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FROM TESTIMONIES TO ARTIFACTS

The musical capacity of the negro race has been recognized for so many years that it is hard to explain why no systematic effort has hitherto been made to collect and preserve their melodies.

(William Frances Allen, 1867)

Often in the starlit evening . . . [I] have silently approached some glimmering fire, round which the dusky figures moved in the rhythmical barbaric dance the negroes call a “shout,” chanting, often harshly, but always in the most perfect time some monstrous refrain. Writing down in the darkness, as I best could,—perhaps with my hand in the safe covert of my pocket,—the words of the song, I have afterwards carried it to my tent, like some captured bird or insect, and then, after examination, put it by.

(Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1870)

ON APRIL 14, 1861, the long-smoldering antagonisms between the North and South finally broke out into war. Following the surrender of Fort Sumter to the Confederate Army, the North, in one of its first military responses, used the Union’s combined army and navy force to annex Port Royal, a major sea island off the coast of South Carolina. Port Royal and environs gave the North a strategic foothold between the major Atlantic ports of the Confederacy. A month after the fall of Fort Sumter, the first wave of former slaves crossed Union lines at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, on the Chesapeake Bay. Union Army officials at Fortress Monroe began the policy of refusing to return refugee slaves to their southern owners, calling them “contraband of war.” As refugee numbers grew, volunteer groups from the North responded by mobilizing aid, and this philanthropic endeavor expanded rapidly in the early war years. Through these efforts, the Port Royal experiment, the first major program of federally supported Reconstruction in the South, was launched.¹ A battery of military and volunteer philanthropic personnel descended upon the recently freed slaves, zealously exercising for the first time their chance to aid those black subjects who had been up to now only literary voices, images, and representations within the cultural

arsenal of the North's antislavery propaganda. In the shadow of a major military occupational force, volunteers established a fledgling infrastructure of new institutions. Waves of teachers and ministers—some professional appointees, many exuberant volunteers—convened to operate schools and churches. Managerial teams worked to rekindle the domestic economies of the abandoned plantations. It was in this context of military occupation that northerners with distinct cultural interests in blacks were given the opportunity to pursue the Negro spiritual.

Northerners approached the recently freed blacks with a mixture of benevolent patronage and romantic zeal. And in the blended interests of ethnosympathy and ethnotourism, these visitors considered hearing blacks sing a spiritual an event not to be missed. As William Allen put it, their exposure to former slaves had sparked a "fresh interest" in slave songs. In this early phase of the war, black religious singing took on new cultural gravity. In his own account of his involvement in collecting black songs, Allen noted how the "agents of this mission were not long in discovering the rich vein of music that existed in these half-barbarous people." For visiting northerners, "there was nothing that seemed better worth their while than to see a 'shout' or hear the 'people' sing their 'spirichils.'"2

Black song making, which had hitherto been entirely an *oral* cultural form, was on the verge of being transformed into literary representation. The stage was set for the spiritual to surface as a new and distinct cultural discovery. Soon Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William Allen, and others would bring the spiritual into print, and launch black music on a new cultural trajectory. It was first viewed as a social and political testimony, but then rather quickly it was increasingly considered as a modern scientific artifact, a specimen fit for capture by the spreading nets of an emergent ethnoscience.

To assess the appropriation of black music by northern intellectuals requires that we examine important cultural developments that had little to do with black music, but that impacted the emerging forms of interpreting it. This inquiry takes us away from black music making in order to assess how new modes of cultural reception were repositioning it. This analytic route enables us to appreciate the productive effects of ethnosympathy upon this sphere of black expressivity. Though the new modes of interest in reception of and appropriation of black music were never able to fully annex black music, they nonetheless inaugurated a new cultural logic that informed and shaped the discovery, recognition, and assessment of black song making, situating it within the newly emerging ethnoscientific imagination.

Of the cultural forces in operation, new religious impulses deserve to be highlighted. As I shall argue, the ministerial activism associated with

the more radical currents of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism appear to have been determinant. Radical Unitarianism and Transcendentalism were crucial in cultivating the growth of northern abolitionism and in launching important criticisms of modern society. As I shall argue, Unitarianism and Transcendentalism also played major roles in shaping the protoethnographic interests that Higginson, Allen, and others brought to the new cultural “field.” Higginson’s field was his opportunity to live with and command former slaves in Union Army uniform. Allen and others found their field in the opportunity afforded by the North’s military incursions into the South, which enabled them to collect the spirituals. Higginson’s observations in particular can be situated in relation to significant theological, intellectual, and cultural currents that were central to the ideological forms of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. My excursion into shifting religious ideologies allows us to assess key developments that spawned theological activism within Unitarianism, and to trace how these in turn shaped social criticisms of modern society that arose from the social crises mapped at the critical edges of Protestantism. More importantly, it allows us to conceptualize abolitionism as a complex cultural conjuncture that contained ideological and religious impulses that further fueled the discovery-oriented cultural turn to the racial margins. Both Unitarianism and Transcendentalism were minority sects within the rapidly changing post-Calvinist Protestantism. Yet they were crucial in the development of the religious orientations of Higginson, Allen, and other figures who launched the enterprise of collecting black spirituals. These theological and philosophical orientations reflected disenchantment with capitalism and market society, and this disenchantment paved the way for the new ethnosympathy that informed the reception of black religious singing.

Contextualizing the interplay of romanticism and disenchantment that operated at the fringes of radical abolitionism allows us to broaden and develop further the argument that the manner in which the cultural discovery of the spiritual developed also eclipsed an aspect of black voicing that the writers of the slave narratives had tried to bring out. In their benevolent but narrow approach to black music, and in their unmitigated desire to overcode it primarily within a restricted religious framework, the critical abolitionists were able to use black music as a conduit to express their own disenchantment with market society. The cultural intellectuals who had emerged as the most sympathetic to the abolitionist movement and who displayed the most interest in the lives and expressive dimensions of slaves edified black culture for its preferred musical virtues. But in doing so they exacted a cost by muting the potential black public sphere and the larger dialogue over the fate of black Americans within civil society. In the process, blacks could be easily envisioned and heard

as spiritual performers (and later as “folk” culture performers and producers) but not as speakers and writers concerned with the larger American dilemma involving the transformation of American institutions within civil society. What might have flourished was instead truncated.³

In understanding their turn away from politics and toward culture and how they championed the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of black song making, we can see how radical northerners drew upon the new ethnosympathy in ways that enabled them to frame the problem of race within American civil society in a relatively safe manner, one that merged cultural benevolence with sociocultural managerialism. In the process, the new interpretation failed on one front while it succeeded on another. It greatly expanded the recognition of and receptivity toward black culture. But it also failed to entail any serious commitment to institutional transformations beyond the juridico-legal abolition of slavery. Rather, the new culturalism continued to promote what I referred to earlier as *disengaged cultural engagement* (see chapter 1). On one hand, it created an ever-expanding opening for cultural study. On the other, it encouraged a mode of social and political enclosure; black expressivity was screened, and the “spiritual” forms that were heard engendered intrigued study as they were admitted into a new *cultural-interpretive reservation*. In essence, the new interest in black culture was characterized by limited recognition.

I use the term *reservation* in two of its possible meanings—as a form of hesitation and as an enclosing tactic. In the first case, the meaning of reservation involves limits upon reception and interpretation that proceed hand in glove with preferences and predispositions. In the development being discussed here, the politics of reception demonstrated reservations; romantic and sentimental perspectives appear unable to accommodate social, political, and economic discourses, particularly those associated with transforming the fate of former slaves (e.g., Reconstruction and substantial egalitarianism). In the second case, the notion of a reservation invokes a cultural and even institutional parallel to the racial reservations that were being constructed and maintained for Native Americans. Native Americans, unlike slaves, were always defined as outside the polity, and beyond the borders of cultural and economic spheres. Slaves, however, were chattel, a status that obviated total exclusion; slaves were economic property and politically subordinated within American civil society. The option to pursue biological exclusion for slaves through “colonization” (the returning slaves to Africa) was considered by some abolitionists during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, but free black opposition was intense, and northern radical abolitionists rejected the idea. Of course, the entire economy of the South would have been in jeopardy had such steps actually been taken. Thus,

the process of black incorporation after slavery took place economically through the resurgent feudalism of sharecropping and debt peonage in the South and through bottom-entry positions of wage labor in the North.

The cultural turn, however, involved more than the creation of a symbolic reservation that admitted black expressivity through the religiously framed windows of selective reception. In mapping black song making, the new cultural intellectuals were taking the first modern steps toward installing the study of *subcultures* in the American context. Fronted by a critical and humanistically oriented cultural bourgeoisie, the new enclosure welcomed the spiritual while it expanded and intensified the benevolent interest in black culture. This interest took place within a small domain of American society, but one that had important knowledge-forming repercussions. Other possibilities of incorporating blacks—options that might have matched this ostensibly benevolent gesture, but within economic and political arenas—were simultaneously stiff-armed and held in abeyance.

As we shall see, an examination of some of the ideological currents behind Unitarianism and Transcendentalism helps bring into focus just how Thomas Wentworth Higginson—a member of New England’s “natural aristocracy,” a Harvard-educated minister, and a person with long and deep social ties to some of the most influential and important radicals, reformers, and intellectual luminaries in the North—could come to hear and to collect those “words of the song” that could be “carried . . . to [his] tent, like some captured bird or insect.” We leave slavery and the spiritual in order to fathom the intellectual reorientations that were beginning to remap the meaning of slavery and slave expressions, and to assess some key dimensions of the discovery process and the cultural logic that operated within a mode of disengaged engagement.

Higginson and Allen are exceptional individuals to consider because of their central role in publishing and providing qualitatively new frameworks for interpreting black song making. Drawing upon the larger trope of natural history, Higginson, I argue, translated the already burgeoning development of ethnosympathy into a more reflexive relationship with black culture through what I call *protoethnography*. This he accomplished through his novel fieldwork. Allen, however, took the protoethnographic incursion a step further by subjecting black musical specimens to a new scientific taxonomy. What these two key interpreters accomplished in the conjuncture was a synthesis of emergent sensibilities. They helped install a dialogue that blended romanticism with the scientific quests into the cultural practices at the racial margins. In the process, black music continued to serve as testimony to lived lives, but it was also objectified and reclassified by the new scientific interest in cultural arti-

facts. By century's end, the emphasis upon the more scientific mode of interpretation took on greater institutional weight. Hence, the larger problem can be partially grasped as a shift from testimonies to artifacts.

First Transcriptions

When social crises rupture the normative order, one result is the compression of elaborate and complex cultural discourses into simpler and more urgent forms. The coming of the Civil War appears to have had such an effect upon the awareness, perception, and receptivity of black religious song making. War intensified the quest for additional cultural and ideological weapons against the evil of slavery. What better weapon against slavery than the spiritual, the quintessential expression of black Christians shackled by southern slaveholders?

As Dena Epstein points out, it was at Fortress Monroe where events led to the publication of the first Negro spiritual. The incident is worth noting because it illustrates the initial ties that the discovery process had to the great moral crisis of slavery and war. And as the war proceeded, so too did the discovery of the spiritual. When the Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood was sent by the Young Men's Christian Association of New York to aid the destitute contrabands at Fortress Monroe, he did not go with the intent to hear black music.⁴ But he and many others did hear singing throughout the tent camps that sheltered the former slaves. As an incidental listener, Lockwood was deeply moved and impressed by a particular song he first heard on September 1, 1861. He transcribed the song and sent it along with a letter to the secretary of the YMCA, who, in turn, sent it and his own accompanying letter to the *New York Tribune*. The *Tribune* printed the lyrics, making "Go Down, Moses" the first publication of the complete text of a Negro spiritual.⁵ The important abolitionist publication the *Anti-Slavery Standard* reprinted the song, and the American Missionary Association, which had sponsored Lockwood's excursion to Fortress Monroe, also offered the song with printed music for sale—"a sweet melody. Price 25 cents."⁶ By March 1862 "Go Down, Moses" was available for purchase as sheet music through the Anti-Slavery Office in Philadelphia. The event appears to have stimulated the interests of others in acquiring the texts of spirituals.

The nascent commodification of the spiritual that is evident in these first publications is important in its own right.⁷ What I want to highlight, however, is that "Go Down, Moses" was initially received as a song that testified unequivocally to the spiritual plight of the contrabands. It likened the slaves to the children of Israel, and it spoke of their deliverance from bondage. It was heard first and foremost as an *antislavery* song, and

its reception marked an interpretive desire to connect song and social circumstance—the very connection between existence and social structure that Frederick Douglass had tried to launch sixteen years earlier.

Yet, it appears that soon after the Negro spiritual had been discovered as an indisputable testimony to slavery, a shift in interest emerged. This shift severed the spiritual from slavery, the social context in which it was produced. The result was that the initial moral connections that the spiritual had with slavery, the social and political tensions that had given the spiritual its initial grammar, withered by the late 1860s. By the time Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William Allen, and other affiliated black culture hunters arranged to print their accounts of black music, the specter of slavery had lost its framing and interpretive power; it was no longer part of the interpretive gestalt. How and why did this happen? If slavery was no longer a salient factor, what kind of interpretive framework was emerging? How might we understand the decontextualizing and recontextualizing developments in which the spiritual was being interpreted?

It could be argued that slavery had ended by the time Higginson and Allen were preparing their works for publication, and thus there was no compelling reason to view the spirituals through an antislavery lens. But this does not account for Higginson's frameworks, which were composed as journal entries during the war when slavery was still in operation. The shift was an interpretive one, and it appears to have moved quickly from one terrain of moral and social crisis to another—from a highly focused concern with slavery to a more nebulously refracted concern with modernity (and in the process it was becoming tied to a modern knowledge of cultural interpretation). This shift also marked the departure from the issues raised by Frederick Douglass; he had used the songs of sorrow explicitly to open a larger discourse on not just the testimonies of inner authenticity or on the evils of slavery, but also on the hopes and aspirations of blacks seeking an equitable inclusion in civil society. But in their pursuit of the spiritual, the abolitionists transformed the cultural ground upon which it was to be understood. Black song making became a site that hosted two general cultural fronts: it helped critical abolitionists to stage their anxieties of social transformations that were altering older modes of living (for both slaves as well as for the new pathos-oriented cultural bourgeoisie), and it hosted the new activities of a modern, ethnosympathetic mode of cultural interpretation. Abolitionists continued to hear religious song making as the sign of the civilizing process; they were, after all, clamoring to champion the latter. They operationalized this older recognition by reinforcing religious singing and repressing black noise, those forms of music that fell beyond recognized religious categories and that lacked the proper, or at least approximate, fit against the template of Protestant hymnology.

In essence (and perhaps in effect), the cultural turn developed in a peculiar direction, one that asked blacks to sing rather than to write about, talk about, or dream out loud their desire to open further the doors of Reconstruction and to probe the pressures that were pushing this door closed. The ending of slavery and the new benevolent reception authorized by a rather limited aesthetic seemed to be concession enough. What is striking about the new culturalism—which begins with the interest in the spiritual and becomes increasingly elaborated with the creation of professional folklore—is its reticence if not its incapacity to include and embrace any additional dialogue that might imagine alternatives to postslavery racial subordination. As I shall discuss here and in the next chapter, the new culturalism’s withdrawal from the politics out of which it developed was coupled with the professionalization of cultural analysis.

Renegade Ministers in the Abolitionist Conjuncture

It makes sense to speak of an “abolitionist conjuncture” as a social figuration, one shaped by a number of developments that merge, make possible, and nurture the fledgling cultural turn toward the discovery of blacks as having practices worth fathoming. I have already noted several lines of development that stem from the culture of slavery: the emergence and rationalization of a critical selfhood for slaves, rooted partially in the external attribution of and the internal expansion of soul and subjecthood made possible by the religious franchise; the emergence of the slave narratives as symptomatic of a deeper crisis within religion and American society; and the reception of the spiritual as the preferred cultural practice—the “good culture” among black cultural goods—among slaves. As noted earlier, the slave narratives were certainly deeply grooved voicings within the *racialized* framework of western cultural and political crises. But they were more than a peculiar kind of blackspcak, more than a racial discourse. They spoke of, to, and from the core ideology of Christendom and to the much broader political ideologies of the Enlightenment as well. The cultural origins of the narratives and their sensibilities went deep into the marrow of political and ideological configurations, into the fateful marriage between New World Protestantism and American slavery. This, too, could be said about the cultural origins and sensibilities of their white radical abolitionist counterparts, who found the slave narratives and the Negro spiritual so useful in launching their social critique of an errant society.

Radical abolitionists also had ideological roots that linked them to a Jeffersonian pastoralism represented in the idealized, independent, and

autonomous yeoman-farmer. This gentry class was, by the mid-nineteenth century, increasingly caught in the displacing forces of industrialization—and losing cultural ground.⁸ The class erosion that members of the northern clergy were beginning to face in the early-eighteenth century had intensified by the early-nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the revolutionary war with England, New England Congregational ministers were already concerned about their social place. As Harry Stout argues, “For New England’s clergy, the most frightening aspect of the internal revolution accompanying independence from England was a loss of mastery.” At the end of the revolution, Congregational ministers remained the dominant voice in public opinion throughout New England and enjoyed state support, but their hold was precarious. “Belatedly they saw themselves threatened by other speakers in New England and in other ‘states’ who held very different beliefs about the compatibility of established religion and republican ideology.” In the middle states no other established denominational structure possessed the kind of hegemony enjoyed by northern Congregationalists. In the South, the colonial Anglican Church remained hegemonic, but its power had been compromised because of its British loyalism during the revolution. In neither region was there a group of clergymen “even remotely comparable to the Congregational clergy in numbers, social prestige, education, and the ability to dominate public speech in local settings.” Congregationalism’s potential expansion however was in the process of being checked by the movement toward church-state disestablishment. “Other, more powerful voices,” Stout argues, “dominated in these regions and called for a complete separation of church and state. Through these cries for the disestablishment of religion, New England’s ministers glimpsed a new social system that would deprive them of the exalted position they had hoped to preserve in first counseling resistance and revolution.”⁹

As noted earlier, what followed in the cultural field of struggles was the first Great Awakening, in which the new post-Calvinist and post-Congregationalist Protestant sects emerged to instantiate a major wave of post-revolutionary religious populism; as we saw, this had great import for slaves. As they expanded into the middle-state regions hitherto uncaptured by Congregationalism, Baptists and Methodists targeted the social margins where rural, uneducated whites could be proselytized. And Baptists and Methodists also endorsed (unevenly and not without wrenching internal debate) the view that blacks too ought to be proselytized, thus spurring the tepid commitment of owners and overseers to extend the religious franchise.

Here lies one crucial rub in the context of abolitionism and the sectarian struggles over the fragmented cultural field of midcentury Protestantism: the cultural work carried out by the Methodists and Baptists who

were cultivating the rise of black Christianity in the South was politically harvested by the radical northern Unitarians. As northerners embraced the renegade black Christian abolitionists who were themselves the products of proselytization, and who had challenged the South's failure to embody the core principles of religious teachings, they skewed their emphasis toward particular black cultural expressions. The result was a mode of cultural reception conflated with their cultural projections—they preferred to hear a spiritualized Negro who, to the convenience of northerners, appeared to prefer to sing Negro spirituals. With such cultural-interpretive velocity behind them, these songs demanded to be heard with the new and deep ethos of pathos. This new hearing took on such urgency because it held tremendous cultural tension.

While Methodists and Baptists worked the largely neglected lower-and middle-class populations on the frontier, Unitarians in the Northeast were formulating their own social critique. Influenced by Enlightenment idealism, both Unitarianism and Transcendentalism promoted, at least at their radical edges, a quest for a sense of selfhood that was not reducible to modern market society as well as a search for social perfection, and these came with a critique of American society and a growing apprehensiveness toward capitalist modernity. The liberal Protestantism that emerged out of the socially oriented strains of Unitarianism proved to be crucial in the abolitionist conjuncture.

Unitarianism's cultural significance was greatly expanded in 1805 when Henry Ware was appointed as Hollis Professor of Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School. (A little more than half century later, two of his grandchildren, William Frances Allen and Charles Pickard Ware, along with Lucy McKim Garrison, who married the third son of William Lloyd Garrison, would compile and publish *Slave Songs of the United States*.)¹⁰ With Ware's appointment, the Divinity School passed into Unitarian control. The institutional ascendancy of Unitarianism, however, was not without opposition, and departing religious intellectuals formed the Andover Theological Seminary. Unitarianism served as the primary font of "moral philosophy" taught at Harvard during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although Unitarianism was a minority plank within American Protestantism, its importance, as Daniel Howe points out, was in its relationship to the training of American cultural elites.¹¹

Unitarian theology articulated some of the more elaborate criticisms of market society, and it played a major role in the rise of critical antislavery ideology in the North. As early as the 1820s, Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing had begun to address the difficulties faced by wage workers under the growth of industrialization, challenging in the process the larger quietism of established Protestant churches. Channing's socially engaged theology focused primarily on the individual, but his con-

cerns expanded the moral dialogue on the plight of the “laboring classes.”¹² Poorhouses were proliferating on the eve of disestablishment. As Walter Trattner has pointed out, “In 1824 Massachusetts had eighty three almshouses; fifteen years later the number had increased to one hundred eight, and by 1860 the total had risen to two hundred nineteen.”¹³ Channing insisted that there were direct links between factory expansion and pauperism. This put Unitarianism in general, and Channing in particular, in the forefront of the new strain within Protestant theology that argued that reform of the individual was not enough to bring about a better society. Orestes Brownson, another Unitarian minister, stressed that “the perfection of the social state” was necessary in order to obtain individual perfection.¹⁴ At the edges of Unitarianism, the importance of society had begun to precede the sanctity of the individual.¹⁵

A younger generation of aspiring Unitarian ministers who studied at the Harvard Divinity School during the 1830s and 1840s were part of the movement to reconcile the growing pressure of the new industrial society with the new religious impulse for social engagement. The pulpit had traditionally been the societal site for collective critical moral reflection. But by the 1830s the established ministerial public sphere was being outstripped by the growth of critical public politics and discourses associated with social movements. As abolitionism and reformism ascended in social importance, the pulpit began to lose some of its traditional grip upon moral issues and had to compete with emerging social movements, particularly those that focused on abolitionism, working-class advocacy, and women’s rights. Socially concerned ministers were increasingly compelled to go to the people—to the populist lyceums, the political gatherings, the public assemblies that marked fledgling social movements—rather than wait for them to clamor for the limited peripheral space beyond the pay-per-pew seating held for church members who supported their ministers.

Important changes in the status of the ministry membership itself also propelled clergymen to engage new publics beyond church congregations. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century ministers experienced declining rates of tenure. By the 1830s and 1840s the effects of professional status erosion were being felt. The average tenure of a minister in New Hampshire in 1790 was thirty years. This declined to twenty-five years in 1804. By the late 1830s, the average stay with a congregation had shrunk to a short four to eight years.¹⁶ The shortening of tenure, however, did not signal an erosion of religious practice—on the contrary, the field of religion was actually expanding, but along lines of fragmentation, competition, and multid denominational segmentation (a classic example of what Emile Durkheim called “moral density” and the resultant

“division of—in this case, moral—labor”).¹⁷ As a field in great flux, religion became mobile, contentious, and multicultural; let us remember that the second Great Awakening was occurring at this time, elevating emotional intensity as an external sign of a spiritual awakening that was linked to antiinstitutionalism.

To the chagrin of Unitarian traditionalists, Unitarianism was in the process of producing renegade clergy who were not tied to pulpits and who took part in the leadership of new ideologies and social movements. A further rupture within Unitarian orthodoxy emerged when the young minister Ralph Waldo Emerson presented an alternative theological view of miracles. Emerson, who trained at the Harvard Divinity School, argued against the established view which held that miracles were the manifestations or “performances” of rare interventions from God. It was not the divine, rare miracles that ought to really matter, he insisted, but rather those miracles of a common daily “Nature” in which one’s life was a part. Emerson’s notion of nature was certainly theologically inspired, but his turn to nature earned him the brand of “infidel” by church conservatives.¹⁸ More important, Emerson’s argument with the interpretive schemas of Unitarian belief was an indication of the new desire for a deep value orientation that was not shackled by the limits of traditional Christian theology. Emerson also drew ideas from romanticism, Indian philosophy, and eastern religion (Orientalism). He was not alone in his attraction to the “Orient”; his interests were representative of a significant but limited intellectual formation among a small number who kindled theosophic ideas outside of denominationally sanctioned Christian frameworks.

Emerson’s particular contribution to the larger blend of ideas may be his impact upon the American notion of radical individualism, or “self-reliance.”¹⁹ It is, however, the Emersonian turn to nature that I wish to flag, for it contained a theory as well as an incipient notion of a way to analyze culture that merged romanticism with natural history. As Bruce Mazlish notes, “Natural History” was “quite the rage in mid-nineteenth-century England. On the eve of the Darwinian revolution, it was still the clergyman’s pursuit and the amateur’s hobby. ‘Collections’ of sea shells, beetles, birds, and so forth were to be found everywhere, even in poor people’s houses. Such collections joined the city to the country. On a more professional level, they represented the classifying stage of biological science, about to become evolutionary in nature.”²⁰ Emerson, too, had become acquainted with natural history. After viewing the cabinets of natural history in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, Emerson declared, “I will be a naturalist.” According to Mazlish, “By this he meant a naturalist of the soul, and his first public lectures on his return to America were

on ‘The Use of Natural History,’ where he declared, ‘It is in my judgment the greatest office of natural science (and one which is as yet only begun to be discharged) to explain man to himself.’”²¹

Emerson’s turn toward nature was motivated not by the pressures of the new scientific consciousness. Rather, it was driven by a theophilosophical radicalism, which included a distinct emancipatory interest. In his essay “Nature,” which he published in 1836, he wrote, “Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us.”²² The larger romantic discovery of nature as a source of truth—which led to the inner (psychocultural) turn to the nature of the discoverable authentic self—was a key theme in the Transcendentalist revolt against theological traditionalism. Nature offered emancipation, but to explain this natural virtue—to “explain man to himself”—required language. In search of an axiom, Emerson sketched a theory of nature and its relationship to language:

Language is a third use which Nature subserves to man. Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double, and threefold degree.

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.²³

This theory of language, which is more specifically a theory of transcendental emancipation *into* and *through* nature, implied a modern theological redefinition and reappropriation of nature in which the latter was no longer a source of trouble, a danger to be conquered, or a material realm devoid of spirit as it was for Calvinism. Contrary to its place in Calvinism, nature was reclassified as intrinsically good. Interestingly, the young Marx, who was in the process of drawing upon and critiquing Fourier, Bauer, and other Christian socialists, would say something similar in less than a decade in his provocative passages on the ontology of human nature as “species being.”²⁴

For Emerson, to study words, signs, and symbols was to read toward the source of all signs: nature. This is one major way in which romantic primitivism shares in a struggle for truth as *natural fact*, and is one of the modern recipes for conjuring authenticity through uncovering it historically or recovering it in the present. “As we go back in history,” Emerson argued, “language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols.”²⁵ As I shall discuss below, this particular kind of theory of nature, as truth to be accessed through *expressivity*, is kindred to the underlying epistemology that shaped the less-articulate cultural gropings of Higginson and Allen, and many of the less-reflexive discoverers of the Negro spiritual who carried out this Unitarian-Transcendentalist interpretive impulse as

they called on the cultural and racial margins to kindly yield the truths of a nonalienated naturalism that could be used to deal with the problems created by an errant market society.

Henry David Thoreau, another Harvard Divinity School student, turned to nature as well. And his turn was away from not just the pulpit and popular lyceums, but from virtually anything remotely organized or institutionalized. His retreat from civil society to nature was a solitary one (which he did share through his writings and occasional public lectures); such retreat was necessary in order to transcend the inherited fetters of society if one was to achieve a unity with one's consciousness in (and of) nature. Thoreau vehemently rejected market society for its rapacious domination toward nature, and its capacity (following Reverend Channing) to reduce workers to the "wage slaves" that the new business culture seemed to require. In this regard, his concern with what modern society did to workers resonated with the emerging labor movement's deep anxieties over the possibility of "free" white workers slipping into slavelike conditions.²⁶

Such concern resonated with core Unitarian beliefs, such as the idea that the perfectibility of the soul ought to be linked to the social world through the perfectibility of society. Unitarianism and its critical-liberal offshoot, Transcendentalism, carried the concepts of perfectionism even further by insisting that individuals were compelled to transcend spiritual as well as social flaws. In being "fundamentally united in condemning formalism in religion and literature, Lockean 'sensationalism' in philosophy, and all that was inhuman or materialistic in the popular social morality,"²⁷ Transcendentalists supported the idea that the destruction of the oppressive aspects of the social order and the rearrangement of society could enable the individual and the social to blossom. Such a vision was radically reformist in spirit; it was, after all, first concerned with the spiritual realm. However, Transcendentalists, particularly those at the forefront of its philosophical helm, like Emerson and Thoreau, had strong individualistic and antiinstitutional orientations. They were not joiners of movements; they displayed a practiced disdain for organizations and cherished their sense of critical distance. Some tried to engender alternative collective strategies by which to live—such as the Associationists' Brook Farm. By and large, with regard to the sphere of formal politics and social institutions, Transcendentalists preferred disengagement.

The reformist impulse, which preceded and encircled many of the social and political issues during the middle of the nineteenth century and afterward, was powerful. As this impulse moved beyond the inner walls of the new religiously sanctioned solipsism of some hard-core Transcendentalists, it provided an ethos that was brought outward by its more socially oriented carriers into increasingly broader circles of civil society.

Indeed, when we trace the broader idea of self and social perfectibility—as it was manifested in radical evangelicalism, then taken up in the more institutionalized forms of the Baptist and Methodist denominations, and then elaborated by the critical Unitarian cultivation of the ties between the self and social change—we see how an orientation that was initially religious and limited to a primarily internal concept (the autonomous Christian self) was rationalized in progressively external directions, from the sacred to the secular, from inner spiritual crisis to institutional operations. In essence, the humanitarian reformist impulse was a movement—from soul to society, from theology to societal intervention. The modern notion of perfectibility of the self became a way of envisioning social structure.²⁸

Social perfectibility is of course a utopian ideal, but this sensibility helped spawn some important utopian experiments. Several decades before the outbreak of the Civil War, disenchanted Transcendentalists and Associationists had launched attempts to resist and reject the dominant culture. In an attempt to avoid the new *gesellschaft* by returning to *gemeinschaft*, the Associationists tried in the 1840s to carve out an alternative, autonomous, and rather immediate community in the social experiment of Brook Farm. Through Brook Farm, those who were attracted to Associationism sought to disengage from the dominant trends and ideologies in American society by exploring experimental modes of living.²⁹ It should be noted, however, that the Associationists did not see themselves as simply seeking spiritual renewal; their project was aimed at personal and social reform. Greatly influenced by the writings of Fourier, a central figure in early-nineteenth-century French social utopianism, the Associationists saw themselves in pursuit of secular renewal.³⁰ Established in 1840, the Associationists' Brook Farm lasted only seven years. It was more a symbol and symptom of disenchantment with the business ethic than it was a counterinstitutional strategy.

Nonetheless, the idea of perfectibility engendered a profoundly important form of social criticism aimed at industrial modernity. To the Transcendentalists and Associationists, the sense of spiritual bankruptcy and vacuousness that came with market society, the same dispirited ennui that Weber pointed to as one of the major cultural outcomes of the rationalization of Calvinism into bureaucratic capitalism, represented a major modern crisis. The Transcendentalist retreat from mainstream society was to avoid market society. In Perry Miller's words, Transcendentalism grounded a "revolt against the rationalism of their fathers." It also represented an attempt to found a "new religious expression in forms derived from romantic literature and from the philosophical idealism of Germany."³¹ This revolt amounted to "the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization." Transcendentalists

were “Protestant to the core,” but they fostered a “protest against what is customarily called the ‘Protestant Ethic’: they refuse to labor in a proper calling, conscientiously cultivate the arts of leisure, and strive to avoid making money.”³²

It was thus not so much antislavery sentiment that helped ground Transcendentalism as it was the growing disenchantment with market capitalism and its system of morality and ethics. In their neo-Rousseauian view, Transcendentalists saw modernity as threatening to drive a wedge between the individual (and, by extension, society) and a spiritualized notion of nature. Yet because of its antibusiness attitude, Transcendentalism proved quickly to be a crucial ally to the radical antislavery forces. Slavery was in itself morally repugnant, but it also carried tremendous significance for the most radical abolitionists, who saw the “peculiar institution” as the grand analogy to the tendencies of a runaway system of industrial servitude. Radical labor leaders in the North drew parallels to the “wage slavery” foisted upon them by the new modes of industrial labor.³³ Many sectors of organized labor in the North also feared the flood of black wage earners should slavery be dismantled. The slavery analogy was also central to the emergent concerns of women, who were attempting to secure political rights. The critiques of slavery applied to women, as well; like slaves, white women could not vote. Thus, their capacities for public representation were severely curtailed, and what political rights they had were negligible.³⁴

For the radical Unitarians and Transcendentalists, slavery as well as the coming of the machine in the garden were, from their different origins, enterprises that had been erroneously justified within a quasi-Christian ethos. Progress had long been cited as evidence of God’s approval of the entrepreneurial and utilitarian self (embodied, as Max Weber described so well, in the figure of Benjamin Franklin), and, by extension, of the nation’s religious virtue. But it was precisely this religious nexus, which blended an older traditionalism with the power of capitalism and industrialization, that Thoreau abhorred. Christian logic had produced a Christian nightmare: “Let us consider,” wrote Thoreau, “the way in which we spend our lives. This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once.”³⁵ As noted earlier, the Christian nightmare had already surfaced in the slave narratives.

While a significant contingent among disenchanting cultural bourgeoisie in the North had found slavery repulsive, many more among the ascending economic bourgeoisie, the new businessmen of manufacture and trade, were relatively indifferent to slavery. Many had investments in the South. As Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “though slaveholders are apt

to have a bad temper, and vicious politics,—a strong desire to keep the peace, and a good humor with them, is felt not only by the financial authorities in State street and Wall street, but also by the cotton-spinners, the freighter, the shoe-dealers, the cabinet-makers, the printers, the book-sellers, and by every description of northern salesmen.”³⁶ For these financial and market players, slavery was not initially an issue, but it became one once there was concerted effort to expand slavery westward in ways that might compromise northern economic hegemony over the larger economy.³⁷

The troubling connections between market society and slavery were of deep concern to Theodore Parker, one of the most popular and certainly most radical among Unitarian ministers of the 1840s. Parker’s engagement as a public intellectual is important because it is through Parker that our elliptical circuit through Unitarianism and Transcendentalism allows us to return to a deeper appreciation of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and how his engagement in some of the political struggles in the North helped prepare his cultural turn to the racial margins. Parker, who even as a religious radical was able to remain a denominational minister, straddled Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. He preached of the inner goodness of the individual trapped in a society that was increasingly governed by an emergent industrialism. By 1840 Parker’s ministerial activism and strong advocacy for reformist causes had brought him into increasingly antagonistic relations with mainstream Unitarians. Ostracized (though not removed) by establishment ministers, Parker took his sermons on the public lecture circuit and plied his activist theology of attacking slavery and industrial servitude. Parker’s sermons, which he delivered with intensity and inspiration, were considered events; they frequently drew several thousand audience members during his peak popularity.

Also in Parker’s congregation was William Lloyd Garrison, the leader of the most radical abolitionist group in the antebellum era.³⁸ Garrison and his fellow black and white abolitionist followers, who were able to emerge in the opportunity structure engendered by Protestant schisms, represented an important spin-off of the critical Christian disenchantment with both modern society in the North and slavery in the South. It was through his antislavery work that Garrison befriended Frederick Douglass (Garrison wrote an introduction to the 1845 publication of Douglass’s *Narrative*), who joined Garrison’s movement until Douglass decided to publish his own antislavery paper, the *North Star*.³⁹ Another member from Parker’s congregation was Franklin Sanborn, who later became the first president of the American Social Science Association, which formed in 1865.⁴⁰ Parker practiced what he preached. Along with Sanborn, Higginson, and three others, he helped form the “Secret Six” to provide financial and political support for the white abolitionist John

Brown. In 1859, Brown and fewer than fifty accomplices planned to incite a slave uprising. Their raid upon the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, failed, and Brown was hanged.⁴¹

Deep cultural currents cut into the larger socioreligious terrain in both the South and the North, currents that also flowed into the abolitionist conjuncture. Northern liberal Protestants attempted to move from an earlier position of wanting to perfect the soul, to that of perfecting civil society as well as souls. Similar developmental ground was covered with the rise of slave subjectivity within the contours of the religious franchise. For blacks, a critical subjectivity had emerged partly and inadvertently when they were bestowed with salvageable souls. Religion provided a cultural terrain that engendered profoundly important collective forms and stimulated the development of new practices, and these, in turn, expanded social subjectivities that culminated in the slave narratives as well as the Negro spirituals. Development in both cases emerged through those Christian teachings that had the most widespread *social* implications. Such principles included the notion of Christian individualism, of the self as free and equal to all others in the eyes of God, and the rejection of human subjection to unsanctified institutional authority. The desired transcendent social order embodied these core principles, which were consistent with Protestantism's deepest psychotheological assumptions of the sanctity of radical individualism. Nonetheless, the cultural work of the slave narratives and the cultural work taking shape on the critical fringes of Unitarian and Transcendentalist antimodernism spoke a kindred grammar within abolitionist conjuncture. It is not surprising that the slave narratives struck such a chord with Theodore Parker, who viewed them as containing the "original romance of Americans."⁴²

It is in this confluence of cultural, political, and economic developments that abolitionism emerged with its sprawling sensibility and many facets. Abolitionism was not merely an irruption of self-willed moral entrepreneurs who quite simply had the fate of enslaved blacks foremost in their hearts and who knew good ideas (abolition, free labor, and in some cases the emancipation of women) and a bad social system (slavery) when they saw them. Nor was the abolitionist conjuncture simply a restricted cultural affair in which slaves were being given—and struggling intensely to remake a broken—subjectivity and sense of place. The reconceptualization of social subjects and collective identities was actually much more widespread; it was part of a social configuration in which multiple and interlocking forces constituted a larger social, political, economic and cultural field that was taking the shape of humanitarian reformism. After all, reformism in general and abolitionism in particular were central to the struggles with which older institutions coped with the pressures of modernity. Reformism provided the social site where moral entrepre-

neurs fought to maintain as well as radically to alter institutions. Reformist battles were certainly concerned with philosophical, ideological, political, and religious ideals; and when translated into flesh and blood, reform pivoted necessarily upon distinct social subjects—slaves, women, wage laborers, the poor, youth, and the growing mosaic of white ethnic immigrants. Indeed, this panoply of emergent social subjects came to occupy the grammar of social talk.⁴³ But most pressing was the urgency surrounding the abolition of slavery.

Within the abolitionist conjuncture, the renegade ministers were inadvertently laying the ground for the new protoethnography. They had thematized the problems of modern society and opened the quest for authenticity. And in keeping with the important currents of Orientalism, the search pointed away from sites of industrial as well as western contamination. As I shall suggest, the fusion of naturalism and romanticism pointed the junior Transcendentalist Higginson toward the subjective culture of the black soldiers, but this would take shape only after he took the opportunity to command a black regiment of contrabands.

As former Unitarian ministers, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and William Frances Allen inherited the intellectual ferment created within Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Higginson, however, embodied more clearly the intellectual and ideological tensions that surfaced within these two cultural fronts. Though certainly a modern reformer, he represented the legacy of an older romanticism, which he connected to the retrieval and interpretation of black song making. And it is Higginson who, in his *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, actually wrote about black song making within the framework of what we today would recognize as the “participant observer” in the context of fieldwork. Allen and his fellow editors, on the other hand, were assemblers. And Allen, who wrote the important and lengthy introduction to *Slave Songs of the United States*, was much more the modern classifier. In comparison to Higginson’s poetic flair, Allen’s staid writing style fit the new scientific objectivism, and he pushed his and others’ observations toward a more modern mode of analytical description. Allen, too, was a retrievalist. Though he displayed little of the romanticism found in Higginson, he also carried out field work, and gathered the first large collection of black songs that included not just transcribed lyrics but also musical notation. The added dimension of musical notation was another feature that Allen and fellow editors of *Slave Songs* brought to the discovery enterprise; it reflected the coming protoscientific sensibility that stressed the consciousness of objectivity, accurate capture, and classification.

These two figures, along with others, worked together quite collegially. Both were in the Port Royal environs during and after the Civil War. And in their combined sensibilities and orientations, both were central to the

quite small number of cultural intellectuals who helped set into motion the early interpretive schemas that fed the new cultural-interpretive work. How it was absorbed by the fledgling black colleges after the Civil War and how it paved important paths to the rise of professional folklore studies in the United States will be discussed in the following chapter. Taken together, the two entwined sensibilities—Higginson’s romanticism and Allen’s scientism—helped propel the new ethnosympathy and protoethnography. I turn now to highlight how the discovery of the spiritual first took on its distinctly modern form in Higginson and Allen.

“Natural Transcendentalists”: Black Music as Testimony

Higginson deserves to be considered in relationship to the issues and thinkers central to both Unitarianism and New England Transcendentalism, for he was party to this cultural sphere. He was influenced by and embraced many of its most critical intellectuals, and he participated in some of the most critical social movements that drew, in part, from the ideological ruptures on the edges of nineteenth-century Protestantism. Higginson’s interpretive enterprise connected the particular religious formations in the North that produced the new ethnosympathy and the phenomenon of black religious subjectivity in both the North and the South, both of which had grown in tandem with the extension of the religious franchise. The new ethnosympathy helped forge the cultural connections within the new conjuncture, and Higginson embodied that ethnosympathy. In doing so, he helped ground and institutionalize the interpretive current first sparked by Frederick Douglass. Higginson also best represents the early mode of pathos-oriented hearing that came sharply into being at the very onset of the war.

Higginson’s romantic and antimodernist perspectives, nurtured as they were through his exposure to left-Protestantism and Christian socialism, were brought fully into play as he supervised the troops under his command. As commander he could observe, listen to, study, request, catch, and transcribe the words of songs that were sung as a matter of cultural routine. He could also use blacks and their modes of expressivity to frame his larger concerns with market society. His romanticism, however, led him to abandon the most pressing questions of the fate of black people, instead preparing him for his desired career as a man of letters against the fading social movements at the century’s end. In this regard, Higginson embodied the very shift away from racial politics and toward the new aestheticized culturalism that triumphed toward the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Among all the Unitarian ministers and Transcendentalist intellectuals, it was Theodore Parker that Higginson most admired. As far as Higginson was concerned, Parker was “the most eloquent talker living; nobody compares to him in that; some are more *original*, perhaps, in talking; but he knows everything, and pours it out in the most simple and delightful way.” Compared to other oratorical luminaries, Parker was “wonderful as a specimen of popularizing information and thought, in this he has no equal in this country; he is far before H. W. Beecher as a stump orator. It is a treat to see how people listen to him.”⁴⁵ Higginson certainly admired Emerson and Thoreau, and he embraced much of Transcendentalist thought; but he was much more like Parker in that he was too strongly attracted to social causes to find the hermetical and utopianist retreats viable. It was perhaps easier in the 1840s for Transcendentalists to simply disengage from political institutions and revel in self-righteous withdrawal and autonomy. Critical Protestants engaged in the utopian projects on the margins of society would later become more involved in the antislavery crusade, but it took the exhaustion of utopian communitarianism to deliver them to the abolitionist ranks.⁴⁶ As this intellectual strata—this increasingly “dominated fraction of the dominant class” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase)—and its ideologies of civic reform were squeezed and restricted even more by the new forces of market society, their moral spirit took some of them to the protoethnographic field, where they sought out the important symbolic capital provided by the Negro spiritual.

Like Emerson, Thoreau, and Parker, Higginson sought a career in the ministry and completed his training at the Harvard Divinity School. But it was a career cut short. His radical positions on issues of social reform, particularly workers’ and women’s rights, and his stance against slavery drew the ire of businessmen in his congregation. Shortly after he began as a minister, Higginson was edged out of his place behind the pulpit by a handful of influential business leaders who had vested interests in maintaining slavery and who found his liberal reformism distasteful.⁴⁷ Rather than muzzle his political sentiments, Higginson left the ministry in 1850 and took advantage of the emerging crisis-ridden political public sphere.

While still a minister, Higginson had already launched an activist career that would propel him to become something of a who’s who within the progressive social movements that spanned the middle decades of the nineteenth century. He was already sympathetic to and involved with the emerging workingmen’s associations that were forming in the industrial sectors of the North in the 1840s. And even as the utopianists retreated to their small-scale, short-lived experiments in alternative communitarianism, Higginson, at the request of the abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier, had attempted to win a seat in Congress in 1848 on the Free Soil

ticket. Losing—as well as letting go of—the ministry simplified his political leanings and enabled him to continue his political involvement. Working with Lucy Stone and others, Higginson became one of the men important to the women's rights movement. Indeed, he was one of the few men who chastised the male leaders of the World's Temperance Conference, held in New York in 1853. At the conference men not only rejected the proposals that women be installed on committees (women had, after all, played the crucial role in the rise of temperance), but also refused to allow women to address the gathering.⁴⁸

It was with minister and mentor Theodore Parker that Higginson and others took a stand against the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. The act, passed in 1850, required northerners in the free states to return runaway slaves to their southern masters. Parker viewed the act as politically intolerable and as evidence that the slave codes had penetrated the free North. Urging citizens to resist the unjust law, Parker was instrumental in forming the Boston Vigilance Committee, which he also chaired. The committee attempted, often with force, to rescue fugitive slaves who had been captured and held by authorities. As George Fredrickson notes, Higginson was Parker's "principal lieutenant" and "led the antislavery mob which attempted to free Anthony Burns, a runaway slave being held by Boston authorities, by assaulting the Boston Courthouse in 1854." When Higginson went to Kansas in 1856 to fight against the expansion of slavery into that state, he became, as Fredrickson put it, "the first transcendentalist in arms."⁴⁹ Three years later, along with Parker and others, Higginson supported the abolitionist John Brown's failed assault upon the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in Virginia. In 1861, two years after John Brown was hanged, Higginson received the invitation to become a colonel and take command of the first all-black regiment for the Union Army.

The chance to command black troops during the Civil War enabled many of the cultural tensions that were operating in Higginson's life to intersect at the point of discovering and writing about black song making. Romanticism, naturalism, antimodernism, Transcendentalism, humanitarian reformism, and ethnosympathy all came into a new constellation in Higginson's book, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. His various cultural and ideological dispositions culminated with his ability to observe his soldiers in the dark and bring to his tent, "like some captured bird or insect," his scribbled field notes. By blending political and literary sensibilities with the emerging protoethnographic enterprise, Higginson helped funnel and reshape in a modern direction romanticist dispositions toward the use of black culture. He not only demonstrated the cultural and interpretive orientation that was being inaugurated by the new pathos-oriented hearing; he expanded this orientation greatly. As a memoir,

Army Life in a Black Regiment was one of the first book-length documents that presented in a sympathetic framework the printed transcriptions of a large number of black song lyrics that coincide with detailed observations of the troops under his supervision.

Like Emerson and Thoreau, two of his mentors, Higginson drew fondly from the tropes of natural history, which he blended with his admiration for the romantic Sir Walter Scott. In this opening passage to the chapter entitled “Negro Spirituals,” Higginson envisioned himself having the opportunity to do for black song making what Scott had done when he found the cultural remnants of an older world with its stories of love, war, and tragedy. “The war brought to some of us many a strange fulfillment of dreams of other days,” Higginson wrote.

The present writer had been a faithful student of the Scottish ballads, and had always envied Sir Walter the delight of tracing them out amid their own heather, and of writing them down piecemeal from the lips of aged crones. It was a strange enjoyment, therefore, to be suddenly brought into the midst of a kindred world of unwritten songs, as simple and indigenous as the Border Minstrelsy, more uniformly plaintive, almost always more quaint, and often as essentially poetic.⁵⁰

With the prose of a natural historian, he referred to the spirituals as “strange plants” which could now be “gather[ed] on their own soil.”⁵¹ Listening to the soldiers sing from the “class of songs under the name of ‘Negro Spirituals’”⁵² provided him the chance to capture and preserve songs that had for posterity a cultural value similar to those recorded and interpretively embellished by Scott.

Such work on the cultural border was deeply consistent with the retrievalist paradigm in which cultures on the margins of modernity were on the verge of slipping irretrievably into historical anonymity. Higginson’s pathos-oriented sensibility enabled him to merge the retrievalist paradigm with the more immediate strains of antimodern disenchantment that were also part of the lessons of Transcendentalism. Sympathetic with Transcendentalism, his reception of black songs and black subjects was framed within a notion of a simple, premodern, authentic life that slavery crushed and American modernity was quite likely to banish. For Higginson, the spirituals and the black soldiers who sang them were strategically useful ideal images. They provided a useful place to integrate his romanticism and his desire to locate and pursue authenticity. Like the Scottish ballads, slave songs were conceived as similarly simple and unwritten, homegrown and unpolished, and coming from a people who were on the verge of being absorbed presumably through the benevolence of a rapidly changing modernity. Early founders of the retrievalist paradigm—Rousseau, Herder, Chateaubriand—had long extolled the

virtues of common people whose lives were being buried by the inauthenticity of a more modern society.⁵³ In the spirit of Chateaubriand, who praised the French peasants for their “popular religion” that manifested the “genius of Christianity,” or like Herder, who described folk expressions as “national” and “popular” poetry, Higginson could write that the Union-uniformed contrabands’ “philosophizing is often the highest form of mysticism; and our dear surgeon declares that they are all natural transcendentalists.”⁵⁴

Nonetheless, these natural black Transcendentalists were not absorbed as partners into the institutions of utilitarian liberalism. They were outsiders, and this marginalized status had its antimodern charm. They did not have the “English and European manners and tastes” toward which Thoreau, according to Emerson, felt much “contempt.”⁵⁵ Nor were they tainted by modernity, or trapped behind the wall of a dispiriting civilization that severed them from the innocence of nature. Consistent with the romanticist constructions of the modern meaning and value of the “noble savage,” they were like children—Higginson referred to them as “young barbarians” and “grown up children.”⁵⁶ They were close to nature; their ascribed virtues hinged not on what they possessed but on what they lacked.⁵⁷ They might not have been who Emerson had in mind when he suggested that history rolled backward would yield the ideal point or state of human infancy when all is “poetry,” or when spirituality could be stripped back to reveal the essential “natural symbols.” But something of this Emersonian imagery seemed to be at work in Higginson’s romanticism. His troops (and blacks in general) appeared as “the world’s perpetual children, docile, gay, and lovable, in the midst of this war for freedom on which they have intelligently entered.”⁵⁸ When they worked, they did so with a robust cheerfulness and without lethargy. Having watched many times his troops from a distance and in the cover of dark, Higginson often marveled at their singing, their exchange of stories and personal accounts, their intensity of description, and their social engagement when they were able to interact outside of externally imposed controls (in the absence of white overseers). After such observations he would ponder the fallacy of the dominant view in which these men were held: “Yet tomorrow strangers will remark on the hopeless, impenetrable stupidity in the daylight faces of many of these very men, the solid mask under which Nature has concealed all this wealth of mother-wit.”⁵⁹ How absurd, he could also point out, was the view that they were “sluggish and inefficient in labor.”⁶⁰ On the contrary, the soldiers seemed to exercise all the virtues of daily labor that Emerson and Thoreau extolled for the cultivation of self-reliance, qualities sought as well by the Associationists and the Owenites, who believed that the utopian unity of work and life could be attained if one could gain distance and insulation from the dulling and

nerve-deadening edges of modern civil society.⁶¹ Interestingly, black troops were compared favorably to white Americans when Higginson raised social issues of American society. When wounded, the black men showed none of the “restless, defiant habit of white invalids.”⁶² In contrast to white soldiers, Higginson’s troops did not have a problem with frequent “inebriation”: “I have never heard of a glass of liquor in the camp, nor of any effort either to bring it in or to keep it out.”⁶³

Childlike—yet they possessed the wisdom of the ages, which made them only remotely connected to anything American. Their novelty, their appeal, rested partly in their disengagement from all of the vices, vulgarity, and banality that the critical Transcendentalists abhorred in American society. Among the uniformed representatives of childlike innocence there were certainly no incendiary Nat Turners or David Walkers; nor were there any learned and articulate politicians like Frederick Douglass. They were wise, likened to the greatness of the sages—Hebrew, Roman, and Greek. It was a great privilege, Higginson writes, to be “dusky soldiers, who based their whole walk and conversation strictly on the ancient Israelites.”⁶⁴ The experience was like “‘dwelling in tents, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ This condition is certainly mine,—and with a multitude of patriarchs beside, not to mention Caesar and Pompey, Hercules and Bacchus.”⁶⁵ The men possessed feminine characteristics too: “Yet their religious spirit grows more beautiful to me in living longer with them; it is certainly far more so than at first, when it seemed rather a matter of phrase and habit. It influences them both in the negative and the positive side. That is, it cultivates the feminine virtues first,—makes them patient, meek, resigned.”⁶⁶ They could have all the virtues of Oriental wisdom checked by the submissiveness of a premodern model minority:

Imbued from childhood with the habit of submission, drinking in through every pore that other-world trust which is the one spirit of their songs, they can endure everything. This I expected; but I am relieved to find that their religion strengthens them on the positive side also,—gives zeal, energy, daring. They could easily be made fanatics, if I chose; but I do not choose. Their whole mood is essentially Mohammedan, perhaps, in its strength and its weakness; and I feel the same degree of sympathy that I should if I had a Turkish command,—that is a sort of sympathetic admiration, not tending towards agreement, but towards co-operation.⁶⁷

Such were the individuals from whom Higginson obtained songs.

There is plenty of mid-nineteenth-century Orientalism here. But why did not the evil specter of slavery appear in these written accounts of the troops from whom Higginson logged so many songs? Indeed, throughout Higginson’s encounters, the specter had already disappeared. The narratives and the earliest treatments of Negro religious singing were initially

embedded, and inextricably so, in slavery—this was Douglass’s insistent insight. But during the Civil War, when Higginson brought his Transcendentalist-inspired romantic antimodernist sensibility to the battlefield to collect—like a good protoethnographer that he was—the much-talked-about “songs of the Contrabands,” he participated in shifting the meaning of the spirituals to a different register. With (but certainly not only with) Higginson, the exoticization and romanticization of a black essentialism took form. The significance of this would reach forward, where it would be embraced by W. E. B. Du Bois, who singled out Higginson and other white abolitionists as interpretive allies to the humanistic recovery process, and as predecessors, along with Frederick Douglass, who ventured to open up a modern struggle to grasp the “souls of black folk.”⁶⁸

Black music and slaves served as interpretive tropes, as quasi-analytical devices, that helped Higginson and others frame their desires for reenchantment in the midst of all the dispiriting and stultifying effects that market modernity had unleashed. Yet as much as Higginson worked the moral reflection side of the discovery process, he did not marshal long-range concern for the social, economic, and political fate of former slaves. Indeed, the waning of slavery as the backdrop to understanding black expressivity coincided with the ascent of romantic and socially detached images. An aesthetic of authenticity and simplicity took the place of broader social conceptions. This shift signaled a culturally specific use, a restricted codification, of black music.

In spite of its romantic qualities, *Army Life* has a distinctly modern feel. It is a remarkable example of what today we would call fieldwork. Higginson lived with his subjects, his troops. As their commander, he was enmeshed in their daily lives. He observed, noted, probed, gathered, and transcribed black song making with the kind of lived proximity to his work and to his subjects that would become important to a professional ethnographer and anthropologist. He carried out what today some call the methodology of “participant observation.” Higginson relays how he obtained black songs—how he observed from a distance, how he approached his subjects as unobtrusively as possible while maximizing his closeness to them, how he indulged in small talk to get big answers and insights, or asked straight out how they actually made new songs. He queried singers for their own meanings and interpretations, and juxtaposed black song making to a variety of comparative examples, often waxing romantically and moralistically in ways that quickly abandoned the actual terrain at hand. While he vacillated between seeing his soldiers as adults and as childlike, never did he deprecate the integrity of his soldiers and musical informants. His method is modern, too, in that it reflects an ostensible willingness to let the subjects tell their side of things—even though the new ethnosympathetic mode of hearing oper-

ated nonetheless with its own powers of selectivity, with cultural filters shaped by pressures of ideological legitimation and enclosure. Higginson valued the internal ethos of pathos, that inner and earnest interest in wanting to know about “the Other” because such knowledge was humanly valuable and self-edifying, even though fraught with historical, social, and institutional compromises from the outset. Higginson’s work was an example of an emerging humanistic ethnography. But it is most fittingly *protoethnographic*, given that such a discipline had not really emerged as an academically recognized intellectual practice.

Army Life exemplifies the sympathetic turn suggested earlier by Frederick Douglass and others who were steeped in the abolitionist movement. But more important, these accomplishments bridged and simultaneously synthesized ethnosympathy and protoethnography. In presenting his forays into black song making as an important act of recording cultural practices that might soon vanish, Higginson shared the sentiments that were being engendered by intellectuals who felt that something of the Old World was disappearing with the encroachment of modernity. In this regard, part of his orientation toward black culture fed the more serious endeavors of collecting and archiving that were first championed by the proponents of natural history and that would soon be fundamental to an emergent cultural anthropology, scientific folklore, and cultural sociology.

What deserves highlighting, however, is how Higginson helped install as well as crystallize a strategy for interpreting black culture at the racial margins. It was a complicated and complex move that drew upon and merged romanticist, political, and literary motivations. In the process, Higginson helped cut a path that led to the modern academic exoneration of black cultural expressions; the latter were practices to be embraced and read as fundamental indicators of hitherto hidden lives, an enterprise that also simultaneously pushed as well as checked insights into larger cultural tensions. In Higginson, black culture helped ground in flesh and blood a romantic naturalism that was less concerned with actual black lives than with a more inchoate feel for finding authenticity on the edges of modernity, even if what he and many of his sensitive peers were up to involved screening black music for its preferred fit within the new interpretive enterprise.

Spiritual Proclivities and Modern Taxonomies: Black Music as Artifact

Developing in tandem with the romantic and nostalgic strains in Higginson’s view was a different dimension of discovery, one reflecting the

emergent rationalization of scientific observation and classification. It was *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), the collection of songs compiled by William Frances Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, that actually prefigured the modern scientific mode of analysis for black music. The compilers and editors of *Slave Songs* were involved primarily in a mission to “collect and preserve” black songs. The presentation of this work, however, did not indulge in the kind of day-to-day intimacy that informed Higginson’s accounts. Higginson championed a romantically infused sensibility, but Allen and his fellow editors systematized this sensibility. In doing so, they checked the earlier romanticist strains with a more neutralized and neutralizing grammar of objective description.

Army Life and *Slave Songs* were written only a few years apart. Both publications, however, drew their inspiration from the Port Royal experiment, which enabled collectors to scour the black cultural landscape for songs. Yet the framing of their content as well as their respective prose styles show signs of an emerging *division of interpretive labor* that harbored as well a significant schematic shift. Higginson’s *Army Life*, drawn partly from the notebooks and journals he composed while commanding his black soldiers, reads as a personal memoir, a travel narrative, and a political romance. Written in the historical conjuncture, it draws upon multiple genres inasmuch as it seems a prose in search of a new synthetic genre. Higginson imparts to his readers a familiarity with slaves as characters (as nascent persons with incipient selfhood). He writes of people with faces, of individuals with voices, mannerisms, and idiosyncracies, and of black soldiers with names. Black people and black practices become milestones to mark his remarkable voyage made possible by a moral war. Higginson’s *Army Life* is, fundamentally, a testimony, as are the songs he hears and transcribes.

In contrast, the lengthy and interpretive introduction to *Slave Songs of the United States* penned by Allen reads like a scientific treatise with a highly focused aim—to provide a new intellectual scaffolding to the first major collection of black songs. A modern taxonomically inflected rationale positions the collection in relationship to a new sort of classificatory knowledge in the making. *Slave Songs* is clearly up to serious and reflexive archival work; it has little of Higginson’s literary pretensions and pursuits, and its authors have no need to be recognized as persons of letters. Higginson plotted his work to be read; Allen’s introduction aims to be read as a work of knowledge being plotted. Higginson writes with a modest righteousness; Allen seems just to want to bring the hidden into visibility while getting things descriptively right. Allen, like Higginson, accepted the fact that modernity had banishing power as it moved relentlessly along a path of progress.

Allen's introduction to *Slave Songs* addresses the notion that the culture of slaves, a traditional culture of black song making rooted in oral practices, was now subject to the upheaval of social change. In time, all of the social and institutional forms that had hitherto generated and shaped slave culture would disappear. But more than slavery disappeared in this crowning stage of cultural discovery. Soon to disappear was the ethos of pathos that had only recently addressed the social, economic, and political fate of black lives. Black *culture* certainly attracted a new kind of inquisitive gravity, but the attraction came at the expense of a dialogue over the larger political crisis of the future of freed blacks. A symptom of the new cultural enclosure was an urgent concern for the "specimen" collection. *Slave Songs* is fundamentally an assembled collection of artifacts.

In order to produce *Slave Songs*, Allen and associates launched an extensive campaign to collect black songs and to put their words and music into print. They obtained the songs largely through the missionary-teacher-abolitionist network, which was quite extensive; they even published in the *Nation* a request to the larger liberal readership to aid in the collection process.⁶⁹ Higginson, who published an essay on black songs the same year *Slave Songs* was published, also supplied a substantial number of songs for the project.

With its publication, *Slave Songs* became the first major compilation of black songs that included not just lyrics, but also professionally transcribed musical notation.⁷⁰ Containing 136 songs, it was the most extensive collection of Negro spirituals ever assembled. It was a milestone, not only in the discovery of black music, but in American cultural history. Important essays and articles had appeared during the war years,⁷¹ but the new compilation was unprecedented. In keeping with what I have called "spiritual proclivities," the songs—"spirichils," to use the editor's rendition of dialect—were predominantly religious, and were gathered from former slaves residing in the Port Royal area and surrounding regions, with additional examples from other regions of the South.⁷² Many commentators since the publication of *Slave Songs* have singled out various favorites, have highlighted from these their own lists of which are of more or less importance, have added their aesthetic angles of analysis, and have gone to great lengths to interpret the "meanings" of these songs.

My concern, however, is with the new knowledge formation, the new interpretive scaffolding, the intellectual framework that provided the cultural cartography of black music at this particular juncture. Allen had posed the question as to why such a well-known body of music had not been approached by any "systematic effort . . . to collect and preserve their melodies." There is an obvious answer to his question: such melo-

dies were not in danger of disappearing while the system of slavery remained intact. But when it appeared that slavery would be abolished, the issue of cultural loss became evident, and this, in turn, posed the need for cultural retention and preservation. Allen spoke of “accurate” collections, and of the “difficulty in attaining absolute correctness.”⁷³ However, as I have suggested, the proclivity for hearing the spiritual stemmed from deeper cultural sources in which the stakes of ideology were higher and the religious frames of legitimacy were of greater importance. With the publication of *Slave Songs*, two sensibilities—the particular ideological preferences toward religious singing as “good culture” and the impulse toward cultural preservation—converged to shape and prefigure the new field of subcultural interpretation. Those attracted to black religious singing were actually fusing two concerns. Religious singing confirmed their belief that the slaves were disposed toward Christianity; hence it underscored Christian efficacy, particularly the benevolent anti-slavery dimensions of Protestant virtue. The spirituals also hosted the desire to archive for posterity “these relics of a state of society which has passed away.”⁷⁴

Allen pointed out that not all black music was religious or fit the category of spirituals; he referred to such music as “intrinsically barbaric.” But such music was presumably dwarfed in comparison to what many believed were the much more important effects—an idealized “civilizing” process—rooted ultimately in Christian signification.

Still, the chief part of the negro music is *civilized* in its character—partly composed under the influence of association with the whites, partly actually imitated from their music. . . . On the other hand there are very few which are of an intrinsically barbaric character, and where this character does appear, it is chiefly in short passages, intermingled with others of a different character.⁷⁵

As noted earlier, the published reports of the shouts as disturbingly frequent, and as defined by white observers in the language of noise, suggest that their construction of the preferred Negro involved simultaneous aims of cultural denial and active repression.

Indeed, it is very likely that if we had found it possible to get at more of their secular music, we should have come to another conclusion as to the proportion of the barbaric element. A Gentlemen in Delaware writes: “We must look among their non-religious songs for the purest specimens of negro minstrelsy. It is remarkable that they have themselves transferred the best of these to the uses of their churches—I suppose on Mr. Wesley’s principle that ‘it is not right the Devil should have all the good tunes.’ Their leaders and preachers have not found this change difficult to effect; or at least they have

taken so little pains about it that one often detects the profane *cropping out*, and revealing the origin of their most solemn ‘hymns,’ in spite of the best intentions of the poet and artist.”⁷⁶

Allen concedes the notion that blacks had an extensive repertoire of nonreligious music, but the early discoverers were not interested in this music. Such interest, however, became much more widespread two decades later, and served as the basis for an expanded folkloristic typology that included more refined distinctions between “work songs,” “field hollers,” and “corn songs” (these last being the ground for the turn-of-the-century “blues”), and it is important to note that *Slave Songs* did contain examples of songs that had no ostensible religious references.

What mattered in this natural-history-turned-ethnological narrative was what was most natural:

The greater number of the songs which come into *our possession* seem to be the natural and original production of a race of remarkable musical capacity and very teachable, which has been long enough associated with the more cultivated race to have become imbued with the mode and spirit of European music—often, nevertheless, retaining a distinct tinge of the native Africa.⁷⁷

It was thus culturally convenient for the discoverers to focus upon the distinct separation between the “greater number” of admissible songs in comparison to the number of inadmissible songs. William George Hawkins, one of many clergymen working in the Port Royal area during the war, demonstrated how “native songs” that contained religious references but that could not be easily comprehended were taken by northerners as examples of “specimens of Negro ignorance.” To remedy this, teachers ought to “endeavor to teach them something better.” He provided an example:

Here is a specimen which should not be tolerated in these schools:

“In de mornin’ when I rise,
Tell my Jesus, Huddy oh? . . .”

We hope the day may soon come when all such illiterate, we will not say senseless songs will be discouraged by all who wish and are laboring for the true enlightenment of the African race.

For Hawkins, the task of this uplift fell upon the shoulders of “the refined young ladies at Port Royal [who] will substitute others more sensible and elevated in language.”⁷⁸ Other observers noted that the former slaves were “receiving an education through their songs which is incalculable” with the aid of “teachers [who] discourage the use of their old barbaric

chants, and besides *our beautiful, patriotic and religious hymns teach the virtue of industry, truth, honesty and purity* in rhyme and measure.”⁷⁹

The missionaries, teachers, and kindred moral entrepreneurs and uplifters who descended upon Port Royal and who helped contribute to the milieu in which the spirituals were edified as the supreme expression of religiously redeemable and savable subjects all knew about the spirituals before they arrived. These songs had already become charged with authenticity (the term “folklore,”⁸⁰ which had recently been coined, would soon provide an irresistible pull upon them). Northerners expected to hear them; they searched for them, and they found them. They also encouraged certain songs. As William Allen noted, among the “spirichils” were those “of special merit” that “soon became established favorites among the whites, and hardly a Sunday passed at the church on St. Helena without ‘Gabriel’s Trumpet,’ ‘I hear from Heaven to-day,’ or ‘Jehovah Hallelujah.’”⁸¹

Slaves were also taught new songs. After hearing a crew of black boatmen sing “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” Charlotte Forten wrote in her journal “Their singing impressed me much. It was so sweet and strange and solemn. . . . I want to hear these men sing [John Greenleaf] Whittier’s ‘Song of the Negro Boatmen.’ I am going to see if it can’t be brought about in some way.”⁸² The abolitionist song “John Brown” was also presented as a song to be learned by the recently emancipated black children: “We taught—or rather commenced teaching the children ‘John Brown’ which they entered into eagerly. I felt to the full the significance of *that* song being sung here in S.[outh] C.[arolina] by little negro children, by those whom he—the glorious old man—died to save.”⁸³

Despite the spiritual proclivities that governed their schemas for hearing, there was still plenty of black noise. Those involved in the uplift mission heard music that was not part of what had become a cultural expectation. At Port Royal and surrounding environs, Higginson, Laura Towne, Harriet Ware, Lucy McKim, Lucy’s father James McKim Miller, and many other witnessed what were called shouts. This practice involved people gathered in a circle and moving in a circular direction by sliding rather than crossing or lifting their feet. It was a practice accompanied by singing chants, repetitive lines, or more elaborate songs, with words and lyrics ranging (according to various observers) from totally unintelligible to recognizable references to religious figures, events, and desires.⁸⁴ The difficulty in distinguishing between shouts and religious singing was captured by Charlotte Forten.

This eve. our boys and girls with others from across the creek came in and sang a long time for us. Of course we had the old favorites “Down in the Lonesome Valley,” and “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” and “No Man Can Hender

Me,” and beside those several shouting tunes that we had not heard before; they are very wild and strange. It was impossible for me to understand many of the words although I asked them to repeat them for me. Only know that one had something about “De Nell Am Ringing.” I think that was the refrain; and of another, some of the words were “Christ build the church widout no hammer nor nail,” “Jehovah Halleluhiah,” which is a grand thing, and “Hold the light,” an especial favorite of mine—they sang also with great spirit.⁸⁵

Forten’s account raises the likelihood that white listeners who could not readily recognize black song making as religious were perhaps quick in categorizing such singing as nonreligious.

Interestingly, while the consensus was that blacks sang mostly spirituals, many visitors to Port Royal heard the shouts, and in some cases much to their displeasure. From accounts compiled by Epstein it is clear that such sounds fell outside the schemas of preference. Higginson described these “half powwow, half prayer meeting[s],” with their mixture of “piety and polka,” as “always within hearing”⁸⁶ and almost of nightly frequency. William Allen, who was always a careful chronicler, and who seldom added moralizing commentary to his ostensibly scientized prose, viewed them as “of African origin, with Christianity engrafted upon [them] just as it was upon the ancient Roman ritual.” Others, however, were much less tolerant or accommodating. One unidentified visitor viewed the “little barbarians” in their “African rite” with discouragement at how much would have to be done to educate them. Laura Towne saw “old idol worship” at work, and had “never [seen] anything so savage.” “The better persons,” she insisted, “go to the praise house.” Others complained that the shouts were better attended than the white-supervised praise house meetings. After seeing a shout, Reuben Tomlinson argued for “some regulation [to] be adopted here with reference to the . . . Church organizations of these people, the limits within which they should enjoy them, ought to be rigorously defined.” Other reports describe attempts to intervene and stop the practice.⁸⁷ Tomlinson’s suggestion seems to have held sway. As the instruction of former slaves became more established and routinized, teachers, ministers, and military personnel acknowledged that black practices that fell beyond the boundaries of appropriate culture were discouraged. The effects of disapproval were quickly registered upon the younger black population. Teacher James B. Black noticed the desirable effect: “I have seen them, when requested to sing some of their grotesque hymns, which were great favorites in slave-times, hide their heads while singing, and seem heartily ashamed of them.”⁸⁸ We would expect northern Protestants who were not the religious offspring of the Baptist and Methodist-inspired revivals to be some-

what uncomfortable with the intense collective emotionality of black song making, regardless of its religious or nonreligious content. For those who sought to intervene, the challenge was to shape black songs to fit the mold of the emerging ideal new Negro who came into view as a spiritualized (e.g., Christianized) and a spiritual-singing subject. Interestingly, Allen had observed that the same song could be sung at the “praise meeting” and then outside of white purview as a shout—an indication of the much more important fact that the actual songs were less an issue than were their conditions of production, and that *white-sanctioned supervision* was the ultimate issue at stake.

The Cultural Enclosure

Higginson wrote of capturing black songs as if he were a natural historian sampling esoteric climes; recall the epigraph at the opening of this chapter. Such imagery and description of the way he “collected” samples of black songs were quite in keeping with the mid-nineteenth-century vogue of natural history. But it was Allen rather than Higginson who actually wrote in the scientized genre of natural history. In thinking of Allen’s prose, I have in mind that of Charles Darwin, with his penchant for minute detail, exquisite subdivisions, and typologies and classifications within a general schema, all the while holding in check emotional and value-laden comments. After all, it was Darwin who provided the ideal-type narrative that scientized the older genre of natural history. Allen’s introduction to *Slave Songs* approximated the form of a natural history insofar as it lent itself to the quasi-scientized discussion of human cultural practices. Higginson, in Emersonian fashion, pulled black music toward a romanticized natural history. What Allen accomplished, however, was to aim newer interpretive tropes of scientized natural history at black song making. The result was a mode of writing about black song making that represented the first “systematic” assessment of black songs to an educated reading public.

As publications concerned with black culture in the United States, both *Slave Songs* and *Army Life* entered on the eve of modern ethnology’s ascendancy within the context of an industrially accelerating society. But it is with *Slave Songs* that the fully modern mode of scientific taxonomy begins to be applied to black music; the study thus capped one important line of development along which black culture was being discovered and mapped. Allen’s mode of capturing black music was through a language and an explanatory structure that we would associate with a modern social-scientific approach to cultural classification. The romanticist and

humanistic-reformist sensibilities that informed the views of Higginson were not entirely eclipsed. They remained vital and resilient to modern ethnosympathy, though they were increasingly checked as the century came to a close. Allen's more measured prose would prove to set the coming professional tone. Higginson's romanticism had already separated black culture from black fate. Allen's scientific repositioning of black music, along the lines of classification and taxonomy, quickened and deepened this breach by introducing a way to speak more systematically about the cultural operations within the new cultural enclosure: testimonies could be reclassified as artifacts.

The developments I have been charting harbor, I believe, the kernel of an emergent interpretive logic that began to link the powerful currents of romantic and reformist ethnosympathy to a sensibility critical of American modernity. This critical sensibility, however, was weak and easily compromised. Market society and industrialization were eroding the older orders of traditional authority, and the landed gentry and cultural elites, who were not the champions of the new industrialization, could not automatically take for granted their positions at the moral and intellectual helms of American institutions. New economic elites were being ushered in by modernity, and it was their pragmatic, fiscal, and technological prowess that grew increasingly more central to the functioning of American society. Older cultural elites had to scramble to maintain their importance; they did so by accommodating the larger pressures of a modernity that was capitalist-driven and based on racial hierarchies. Rent with inequalities, the new market society absorbed the seamy problems surrounding the fate of blacks as well as of Indians, women, wage laborers, the poor, and the increasing waves of immigrant groups whose identities were embedded in the triumph of market society. The panoply of social subjects who emerged to make claims for a better place within market society, and whose emergence was coterminous with the very rise of reformism, were greeted by an increasingly modern managerial rather than democratic discourse. This new managerial discourse was aided by the rise of a professional social science that could house (and attempt to tame) the antimodern apprehensiveness toward market society. In its best posture, it would embrace and even celebrate modern society.⁸⁹

The spiritual proclivities of the most radical abolitionists shaped their proclivities to hear spirituals, but not much else. Their limited orientations toward blacks had a peculiar self-confirming dimension. By capturing and classifying black culture, and by refining their discovery of the Negro spiritual, they were casting an interpretive net that *caught* what had (presumably) been *taught* by the hegemonic culture—the performative, singing, and spiritualized subject.⁹⁰ In this way, the discovery process that was carried out by the former ministers and others who brought

black song making into such critical and appreciative reflection was part of a distinct and complex knowledge formation that contained its own self-flattery by marking the virtues of the modern while simultaneously recognizing what modernity had increasingly little room for—the actual peoples and forms of culture that progress was in danger of (presumably) banishing to history.

The abolitionists' process, then, of preferring to comprehend the social and cultural meanings in black music in a framework of discovery, functioned also like a mirror held up to reflect a preferred image. The process was kindred to the ideological reorientation of culture and education that Matthew Arnold would soon sum up as the "sweetness and light" that a naturally endowed dominant class, in fulfilling its moral obligations of stewardship, ought to radiate to its social and cultural wards, those lower classes and castes who, in turn, were to be guided and educated so that they might internalize through cultural trickle-down "the best which has been thought and said in the world." As a cultural disposition, the discoverer's preference for the Negro spiritual prefigured Arnold's class aesthetic. In his book, *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold provided the following definition of culture: "culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, *the best which has been thought and said* in the world. . . . Culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us . . . to conceive of true human perfection, as a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection, developing all parts of our society."⁹¹ Culture was thus always subjected to stewardship. The spiritual was the "best" of what the slave and even the freed Negro could produce, either as testimony or artifact, to complement the kind of class stewardship that was presupposed in this aesthetic and moral recognition and knowledge of the world of lesser men and women. In this regard, the spiritual represented what the civilizing process had bequeathed to the racial margins. In relation to the spiritual, all other black musical noise—and black literature as well as voices striving to address broader and certainly more crucial social, economic, and political aspirations—could be ignored, discounted, and dismissed, at least for a while. The spiritual—as practice, as phenomenon, as spectacle, and as cultural performance—served as a major element in the modern, end-of-century cartography of black expressivity.

The interpretive impulses that pulled upon black song making and caught cherished Christian fragments of culture, caught other entwined things as well. Not only did the new interpretation of black music produce the ideologically preferred black performative subject, a critical-intellectual, pathos-driven parallel to minstrelsy (but without the latter's class-rooted vicious vulgarity and deprecation); it also confirmed the legitimacy of seeing, understanding, and appreciating the very *activity* of

cultural capture, which included the modern orientation to the margins and the triumph of the modern protoscientific framework itself. The new interpretive formation was a way of knitting together ideas of how to represent the conjuncture of race, culture, and modernity as a form of managerially empathic representations.

Transcendentalist idealism was weakened and dissipated by the 1860s. It did not survive the upheavals of the Civil War. But as I have argued, its benevolent and theologically driven naturalism fueled the early modern protoethnographic forays into black culture. While the Transcendentalist-inspired mode of interpretation was largely overwhelmed by modern social science, it managed to exert influence. Consider that in the 1888 roster of names of founding members of the American Folk-Lore Society, there appeared the names of four individuals: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Moncur Conway, Samuel Longfellow, and Caleb Stetson. Two years later, the society's annual roster included these four in addition to the Transcendentalist historian Octavius B. Frothingham. A half century earlier, on September 19, 1836, these five individuals had joined with twenty-five others and formed the Transcendental Club. All of the club members who convened in 1836 were New Englanders, Unitarians, or neo-Unitarian rebels, and for the most part had attended Harvard at least for work in divinity.⁹² Only thirteen of the original club members remained alive in 1888, when the professional folklorists launched their national organization. That five managed to be engaged in the founding of the new scholarly body is indicative of the affinities Transcendentalist-inspired philosophy had with the most modern and organized embodiment of ethnosympathy. One might speculate that many of the founding members would have joined the intellectual project of collecting and interpreting culture on the margins had there been an earlier quasi-professional body to do such work in the 1840s.

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We can now appreciate how Allen's *Slave Songs* represents much more than what it purports to be, and more than what the received interpretive tradition attributes to this classic text. Far more than just a work of cultural preservation and early musicology, it refracts older lines of thought and prefigures new lines of analysis by anticipating the formation of modern and increasingly more legitimate (e.g., institutionally sanctioned) forms of professional knowledge that draw their contours from a larger and more nebulous notion of *ethnoscience*. *Slave Songs* is a cultural work that recognizes the act of song collection as an important step in preserving for posterity a culture on the wane—it is *natural history*; it speaks of examples of music that highlight “feelings, opinions, and habits of the

slaves”—it is psychological and cultural anthropology, or perhaps a nascent sociology of emotions; it traces the lyrical semiotics from the small texts of the song to the big father-text of Christianity—it is a particularly American version of Protestant hermeneutics; it follows the influence of song styles and content across a larger dispersion—it approaches a peculiar kind of moral ecology and certainly a thesis of cultural diffusion; it compares the interpretive preferences of white ministers with those of the black song makers who sometimes insisted on giving meanings to their music in ways that differed from the imputed meanings of white observers—it is comparative religion; it details the internal practices of blacks conducting their prayers and making songs, describes the decor of the rooms in which they assemble, comments on the nature and quality of black interaction and behavior, and strives to produce an interpretive depth out of the surface of the mundane—it is ethnography; it is challenged to record as precisely as possible the musical production of a sub-cultural group with the procedures of technical notation, scoring, and transcription—it is ethnomusicology; it is reflexive in detailing its own method of categorical accounts, the principles involved in putting musical notation to lyrics, and the search for material while being reflexive with regard to the accuracy as well as limits of the study—it is paradigmatic knowledge maintenance.

Most important, the emerging interpretive formation works with the unquestioned dominant categories of interpretation that have been unleashed by Protestant schisms and social and institutional tensions. The interpretive work, however, is carried out partly through a New World romanticism that must accommodate the onslaught of capitalism and market society. In the wake of slavery's demise and the triumph of capitalist modernity, the critical abolitionist spirit enabled as well as displayed a wide-eyed and passionate look at the cultures of people—in this case former American slaves—found at the edges of the color line. Like many of their counterparts who trafficked in the politics of redemption, who discovered and tried to grasp the fate of women, white wage laborers, the poor, and sometimes Native American peoples, the critical abolitionists tried to see the larger contours of their social moment.

In a fundamental sense, ethnosympathy enabled a new social vision. For the first time, culture on the margins came more fully into view; this was one of the victories of a critical modernity that had begun to probe the very idea of society as an object of investigation while it pondered the hitherto unconscious complicity of human deeds in the shaping of society. Slaves could be seen as human victims and subjects rather than primarily as natural objects in service to an Old World utility. The cultural challenge, which was endemic to romanticism in general and inherited by reformers throughout the nineteenth century, was to salvage forms of

authenticity perceived to be under siege. Those on the edge of furthering the new ethnosympathy were thus compelled to extend their redemptive reach toward groups—former slaves, particularly singing ones, in this case—whose fate signaled not so much the peculiar identity but the unchosen and unjustified social position of those groups.

But ethnosympathy was also checked by a glaucoma-glazed vision that was both modern and historically compromised. Even the most critical ethnosympathizers seem to have accommodated themselves to the new rationalism and scientism; these modern forces were quickly annexing the older romantic and religious impulses and restructuring the entire terrain of modern knowledge. Slave music—as cultural practice, as discoverable object, as new intellectual subject matter—played early host to these developments.

By the early 1870s Reconstruction was being rapidly dismantled. As the national abandonment of freed blacks became the evident social and political backdrop, there were new pressures to accommodate the larger political context. Those who championed the new ethnosympathy also registered the compromise. Allen's *Slave Songs* embodied this accommodation. As we have seen in Allen's study, it became sufficiently benevolent for ethnosympathizers to simply place intellectual value upon the *cultural features* of the lives of former slaves—to the extent that they continued to yield cultural objects to the new professional interpreters. Soon a modern cultural analysis would arise and demonstrate an increasingly unconscious and dehistoricized form of knowledge as it sidled up to the managerial challenges of a multiracial and multiethnic society headed by industrial corporate prowess.

Between Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment* and Allen's *Slave Songs in the United States* there was a shift in analytic emphasis. Higginson had managed to retain some of Frederick Douglass's concern to connect music with the human and institutional determinants of social fate and social structure. His primary contribution was his interest in reading culture (romantically and politically) as the embodiment of social testimonies. Allen and his fellow editors, however, captured the dominant direction of the shift in which culture was to be read increasingly as a taxonomical index of artifacts. In the process, the new knowledge—geared to capture pieces of lives through fragments of cultural expressivity—could take shape. Fractured, dissected, sorted, and reclassified into more discrete and knowable parcels, black expressivity was objectified and pulled into modern rationalized interpretation. Along with other artifacts gleaned from other peoples and cultures, it took its new place in the various ethnosciences bent on interpreting domains of culture, each moving forward along distinct paths of cultural annexation, and each providing elements of interpretation for an increasingly culture-hungry

modern intelligentsia torn by a nostalgia for, yet gripped too frequently by a hostility toward, socially marginalized peoples. Through the edification of the new and relatively autonomous system of knowledge placed over black music's embeddedness in history and social relations, black song making began to lose what it was once considered to be: "testimonies" to black lives, fragments from voiced subjects, external indicators of hitherto veiled worlds, prisms refracting struggles over authenticity and subjectivity, oral cultural passages through which slaves struggled to negotiate the forces of slavery, signifying strategies that rooted a people in time and space.

Black music on American soil was constituted in response to the systematic pulverization of a captured people who had imposed upon them the culture of their captors. Its forms reflect both the determinant and untranscendable relationship and the resultant nuances of black American cultural production. As a social text embedded in a social context, black song making spoke from and to the indomitable; Frederick Douglass brought this aspect sharply into view in 1845. Even the Reverend Lockwood, who brought the first "spiritual," "Go Down, Moses," into print in 1861, retained in his discussion the crucial sociological connections that linked black lives, and social relations.

But these connections frayed rather quickly. Ironically, the ascendancy of the spirituals and their central place on the new interpretive maps signaled both the new ethnosympathy's highest aesthetic praise as well as the unraveling of the sociological ties between culture, society, and history. The edification of black song making appeared to be a long overdue embrace of culture on the margins. But the process of edifying black culture also charts how the study of black music began to be severed from its crucial social domain. How the spirituals became "specimens" and "relics," defined as eligible for professional appropriation, is explored in the following chapter.