. African Americans remembered this tragedy in written and oral traditions. The Blues philosophy of survival through detachment made the devastation bearable for some. Writing about Blues, James Baldwin asserted:

[T]here's always something funny – there's always something a little funny in all our disasters, if one can face the disaster. So that it's this passionate detachment, this inwardness coupled with outwardness, this ability to know that, All right it's a mess, and you can't do anything about it . . . so, well, you have to do something about it. You can't stay there, you can't drop dead, you have to give up, but all right, OK, as Bessie [Smith] said: "Picked up my bag, baby, and I tried again." This made life, however horrible that life was bearable for her. It's what makes life bearable for any person, because every person, everybody born, from the time he's found out about people until the whole thing is over is certain of one thing: he is going to suffer. There is no way not to suffer (132).

For others, Gospel songs provided a different philosophy for endurance and sustenance. As opposed to dealing with tragedy through detachment and humor, Gospel songs are serious and intensely personal even as they point to an alternative perspective on circumstances. Rather than passively accept suffering and its inevitability, they place it in religious context that inspires action, change in personal and moral conduct.

[36] Out of the mouths of Gospel women like Mahalia Jackson, Bessie Johnson, and Ernestine Washington, this philosophy gained potency. The power of voice coupled with multivalenced lyrics and performative practice produced an oral discourse that impelled spiritual and social activism. For women who experienced multiple marginalizations, Gospel's oral discourse challenged hegemony and empowered spiritually, in local communities and, through technology, the wider society. The potency of this oral discourse is contingent on the aural. Through recordings and live performances, Gospel women

located a space in which they could appropriate biblical discourse to examine contemporary America and posit avenues to affect spiritual and material change.

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