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Black Pearl Sings!

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Sing Me Home: Memory, Family and History in *Black Pearl Sings!*

Introduction

The epic undertaking by researchers and journalists to document the narratives of black Americans born into slavery established an archive of critically important first-person narratives that give us great insight into this “peculiar institution” called slavery. What we know today is that there was nothing peculiar about it. Slavery was fundamentally an economic system that capitalized on racial difference. It was so deeply entrenched in the fabric of our economic infrastructure that in the rising tides toward abolition our country was literally rent in half, a blow from which we still have not fully recovered. Out from the rubble of the antebellum years America hobbled forward into a phase many call Reconstruction—a period during which the country tried to come together again, find economic and political stability in spite of sweeping changes, and negotiate the belonging of hundreds of thousands of black Americans who were no longer considered the property of others.

While it is undeniably important that the stories of former slaves were documented, it is critical to realize that sharing their stories did comparatively little for them. Many white businessmen, researchers and journalists built their careers on these stories, winning prized tenure-track posts at the nation’s premiere colleges and universities, whereas the subjects of their interviews may have been given a few dollars in exchange for their stories—what August Wilson called their song, the cultural heart of survival and continuity.

Black Pearl Sings! sheds a unique light on this historical moment. The play creates space for two disenfranchised voices from the period —one by virtue of her gender, the other by virtue of her race and gender—to speak, radically resituating history to give audiences a glimpse of what happened when suddenly those people whose commodity value had been extinguished with emancipation, were considered valuable once more. We see how desperate Susannah is to mine Pearl for her precious song—a song that goes back through the generations, deep in the soil planted and tilled over four hundred years, soaked with the salt brine of the expansive Atlantic ocean, until it reaches the ancestral home where its roots, though torn, are still firmly planted. Pearl will not give up that song, but she does give Susannah others, songs that catapult both women into the limelight of New York City where crowds wait to revel in the music borne out of slavery. As these fictive audiences in the play marvel and rejoice in Pearl’s survival, so our audiences will feel themselves become more fully human as we revisit our shared history.

What is his/(her)story? The WPA and Americana

In 1933 Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated as the thirty-second president of the United States. He inherited an economic predicament unparalleled until only recently; a quarter of American laborers were unemployed, hundreds of thousands of people were homeless, banks were collapsing and closing—the country was in dire straits. Roosevelt entered office with a strategy to bring the country back to life, both economically and spiritually. Poverty had stripped morale, but with a new administration ready to face down the greed of profiteers, who through irresponsible lending and self-interest had squandered the country’s resources, Americans found hope. In his inauguration address Roosevelt famously declared, “[t]he measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.”¹ Roosevelt was true to his word; he knew investing in the people would stimulate the economy; at a time wherein conservatives were tightening their belts, Roosevelt flooded resources toward relief programs.

Under the New Deal, a multipart economic stimulus package, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created—a massive relief plan that would put unemployed Americans back to work. In spite of an attempted filibuster by a conservative Senate, the legislation known as the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act passed the House of Congress in the spring of 1935. During these tough interwar years, Roosevelt’s WPA used federal monies to invest in the infrastructure of the nation, building roads, railways, bridges, and buildings. Food redistribution, housing projects, schools and public parks were also part of the WPA initiative. Some funding went to literacy projects, including the arts and media, and in 1936 the WPA began funneling a wealth of cultural material into the Library of Congress.

A resurgence of interest in American folklore, music and history ensued. Part of this unique project was an effort to preserve the stories of former slaves in first-person narrative. “Compiled in seventeen states during the years 1936-38, the collection consists of more than two thousand interviews with former slaves, most of them first-person accounts of slave life and the respondents’ own reactions to bondage.”²

Until the 1930s most investigation into the American slave system was rife with political agenda, colored either by defense of the project or romanticized by abolitionists.

¹ Roosevelt, Franklin D. First Inaugural Address. Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States. <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres49.html>.

² Yetman, Norman R. “An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives.” See <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html>

Exemplar of the record to date was *American Negro Slavery*,³ a book published in 1918 by Ulrich Bonnell Phillips. Phillips established himself as a leading expert in the field by painting a “portrait of slavery that . . . bore a striking resemblance to that espoused by proslavery apologists before the Civil War,”⁴ Norman Yetman explains. “It minimized the severity of American slavery, extolled its civilizing and Christianizing functions, and reasserted the notion that the slave was submissive rather than defiant. The overall effect was a verification of the “plantation myth” and a confirmation of what Stanley M. Elkins has termed the “Sambo” image of the slave.”⁵

Though unmitigated first-person documentation was not widely available, at black universities and colleges (today known as HBCUs) researchers were working to uncover and document the experiences of former slaves. Two prominent intellectuals did publish important research before the WPA project was initiated. The *Journal of Negro History* under the direction of W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson made a critical intervention in the dominant and largely racist recounting of American history as it pertained to African Americans. Fisk University, Southern University and Prairie View State College were each working on “separate and independent projects.”⁶

Forging a Link: Researching the Gullah Islands

It was out of Fisk University, established in 1867, that linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner began his research into African American music and folklore with a particular eye toward tracing the origins of black American culture. Turner, who earned his master’s degree from Harvard University and a doctorate from the University of Chicago, was chiefly interested in the Gullah people, a cultural niche of African Americans who had inhabited the coastal South for hundreds of years. These coastal peoples extend kin networks from the Carolinas south into Florida and Georgia. Common folklore and traditions knit the disparate communities together. Turner’s primary interest in the Gullah was the strong African influence he detected in their language. He spent twenty years documenting the unique language and dialect of the Gullah and Geechee (as they are known in Charleston, South Carolina). His research finally culminated in a book that became a classic in the academy, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*.

The main concentration of Gullah people is located in a real estate hotspot for wealthy

³ The full title of the book is *American Negro Slavery, a Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor, as Determined by the Plantation Regime*, and can be found online at Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/11490>)

⁴ Yetman, *ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

vacationers known as Hilton Head. Before Spanish exploration, several indigenous tribes (who were eventually pushed out when white opportunists realized the soil was rich and could be cultivated with slave labor) inhabited the lowland islands off the coast of the Carolinas. In 1663 an English sea captain named William Hilton surveyed the land and dubbed it “Hilton’s Headland.” The American colonists who settled here utilized slave labor to develop the region. In addition to townships, they built sprawling plantation estates, though it took some time before plantation owners realized what crops would successfully grow in this wet, marshy environment. By the early 1700s, slave traders began importing captives from the coastal regions of West Africa and captives from the “windward coast” or “rice coast” were the predominant group funneled into the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia.⁷ Rice became a main commodity produced on the low-lying Gullah islands. Plantation owners paid a premium price for these slaves who were endowed with thousands of years of knowledge of rice cultivation. Long staple cotton, indigo and eventually tobacco were also grown as plantation crops.

Perhaps because of their expertise and the similar ecologies of these coastal regions on either side of the Atlantic, black culture on Hilton Head has retained a remarkable amount of its African origins.⁸ The Gullah people inhabiting the coastal regions of the American South share striking similarities to certain groups in West Africa. Today researchers have established that their preparation of food, expert basket weaving skills and patterning, music and bits of language have near exact matches in Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Liberia and Senegal. Unlike other regions where slaves commonly disbanded from others who shared their cultural homelands because of their agricultural skill, here a great concentration of people who shared cultural values, language and traditions set down new roots in America.

In the early 1930s Dr. Turner traveled to this region to continue his research into the Gullah people, hoping to uncover clear links to Africa. After interviewing several inhabitants, Turner found that “recreational forms among the Gullahs such as singing (frequently accompanied by dancing and hand-clapping) and story-telling often reveal significant African survivals.”⁹ The women in particular had retained planting songs, songs about healer women and unique stories which had distinguishing cultural characteristics.¹⁰ On visits to St. Simon Island and Darien, Georgia, and Edisto Island in South Carolina, Turner met Emma Hall, Julia

⁷ For more detailed information see Opala, Joseph A. *The Gullah: Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection*. (Freetown, Sierra Leone: United States Information Service, 1986). The work is out of print but excerpts can be found online.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Turner, Lorenzo Dow. *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002) p. 254.

¹⁰ Ibid, 257.

Armstrong and Eugenia Hutchinson who each shared songs that the linguist recorded. The songs were short, mere snippets really, often including only one or two intelligible words that sounded African. The meaning was lost to the women who sang them. Under a slave regime that deliberately and calculatingly stripped black Africans of their cultural connections to a homeland during “seasoning,” a long and arduous process that slaveholders often likened to breaking wild horses for domesticity. Indeed, breaking the human spirit was part of transforming a person into a slave; the brutal process included torture, degradation and the enforcement of a new language and customs upon recent arrivals to the New World. The intent was not just to cut those men and women sent to replenish the slave economy off from their own culture, but to enforce the total domination of the white slave-owning class. The retention of traditional songs and stories was an important means of spiritual survival. These bits and pieces were passed down like precious gems from generation to generation, the connective tissue of cultural memory, and served to disrupt the racist accounts of African origins by the slave-owning class. Turner asked a graduate student researcher named Solomon Coker to review the wire recordings of the folk songs he had collected. Coker listened carefully and recognized words from his own Mende language. They were onto something very special; the researchers had uncovered a secret centuries-old link between the Gullahs and their ancestors across the Atlantic ocean.

A Woman and Her Song

In 1931 in a small fishing village in Harris Neck, about thirty miles southwest of Savannah, Georgia, Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner encountered a woman named Amelia Dawley. Born in 1881, Dawley’s family had settled in the area after emancipation. Her ancestors had been cultivators of rice on the coastal plantations of the American South. She had stayed in the region all of her life and felt kinship with the people on Harris Neck who shared many of the cultural values and traditions that her mother had taught her. When Turner interviewed her he found that this fifty-year-old woman carried an extraordinary cultural treasure. Turner recorded a song Dawley had learned as a child and after consulting with Coker realized that it had clear African origins: “At least two versions of this song are well known on Harris Neck, Georgia,” Turner wrote, “and in both versions the words are from the Mende language... The singers of the song... had known it all their lives, but did not know the name of the language in which they sang it nor the exact meaning of the words.”¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

Coker recognized the word *kambei*, meaning “grave” in Mende. When he and Turner began translating the song, they discovered five unique stanzas that together made up the longest surviving text found in the U.S. with a direct link to Africa:

Amelia Dawley's Song (as transcribed by Lorenzo Dow Turner)

A woko mu mene kambei ya le; li, le tombe.
A woko mu mene; kambei ya le; le ka.
Ha sa wuli ngo siha; kpanga li le;
Ha sa wuli ngo, ndeli, ndi, ka.
Ha sa wuli ngo siha; kpanga li le;
Ha sa wuli ngo, ndeli, ndi, ka.
A woko mu mene; kambei ya le; li, le tombe.
A woko mu mene; kambei ya le; le ka.
Ha sa wuli ngo siha; kuha nda yia;
Ha sa wuli ngo, nedeli, ndi, ka

English Translation (by Lorenzo Dow Turner and Solomon Coker)

In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet, heart, be cool perfectly.
In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet, heart, be cool continually.
Death quickly the tree destroys, steals [it]; the remains disappear slowly;
Death quickly the tree destroys, be at rest, heart, continually.
Death quickly the tree destroys, steals [it]; the remains disappear slowly.
Death quickly the tree destroys; be at rest, heart, continually.
In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart, be cool perfectly.
In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart, be cool continually.
Death quickly the tree destroys, steals [it]; from afar a voice speaks;
Death quickly the tree destroys; be at rest, heart, continually.¹²

Distinguishable within Turner and Coker’s translation are West African themes that survived in other regions of the New World as well. In his book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* Robert Farris Thompson outlines the idea of *ashé*, a cool and calm energy that is sustained through connection to the *orisha*, or deities of Yoruban spirituality. The “mistress of ashé” is Oshun, a deity whose predictive powers are revered and whose presence is recognized in the coolness of water where she reigns supreme.¹³ Her force is significant and she is venerated for her ability to make troubles vanish with the power of her coolness, her measured retribution and her potentiality as borne in *ashé*.¹⁴ While water is not directly addressed by this song in translation, Oshun’s perpetual coolness is likely distinguishable; a perpetually cool heart would be one protected and at peace. Other significant clues that Turner and Coker revealed in translation are the idea of a tree being destroyed, its remains slowly eroding, and the presence of a faraway voice speaking to the singer of the song. Trees have long been used as metaphors for ancestry; with wide root bases, trees stand sturdy even in the most powerful of storms.

¹² Ibid., 256.

¹³ Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) p. 79.

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

The Language You Cry In

Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner's extensive work and wire recordings lay relatively dormant until the 1980s when a young researcher named Joseph Opala began inquiry into the connections between the "rice coast" in West Africa and the coastal regions of the American South. Opala, a white man from Oklahoma who had worked with farmers in Sierra Leone while abroad with the Peace Corps, focused his research into the transatlantic slave trade around a commodity: rice.¹⁵ Knowing that skilled laborers were needed to cultivate the crop in the West, Opala followed the archives of sale from Sierra Leone to ports in North Carolina and Georgia.

Sierra Leone has within its borders approximately 250 miles of coastline. Its harbor is the third largest naturally occurring harbor in the world, making it an ideal post for the slave trade. It is here that around 1670 the English set up a slave fort at Bunce Island, a tiny parcel of land surrounded by the Sierra Leone River approximately 1650 feet long and 350 feet wide.¹⁶ The brackish estuary where the Rokel River and Port Loko Creek merge to form the Sierra Leone River is home to rich marine life, including a healthy population of crocodiles that kept the slaves held captive on the island from trying the waters. Contemporary black Americans have sought to uncover their roots through this tiny portal into the transatlantic slave trade, and many have made a symbolic pilgrimage back to this seemingly haunted place. Visitors describe an awesome and bone-chilling power surrounding the slave castle that stands in ruins on the island. While hundreds of human beings died on the prison island, only the gravesites of white traders and overseers were marked with headstones. However, the history of the island was deliberately veiled: "In the 1950s and 1960s—at the time of the American Civil Rights' Movement—descendants of the slave traders attempted to erase their family's names from a shameful chapter in history. They paid for the gravestones of their relatives who lived and died on the island to be smashed up."¹⁷ The bodies of African captives were likely thrown into the river for crocodiles to devour. It was via this small tract of land that Opala began to knit together Turner's research, Amelia Dawley's song and the people of Sierra Leone.

A more well-known connection between the Americas and Sierra Leone was made through another song that is prized as one of the world's most famous hymns. John Newton, the lyricist of "Amazing Grace," a song about coming to see the slave trade as criminal, spent several years as a slave trader working the coastal regions of Sierra Leone.¹⁸ Several musicologists have pointed out that the melody for this famous hymn is composed within the

¹⁵ Farrow, Anne. "The Scholar and the Slave Trade." April 3, 2005. See http://www.courant.com/hc-bunce_opala.artapr03,0,2651302.story.

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunce_Island.

¹⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/picture_gallery/07/africa_bunce_island/html/5.stm.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

confines of the pentatonic scale, known in early America as the “slave scale,” and follows the patterning of a West African sorrow song.¹⁹ It is likely that Newton heard the melody either in the prisons or rising up from the bowels of the slave ships aboard which he worked. This connection between American music and Sierra Leone is what led Opala back to the coastal lands of the American South.

In 1989 Opala rediscovered the recordings Turner had made of Amelia Dawley singing and the lectures in which he had traced the linguistic connection between the Gullah people and their regional African ancestry. He went back to Harris Neck, Georgia and looked for anyone who remembered the song that Amelia Dawley had sung for Lorenzo Turner a half a century earlier. The people of the island community had since scattered: In 1942 “the federal government had ejected the Gullahs from Harris Neck...in order to build an air base on the island. The families had scattered far and wide, and it was generally assumed that the song had died with Amelia Dawley in 1955.”²⁰

Opala implored locals to search for Dawley or any of her descendents. It was then that a Gullah native, Lauretta Sams, introduced Opala to Amelia Dawley’s only surviving child, Mary Moran. When Opala met Moran, she was in her seventies and as the eldest in the family had tens of grandchildren and great-grands. Sure enough, she remembered her mother’s song:

Amelia Dawley's Song (as transcribed by Joseph Opala)
Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay tambay
Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay kah.
Ha suh wileego seehai yuh gbangah lilly
Ha suh wileego dwelin duh kwen
Ha suh wileego seehi uh kwendaiyah.

Opala recorded Mary Moran singing her mother’s song and set to work. Since Turner and Solomon Coker had zeroed in on Mende words within the song, Opala found a linguist in Sierra Leone, Tazieff Koroma, who helped to translate the anglicized version of the song into modern Mende:

Corresponding text in Modern Mende (by Tazieff Koroma and Joseph Opala)
A wa kaka, mu mohne; kambei ya le'i; lii i lei tambee.
A wa kaka, mu mohne; kambei ya le'i; lii i lei ka.
So ha a guli wohloh, i sihan; yey kpangгаа a lolohhu lee.
So ha a guli wohloh; ndi lei; ndi let, kaka.
So ha a guli wohloh, i sihan; kuhan ma wo ndayia ley.

Koroma spent hours with Opala and another linguist named Edward Benya pouring over each stanza of the song until they could piece together the meaning using the translation work

¹⁹ Those interested can view a particularly moving rendition of Wintley Phipps performing Amazing Grace with his explanation of how Newton may have first encountered the melody for what has become a treasured American hymn: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMF_24cQqT0.

²⁰ Fletcher, Martin. *Almost Heaven*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000) 82.

already done by Turner and Coker. After several iterations, translations and interpretations, the researchers finally felt satisfied that they had captured the essence of the song:

English Translation (translated by Tazieff Koroma, Edward Benya and Joseph Opala)
Everyone come together, let us work hard;
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be perfectly at peace.
Everyone come together, let us work hard:
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be at peace at once.
Sudden death commands everyone's attention,
like a firing gun.
Sudden death commands everyone's attention,
oh elders, oh heads of family
Sudden death commands everyone's attention,
like a distant drum beat.

The notion of a grave or burial site is preserved from the original translation, but the tree has disappeared, replaced instead with elders and heads of family. A gun is introduced to the story signaling war and iron, both emblematic of the powerful Ogún, another Yoruban deity of great significance in the New World. Finally, the voice that speaks from afar is rendered in the song of a drum; a complicated and ancient language that gave captives in the New World the means to stay connected to their homelands, to culture, and to one another, as coded messages were passed through the drumming of enslaved hands.

Opala then shared the translation with Mary Moran and she was struck by its significance. “I just thought it was a little something to dance by,” explains Mary Moran, “I did not know that it was a funeral hymn. Probably if I’d known, I never would have danced to that little old song, but I didn’t know no better. My mother didn’t know what it was herself. That was the way my grandmother taught it to her. She taught it to us.”²¹ Even without understanding the meaning of the song, Moran appreciated the cultural inheritance she was given. The ancestral chain that the song wove together testifies to the power of survival that knits the Gullah people together. Before meeting Opala, Moran had attempted to teach the song to her descendants as well. She found that her grandchildren were more interested in the song than her children. They sang and danced to it just as she had as a small girl.

Armed with having met a living successor stateside, Opala drew together a team to find living successors in Africa. He knew from Turner’s research that the language evident in Dawley’s song was Mende, and his own research into the rice plantation system had demonstrated a deliberate link between the captives taken from coastal areas of Sierra Leone to the islands off of the Carolinas and Georgia. His team, including Koroma and an ethnomusicologist Cynthia Schmidt, traveled for several weeks around Sierra Leone in search of

²¹ Mary Moran interviewed in film documentary *The Language You Cry In*. Producer/Directors: Alvaro Toepke and Angel Serrano. Narrator: Vertamae Grosvenor. California Newsreel, 1998. 52 minutes.

anyone who might recognize the words, meaning or melody of the song. After visiting many villages, Opala and Koroma called off the search, tremendously disheartened. Schmidt set out on her own, trying one more location in the southernmost tip of Sierra Leone.

Turner's research had uncovered both Mende and Vai words in the songs he found amongst the Gullah, indicating a region in the far South of Sierra Leone (below the Pujehun District where Opala and his team had been looking) near the Liberian borderlands. Had Opala paid closer attention to Turner's research, particularly to the geographical hints evidenced by the language derivations, he may have visited the tiny village of Senehun Ngola earlier. It was here that a group of women finally recognized the song. Schmidt watched utterly rapt as the women sang along to the recording Turner had made nearly fifty years earlier. The link had finally been made.

The song, it turned out, was a funeral dirge, a gathering of the community to help the departed "cross the river," part of a ceremony known amongst the people of Senehun Ngola as *Tenjami*. The ritual surrounding burial was a rite women passed between one another, and only they sang the song in preparation for the ceremony. As the women paint their bodies with white clay, symbolizing death, they prepare a meal of red rice and chicken for the villagers (red rice is common fare amongst the Gullah). Not coincidentally, crossing the river is also a term used by American blacks to describe death. It takes on a special significance within the context of this song, however. As captive slaves were forcibly transported across the Sierra Leone River to the holding pens at Bunce Island, it was a literal river that first separated them from their homeland. It would be the last time they walked on African soil.

Bendu Jabati was among the women who recognized the song. It had changed a bit over time and miles, but she knew the song immediately. Jabati had learned the song from her grandmother, who taught her to be solemn as she sang it. It was a song of passing, her grandmother had explained, and it was to be taken seriously. Of equal significance Jabati explained, was that few women knew it. Anyone who knew that song, she concluded, she would recognize as kin.

In 1997 after war had ravaged Sierra Leone, Mary Moran and her family traveled across the Atlantic to Senehun Ngola. Over two hundred years had likely passed since the woman who carried that song to America had been stolen away from her people. There she met Bendu Jabati whose stoic character finally broke as she knelt prostrate before Mary Moran. The two women held each other sobbing, overwhelmed by the story they shared, a bittersweet revival of the transatlantic slave trade made flesh by one song. The extraordinary story is documented in a modestly produced film called *The Language You Cry In*.

Nabi Jah, the ninety-year-old chief of Senehun Ngola, blind with age, called for the resurrection of a *Tenjami* ceremony for Moran and her family. He reflected on the lost one who centuries before had carried the song with her across the ocean, “that song would be the most valuable thing she could take,” he explained. “It could connect her to all her ancestors and to their continued blessings.”²²

Moran’s journey to Africa was a turning point in her life and the life of her children. They felt an incomparable sense of connectivity, of belonging. Yet, it did not erase the disappointment she suffered when the government reclaimed the land on which she and her mother were born:

The one sadness in [Mary Moran’s] life was that her people never got their island back. The air base had barely been completed before the ground was found to be too soggy to support the heavy aircraft, but there was no way the white authorities were going to return Harris Neck to the Gullahs and it eventually became a national wildlife refuge. On a still, warm January afternoon Mrs. Moran’s son Bill took us over there. The overgrown runways were still visible, slicing through the forest. All other human signs of habitation had long since been destroyed save for a single Gullah cemetery where a small stone marks Amelia Dawley’s grave.²³

Like mitochondrial DNA, the genetic material that links all of humankind through an impressive chain of women, Amelia Dawley’s song led her daughter home. Mary Moran’s journey had revitalized something she already knew in her blood. The Mende have a saying that encapsulates the power of memory, “you know who a person is by the language they cry in.”²⁴

Overwriting History: White-washing Slavery

When it was discovered that “Amelia’s Song” traced black American lineage to Sierra Leone via Bunce Island, what some contemporary whites found appealing about the story was that a white researcher was credited with reuniting African Americans with their ancestral village. This claim is both more and less complicated than it seems.

Endemic within the fields of anthropology, but symptomatic of a larger issue within the American media and academy is the appeal of crediting whites with the preservation of black culture and history. In several of the articles and reviews that emerged after Amelia Dawley’s story was resurrected for a contemporary American public, Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner is not mentioned. Instead, Joseph Opala is often credited with “finding Amelia’s song.” One reporter working for *The Hartford Courant*, Anne Farrow, all but erases any black contribution to the story. “For many African Americans,” Farrow writes, Bunce Island “holds a key piece of the

²² Nabi Jah interviewed for the documentary *The Language You Cry In*. Producer/Directors: Alvaro Toepke and Angel Serrano. Narrator: Vertamae Grosvenor. California Newsreel, 1998. 52 minutes.

²³ Fletcher, *ibid.*, 84.

²⁴ Nabi Jah interviewed for the documentary *The Language You Cry In*, *ibid.*

past, and a bearded, strongly built Oklahoman, a white man who thinks this beleaguered country is one of the most beautiful and important places on earth, knew it first.”²⁵ This erasure of black contributions to the historical record is common and systemic within American culture. Unlike Ulrich Bonnell Phillips’ claim in 1918 that slavery was in fact a benevolent institution, it was in 2005 that Farrow publicly credited Opala with the discovery and subsequent research that unlocked the secret of the Mende song that Turner spent years researching and lecturing about at prestigious colleges and universities around the country in the 1930s and 1940s. The fact that only four years ago, Farrow specifically pointed out that “a white man knew [the story of the song] first” is testament to the enduring need some whites feel to replace their complicit inheritance of privilege with a more humane story, one starring a great white savior.

What makes Farrow’s claim so interesting is that most often white people are not racially identified as such when referenced by other whites. The fact that she seems to take a special pride in crediting Opala with the discovery of Amelia Dawley’s song and her family’s repatriation to their ancestral homelands is subsequently suspicious. Over and over in both historical literature and in Hollywood films, white Americans depict themselves as compassionate abolitionists or benign participants in the project of slavery. However, more noxious than willful ignorance in regard to white privilege is the cultural warfare waged against black intelligence, effectiveness, and value. Black people world-over understand what happened when their ancestors were forcibly relocated to the New World—anyone aware of his or her African ancestry must reckon with the slave trade and the horrors of the Middle Passage, simply by virtue of their nationality outside the African continent—a birthright and a legacy that breathes and walks in the bodies of those living in the contemporary New World. Most African Americans do not need whites to acknowledge that slavery happened, or even to concede that white people continue to profit from its legacy to this day. Instead, what many black teachers and scholars seek to do is recover the history that gives blacks *agency* within the building of this nation, the preservation of our unique history and culture, and to make unnecessary the stamp of approval by whites who place themselves in positions of power that “verify” truth.

A more interesting question is *why*. Why would a story like Opala’s be so valuable to white audiences? Why would Farrow deliberately underscore his whiteness as she claims he “knew it first.” Just like the English who paid to have their ancestors’ grave stones demolished at Bunce Island to erase family ties to the slave trade, crediting a white researcher with reuniting a black American family with living kin in Africa acts as a symbolic reparation of sorts

²⁵ Farrow, Anne. “The Scholar and the Slave Trade.” April 3, 2005. See http://www.courant.com/hc-bunce_opala.artapr03,0,2651302.story.

for the violence of slavery. It overwrites history with a pleasant picture of whites as liberators instead of profiteers.

True some whites may have found black culture worthy of research, of study, but the black folks that carried the language, the music, the customs, they *lived* it. Many did not require “hard evidence” about its origins—they knew the ancestral ties, needed them, and had taken great pains over generations to preserve them. It is because of their efforts that researchers had anything to study at all. Too often intellectuals strip their subjects of agency through a claim of “discovery.” It is a particularly heinous act of cultural violence to alienate African Americans from their ancestral origins in order to claim a white man knew it first. Farrow, who bluntly insinuated that a white researcher knew more about black ancestry than black people themselves, has since dedicated several subsequent articles and a book to exploring the American slave trade and is billed by herself and her colleagues as a leading expert in the field.²⁶

The Land Where the Blues Began

All of these complicated issues, the interruption of genealogical ties because of the slave trade, the politics of memory, of history and representation, and the subsequent dissemination of research throughout the academy and mainstream culture, are at play within *Black Pearl Sings!* The story that inspired the play is truly a remarkable one. The ability to trace one’s ancestral roots through a simple song took Mary Moran and her family on an epic, life-changing journey.

It began with one woman taken from a tiny village in Sierra Leone, held captive at Bunce Island, locked into a slave ship that traveled thousands of miles across the Atlantic, deposited on American soil and sold into slavery. She remembered her ancestral song and taught it to her daughter. The song was passed down between generations of women, some enslaved and some eventually free. Then, a fellow descendant of African slaves, a scholar benefiting from the advances made by his forbearers to experience some of the finest institutions of higher learning the world has to offer, went to a place in America where African culture seemed strong. He encountered Amelia Dawley, a woman who had kept the song with her and gave it to him. He recorded it, freezing it in time and preserving its melody and words. He found a research assistant, who had traveled to America to get a world-class education, to endow himself with the power to help his family across the sea. This young man found words he recognized amongst people he had never met. Years later a young American joined the Peace Corps and, working with farmers in Sierra Leone began to suspect a connection between rice cultivation in West Africa and in the coastal South of the U.S. He recovered the song a woman

²⁶ See Farrow, Anne; Joel Lang and Jennifer Frank. *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005).

had sung, that a researcher recorded, that an African graduate student had translated. He met the woman's daughter and his team tracked the song to a tiny village across the sea. Years later the American family and the African family shared a meal of red rice and chicken in their ancestral homelands after a two hundred year separation.

Joseph Opala made use of a rich research archive, thanks in large part to the WPA initiative to document American folk stories and songs. One of the primary contributors to this archive was John Avery Lomax a white musicologist who sought to preserve the music of the American South. Born in Goodman, Mississippi, he was no stranger to Delta culture, though his sense of fairness may have felt foreign at times. Lomax, who began his career in music documenting Western ballads, insisted on crediting black cowboys for their contribution to his collection. "A man whose pioneering efforts in folklore research established him as 'the greatest popularizer and one of the greatest field collectors of American folksong,' Lomax was instrumental in identifying and preserving important black folk materials that had previously been overlooked or ignored."²⁷ John Lomax's son, Alan, eventually joined him in the field, and together the two documented hundreds of songs unique to the American South. As his ear grew more discerning, Alan Lomax's fieldwork led him deeper into the Delta, where his father was born in 1867. He visited plantations and levees, rail yards and barbershops, speakeasies and churches, collecting songs along the way. The story of his journey throughout the Delta in the forties is remarkable. *The Land Where the Blues Began*, finally published in 1993, is one of the most expansive records of American Southern folk music and stories available to contemporary readers. His research was funded (albeit nominally) by the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk Song with the same federal monies allocated to the slave narrative archive project.

While much larger in scope, the project Alan Lomax underwent to archive music in the Delta was not unlike that which Susannah undertakes in *Black Pearl Sings!* In fact there were many such researchers who attempted to plumb the depths of the Delta for diamonds in the rough. The famous writer Zora Neale Hurston did extensive research into the black folkloric culture of the South, working as an anthropologist on a fellowship from Barnard where she attended college.²⁸ She compiled much of what she saw in a beautiful nonfiction collection

²⁷ Yetman, *ibid.*

²⁸ Born around the turn of the 20th century Zora Neale Hurston was the daughter of a preacher and a schoolteacher. She earned an Associate's degree from Howard University and began writing short fiction pieces. In 1924 Hurston arrived in New York and began work toward her Bachelor's degree. She was the first black student to graduate from Barnard College, where she won a prestigious research fellowship to document folklore in the American South. In 1935 she compiled her research into a book published under the title *Mules and Men*. She went on to travel Haiti, researching voodoo and cultural practices

entitled *Mules and Men*. Hurston was a friend of Lomax, and perhaps they influenced one another. Both writers make certain that the audience is aware of seeing the stories they recount through the eyes of a particular subject position.

What separates *The Land Where the Blues Began* from other books similar in theme written by white researchers is the author's close proximity to the story. He never loses sight of himself within the book, or allows the reader to either. He is most certainly a white man, reminded of it whenever white peace officers (a term Lomax employs with an ironic sting) interrupt his conversations with black folks in bars, barbershops or on plantations where many still worked as sharecroppers. Yet it is not so much the details of the story but the self-reflexivity with which they are arranged that rewards the reader with the sense of respectfully crossing a cultural divide. Lomax never once assumes he "gets it" and manages his outsider status with sensitivity. He knows that he would not have been granted access to such rich material without his friend and fellow researcher Lewis Jones, a black sociologist from Fisk University who had not only cultivated connections amongst the folk in the Delta, but had come to them unadorned, without the patronizing and superior tone that many educated black men and women harbored at the time. Jones was responsible in large part for getting Lomax into the backrooms and alleyways where the blues and the stories that surrounded the music were most animate.

There was something powerful and unyielding about the music, and while propertied whites did not necessarily understand what was being said, the anxiety that had reigned for hundreds of years during slavery, palpated by the incredible resilience of black laborers, was enough to convince them to keep a lid on it wherever possible. The blues were the subterfuge of the slave system and had managed to outlast it.

Since the majority of black people worked as sharecroppers during the years he traveled the Delta, if Lomax wanted to speak directly with them he would have to visit the fields and cabins where they lived and worked. His status as a born and bred Southerner granted him access to many of the plantations, though his whiteness was cause for great alarm, as most whites including the local law enforcement assumed he was "an agitator from the North." Inevitably, authoritative whites from the region would demand to see his draft card, assuming he was "anti-American;" since he was clearly upsetting the system of white domination he was also most likely a draft-dodger. Luckily, Lomax had served, but he presented his card with unease, knowing that while it would subdue the battery of questions, it might just as well infuriate local whites with ineffectuality.

surrounding religion recounted in *Tell My Horse*. She is also the author of the highly celebrated *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Hurston died on January 28, 1960.

Lomax, who was born in Texas, knew how delicately one had to navigate the perils of customary race relations in the South. It was this understanding that allowed him to “gradually slide from the front gate around to the back pasture where the songs live.”²⁹ Still, his impulse toward civility betrayed the respect he had for his interviewees. This more than anything enraged propertied whites and law enforcement officials. On more than one occasion referring to a black man or woman as “Mister” or “Missus,” or the simple act of shaking a black man’s hand in public, landed him in dire situations with white locals. It also made local blacks uneasy. He was regarded by some as reckless, threatening the fragile freedoms they had secured to go unnoticed by domineering whites. Lomax had to tread lightly. It took time to adjust to the stronghold of the Delta, where the last bastions of racial oppression operated unchecked by the currents toward social change sweeping the rest of the nation in the forties.

Every county in the South is a small empire, with its own autonomous power. This county system of government has the virtue of allowing a small area, a small parcel of votes, the opportunity to shape a local lifestyle, independent of the state and national pattern...In the old days a county could refuse to participate in the state road-building program, and, when you hit the county line, you might drive for a tormented long hour along a washboard gravel road before your tires began to whisper on concrete again. At some few county lines in the South, there were signs that read NEGRO, DON’T LET THE NIGHT CATCH YOU IN THIS COUNTY. KEEP MOVING. These signs might not be the work of the county officials, but, since they were stained by time, it was obvious that they had seen them and either approved or feared to take them down.³⁰

Indeed, the further Lomax got from the Delta, the more easily stories about its hardship flowed, but few blacks had means toward mobility and Lomax worked carefully to set “down-home” folks at ease. He often took a backseat during interviews, letting the music guide the life histories he culled. He traveled with a phonograph, an enormously heavy piece of equipment that etched out the recordings on black acetate discs. His compilations played an integral role in the development of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress.

In story after story, many elicited through the explication of songs and field hollers, Lomax heard the pain of enslavement and disenfranchisement. Music was often the sole comfort laborers had as they toiled in ungodly heat and alongside unfathomable pestilence. Yet the music also celebrates a continuity of culture that in the face of almost total domination seems miraculous. As Lomax interviewed local elders, the feats of strength they recount seem incredible, particularly those who prepared the uncultivated land for planting. The levees that run more than a thousand miles along either side of the Mississippi River from Cairo, Illinois past New Orleans are “very likely the biggest thing that man has ever made...higher and longer

²⁹ Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where The Blues Began*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993) p. 3.

³⁰ Lomax, *ibid.*, 21.

than the Great Wall of China.”³¹ For over a century the enormous dykes were built and maintained by muleskinners, men outfitted only with shovels, wheelbarrows and teams of mules. Roustabouts who worked the riverboats transported cargo on their backs that today we would not think twice about using a machine to do—and yet this is how they were treated, as machines, with little acknowledgement of their humanity, used for their astonishing strength and skill, without gratitude for their labor or recognition of their creativity.

*In the South, when you do anything that's wrong,
In the South, when you do anything that's wrong,
They'll sho put you down on the county farm.*

*They'll put you under a man called Captain Jack,
They'll put you under a man called Captain Jack,
Who'll write his name up and down your back.*³²

The laborers celebrated one another and took great pride in their work, recounting their stories almost uniformly without adornment or malice toward those who forced them into such deplorable conditions. This is not to say they were without anger, they kept their pain and frustration at bay because they had to, because mouthing off or fighting back could get you killed, or worse. Instead they masked their emotions in music, in the uniquely black American treasure known as the blues.

Nowadays we begin to find out from the slave narratives and elsewhere how deep the anger has been, how almost ungovernable the rage. The great Bessie Jones told me, after we'd been recording for several months, “You know someday all you white folks will woke up dead. See, we has people work in many kitchens all over the country, and on that certain day, we can send out the word—‘Poison today.’ Then most of you—all be dead at the same time.” She laughed. Yet Bessie was the most loving friend a person could have. She was a mother of the church; she had been born again; she'd been washed in the blood of the Lamb, and she loved everybody.³³

Jones had placed her finger firmly on the pressure point of white anxiety in the South. Somewhere inside the men and women who had profited so immensely from black labor and disenfranchisement, they sensed how immoral the system was. Some of the most vehement and vicious racism to be found in the Delta is due to this sensibility. The system that silences the rage rather than letting it be aired perpetuates a deep and abiding fear of retribution. Yet and still, there is a great intimacy in the South. Many families, black and white, have been linked for centuries, some extending back four and five generations. The system was maintained through a carefully constructed and tacitly enforced practice of daily denigration. From being required to step off a sidewalk to let a white person pass by to being snatched up and put to work in spite of whatever will a man or woman might have, the American South was built through a complex

³¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

³² *Ibid.*, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

network of power that extended from kitchens and parlors to fields and prison yards.

The Mississippi Delta is a place unique in the world with a cultural mixture borne from a deeply entrenched system of domination and subordination. While sugar cane and rice were grown in the region early in its agricultural settlement, the area is primarily known for its massive cotton plantations that stretched uninterrupted as far as the human eye could see. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were brought here, many coming through port in New Orleans, to cultivate plantations out of wild deciduous and pine forests in low swampland. The Delta is periodically flooded with overflow from the great river that cuts through the middle of America and empties into the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi. Silt rich with minerals and natural fertilizers was annually left behind as the floodwaters receded, making the land some of the richest in the world. Lomax describes the region and its particular history eloquently:

We were in the heart of the Delta, the vast floodplain of the Mississippi stretching south from Memphis along both sides of the great river, and endowed by its yearly overflow through the ages with the deepest topsoil on earth. This treasure made its white owners not only rich but arrogant, although their main achievement had been to enslave and exploit the black laborers who actually cleared and tilled the land. The blacks had not only applied their inherited African agricultural skills to the development of the Delta, but had transformed West African music into a new style, called the blues, which was now uncoiling in the ear of the whole world.³⁴

Following the Music: The Quest for Origins

Early research on Southern black culture shares a common theme: nearly all of it has as its center a quest for the singular thread that would bear out African origins. In *Black Pearl Sings!* Pearl is described as “an authentic doorway to the past,” and for that reason is considered highly valuable. Even Lomax set out “to locate the cultural wellsprings of this underprivileged majority.”³⁵ Certainly American blacks had retained cultural practices, tastes, beliefs and folklore that had roots in Africa. Often, though, these traditions flowered differently in the Americas, especially as they were passed orally through the generations, each further from its source than the former. By the time the Works Progress Administration initiated the preservation of slave narratives, most of what was remembered was deeply linked to family members, parents, grandparents, and signaled an important connection to those who had come before. When talking to an elder one might hear her or him say, “my mother gave me that song and her mother gave it to her.” Often, as in the case of Mary Moran, the words and melody carried a unique commitment to honor ancestry and remember the dead and the original meaning was lost to time.

³⁴ Ibid., 64.

³⁵ Ibid., xiii.

Gradually I began to see Delta culture as the produce of the reaction of a powerful African tradition to a new and often harsher social environment... It became clear that black Africa had distinctive performance styles, quite as formal as those of Western Europe. Moreover, these expressive patterns clearly represented and reinforced the fundamental structures of African society. Their broad provenance throughout Africa south of the Sahara indicated that, even though they had been transmitted orally and nonverbally, these cultural traditions were both powerful and stable. Careful comparison showed that black African nonverbal performance traditions had survived virtually intact in African America, and had shaped all its distinctive rhythmic arts, during both the colonial and postcolonial periods.³⁶

The common fascination with unearthing proof of cultural continuity signaled the importance of such a find to the fields of sociology, history and musicology. It also betrayed the American condition, the romanticized eastern currents that led those not indigenous to the continent toward some real or imagined homeland. The discovery of connective tissue between the American descendants of Africa and the far continent also may relieve a tacit sense of guilt deep in American whites in regard to the project of slavery and the deliberate cultural assault to which the enslaved were subjected. Whatever the impetus, research into black American life became an integral part of weaving together the story of the birth of a nation, one hungry to establish its own unique culture but reluctant to sever itself completely from the past.

Black Pearl Sings!

“My biggest dream is to find a song that goes back *before* slavery times; that came here from Africa.” In the first act Susannah reveals her aspirations to Pearl, a convict she has sequestered on a Texas prison farm. Employed by the Library of Congress, Susannah is researching folk music for the WPA. She is under pressure to unearth something unique, something original. There is suddenly currency surrounding black culture and Susannah has come to capitalize on the country’s interest.

In 1935 the appeal for black American music was greater than entertainment. The Library of Congress, under the Roosevelt administration, had secured federal monies for the preservation of a long and unresolved chapter in American history. The nation was aging; there were few left who could speak about slavery with firsthand experience. Those who did remember were wary of revisiting it, of airing injustices that might provoke unsympathetic response or cruel reckoning. In the South especially, the truth had several sides and only certain versions were allowed to publicly circulate in regard to slavery. Nevertheless, in the prisons and plantations where black laborers toiled for little or no compensation, stories were very much alive. Still, few were willing to share with whites, well intentioned or not.

The prisons and plantation farms in the South housed an enormous labor force made up

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

of black men and women incarcerated for everything from vagrancy to murder and many had never experienced the formality of due process. Men could be picked up on the street in one county for something that would go unnoticed in another. Navigating the gauntlet of the “emancipated” South required a degree of care and deference that contemporary Americans find difficult to imagine.

Loathe to see the free labor force dissipate after emancipation, hundreds of black men were arrested as they tried to make their way North where cheap but nevertheless *paid* labor was needed in the mills and factories. In the South, the great majority of laborers were either ensnared in the ceaseless debt system of sharecropping or incarcerated outright. While the sharecroppers kept the agricultural economy that had once been such a boon for the South from grinding to a halt, the prisoners were moved about to dig ditches, build roads, lay railroad ties, and as Pearl does, clear land for cultivation.

It is important to recognize the role that class played in assigning position within Southern society. The labor force was made up of the very poor. There were other castes of black society operating in and throughout the South who, because of education, the accumulation of inheritance over generations, or simply because of skin color, benefited from a comparatively less harsh lifestyle. While some black scholars like W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Dow Turner working out of Fisk University saw great value in preserving the culture of the laborers, most were content to keep their distance and protect their station from risk of association with the poor, who throughout history have been criminalized.

White researchers, like Alan Lomax or his father before him, also endured a kind of virulent disapproval from local whites in the South who saw them as “disloyalists” or “nigger-lovers.” While afforded unparalleled mobility, there were great risks for those working alone.

As a woman, Susannah is perhaps less threatening. She has learned to capitalize on men’s propensity to display power in her presence and often gains access to incarcerated blacks simply because local law enforcement officers wish to prove their stature and prowess. Still, the prison yards and chain gangs were typically located in remote areas where an overseer’s whims could be easily enforced at will. We know from letters, petitions, and family stories that rape was not an uncommon feature of female incarceration. In the prison systems women did what they had to do to survive, often enduring remarkable tortures and daily humiliations.

This is the backdrop against which the story *Black Pearl Sings!* is staged. As the play progresses, each month the number of prisoners climbs, tallied on a chalkboard inside the warden’s office where the two women meet. Throughout the Depression era, vagrancy and theft were frequent charges brought against the poor. Even as the country began to knit itself

together with federal aid for the poor and starving, the South maintained its own rules:

‘I remember here in ’31, the government sent a carload of meat to give to the people that didn’t have no work to do and didn’t have nothing to go on... They kept the meat loaded up until it spoiled and they had to burn it up, before they would give it to them... And the government furnished flour and things and they even written on the sack, NOT TO BE SOLD, TO BE GIVEN OUT. But even after that, they wouldn’t give it out to the colored; they burned it instead.’³⁷

Certainly to prevent starving people from eating, worse yet letting food go to waste, was a criminal act, but malevolence was not the sole motivation. The entrenched sense that in the South nothing was free, especially as it pertained to black laborers, was critical to a carefully maintained system of domination. The idea of *donations*, or food without work, would fly in the face of this system that kept its labor immobilized through restricted access to basic human needs like food, shelter and clothing. Moreover, since the food had come from the federal government, it signaled a show of power that outstripped local law enforcement. Letting the food go to waste was a reminder that regardless of the law of the land, the rebel South would maintain its own policies.

Pearl has been incarcerated for murder and is serving time on a Texas prison farm when she and Susannah meet. Though she never confirms it, it is implied she castrated a man for sexually assaulting her daughter, who was twelve and reaching puberty at the time. In 1935 she has been in prison for ten years, and her daughter, left to fend for herself, is now a grown woman adrift somewhere in the South. This more than anything distresses Pearl; her child has grown up without her protection, and she has no idea where she is or whether she is safe. Susannah exploits Pearl’s keen desire to be reunited with her child, and leverages the potential of a reunion to get what she wants from Pearl.

Susannah has interviewed several of the women incarcerated at the prison, and just as she is about to leave she hears a voice unlike the others. “Hey!” she yells to the prison guards, “I want whoever that is singing brought in here.”³⁸ Later Susannah comes to realize that Pearl may have deliberately sung so that she would overhear, shifting the dynamic of power between the women in an unexpected direction.

Pearl is naturally suspicious of Susannah, and rightfully so. Susannah talks at Pearl, not to her, and the deference Pearl is required to show the white woman through strictly enforced custom is not returned. Instead Susannah assumes that her reputation has preceded her, “the other women haven’t told you who I am?” she asks, before arrogantly informing Pearl, “I save souls.”³⁹ Susannah could be making a metaphorical reference to the music she records—that in a

³⁷ Ibid., 193-4. Lomax recorded Will Stark, “The Sawmill Balladeer.”

³⁸ Higgins, Frank. *Black Pearl Sings!* p. 1.

³⁹ Ibid., 2.

way, each song is a soul that she preserves for posterity. Later in the play she explains, “when a person dies, a library is lost...History isn’t just made by kings and presidents. People who pick cotton or cook the meals got a lot to do with it too.”⁴⁰ As it relates to Pearl, however, Susannah quickly establishes herself as someone in a position of power who can choose to make things happen in Pearl’s interest, or choose to leave her just as she found her.

Until Pearl establishes that she has something of value to Susannah, the women maintain a calculated distance. On paper, the dance in which the two women engage is tense, but when staged the stakes rise considerably. Audiences have the opportunity to observe the worlds that both women embody as they exchange furtive glances or face each other and square off, each refusing to make herself known and thus vulnerable to the other. It is American history made flesh, embodied by those pushed to the very outskirts of its traditional boundaries: women and people of color. Quickly both realize that each has something the other wants and in the sweltering heat of the warden’s office on a Texas prison farm, they strike a deal. In exchange for the songs, Susannah will work to free Pearl and reunite her with her daughter.

In order to gain her freedom Susannah suggests that Pearl sing a song for the Governor—a song the plantation owners sang. Pearl does not recall the words, but Susannah does, demonstrating the cultural pool out of which she has come. Pearl recalls that it entails something about “curtains of the night,” but because it belongs to the master class and empathizes with their fight to keep slaves during the Civil War, she leaves no space for its lyrics in her cultural memory. For Susannah, however, the song is familiar and she recalls the words fairly easily:

SUSANNAH: I know this song. [*She sings*]
When the curtains of the night
Are pinned back by the stars
I know not if fortune be fickle or fair.
Or if time on your memory wears.
I know that I love you, wherever you roam
*And will remember you, love, in my prayers.*⁴¹

The song romanticizes the war by replacing the politics with a story about separated lovers, a fairly common practice that simultaneously erases Southern efforts to keep slavery intact. Recorded in history and preserved in cultural memory, the Civil War can be remembered as a valiant attempt to safeguard Southern life. It explicitly demonstrates one of the major dilemmas of history, that it is not objective, and that the perspectives of its authors inevitably color the recounting of events. It also speaks to the importance of a diversified American history, one that includes various perspectives and places the unfolding of events in a kind of creative abrasion or

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 23.

tension from which a more tempered understanding of events can be gleaned.

As she sings, Susannah urges Pearl to join her. The playwright intersperses the lyrics of the song with “is that the one? See if you can get the melody,” and “there’s a second verse about fortune. Fortune is good for us.” But perhaps the most arresting moment in this exchange is when Susannah interrupts the song to remind Pearl, “you are singing for your freedom; now c’mon.” In order to gain her freedom, Pearl—a black woman, the descendant of slaves—will have to sing gallant praise of the soldiers who fought to keep her people enslaved. She refuses, “if singin’ that song’s what it takes to get a parole, I don’t want no parole.”⁴² Pearl opts instead for a field song her ancestors sang, musing that perhaps it was something the Governor’s people heard their slaves sing on their own plantations. The strange proximity between black and white in the South reverberates as Pearl sings “Reap What You Sow.”

Once the songs begin to emerge, Pearl has room to exact her own kind of power: “I don’t want to sing to no private. I want to sing to a general who can do somethin’ *for* me.” She explains, telling Susannah, “and since you want somethin’ I got, the least you can do is call me *Miz Johnson*.”⁴³ A tenuous relationship is formed between the two women; each is constantly demanding that the other prove her authenticity. Pearl requests that Susannah prove her expertise in her field. Susannah presses Pearl on her lineage, convinced she is harboring slave songs that might trace back to Africa. They are never quite on sure footing with one another; often Susannah will exact the power afforded her by virtue of her race over Pearl, perhaps unintentionally, habitually. In one exchange, the difficulty of relating to one another as they slip between intimacy and the politics of their world is conveyed quite poignantly:

SUSANNAH: I thought we’d become friends.
PEARL: We be friend-*ly*. I just a business proposition for you. I don’t even know who you *is* really.
SUSANNAH: I just told you.
PEARL: Not who you is *now*. I be dependent on you. If you sneeze, to me it’s a hurricane. How I know if I run out of songs you like, you don’t drop me?
SUSANNAH: I’d never do that.
PEARL: All I know ‘bout you is you be an expert in the South, but not in the South now. Can somebody take you ‘way from me? How I find my daughter then? You tell me how you got here. Or you get nothin’ more from me.⁴⁴

Like Alan Lomax, Susannah was born in Texas and though she does not place a great deal of emphasis on her own cultural treasures, she too has a special connection to music. She tells Pearl that she was named after “Oh, Susannah,” the famous folk song, but dismisses its

⁴² Ibid., 23.

⁴³ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

importance as a cultural survival.

SUSANNAH: It's stupid. My mother named me for the song "Oh, Susannah."
PEARL: You think your life woulda been better you was Okra?
SUSANNAH: At least okra helps people survive.
PEARL: Maybe "Oh, Susannah" helped your mother survive.⁴⁵

While it is easy for Susannah to see the value in black folk culture because the songs she collects will have the potential to bring her credibility and fame, she is unable to recognize the worth of her own ancestral history, dismissing the entirety of it because of the sexism inherent in her community. Pearl calls her on it, however, "why you look at somebody poor and think their life authentic? Don't you think your life authentic?"⁴⁶

Pearl's name also has humble, but powerfully metaphorical origins. Her mother told her, "'you irritatin.' A pearl start off as a speck of sand irritatin' the oyster. Most of 'em get throwed away. But I want you to last. A pearl is a speck of sand that stuck with it."⁴⁷ Pearl did endure, though her situation presently seems quite dire. Susannah's story, however, is much foggier. In bits and pieces Pearl learns more about the woman who has come looking for songs.

The environment in which Susannah was raised was rife with sexism. She periodically remembers her mother and father as sentinels who would have kept her from achieving her dreams. She explains, "where I come from, if a woman can cook, then you're expected to cook. Pretty soon you can't do anything *but* cook."⁴⁸ Her vehement refusal to relate to anything in her past, or share it with Pearl, signals the deliberate distance she has put between her dreams and her past. "The girls I grew up with have all popped out ten kids each," she explains. "They've already got faces like grandmothers. And if I had been pretty, that would've happened to me. Instead, I've had the chance to see more of this country more than all the girls I grew up with combined."⁴⁹

Her dream was thwarted, however, when her research was commandeered by a more established male professor, who took credit for her fieldwork and landed a cushy post in the academy leaving Susannah out in the cold. Her protests only served to get her "banished" from Washington D.C. where the Library of Congress is housed. Ironically, they sent her back to Texas, the land from which she came, to see if she could once again uncover authentic music amongst black laborers as she had amongst the rural whites living in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 30.

Susannah recounts one of her most precious finds to Pearl, a song she collected from an old woman who had learned it as a six-year-old aboard a ship coming from Ireland. She excitedly explains that the song recounts the immigration of the Irish to America during the potato famine. As Pearl listens somewhat coldly, the playwright seems to suggest that she does not realize that history can be carried in songs. Yet Pearl resists sharing her ancestral song with the researcher. Within the parameters of the play, it seems Pearl is simply holding out, refusing to satisfy Susannah's desire to find an original African song replanted in the United States. We know, however, from the historical record that black Americans were well aware of the power of song to preserve a deep and abiding cultural connection to Africa without arousing white suspicion. Thus the power dynamic between the two women is quite complex, as the audience is kept uncertain as to how much each woman actually knows and whether Pearl in particular may simply be feigning ignorance to keep Susannah's quest at bay.

The playwright leaves subtle clues to tip off a careful reader as to the parallels he draws between Amelia Dawley and Pearl. During the course of the play we discover that Pearl is originally from a small island off the coast of South Carolina. Typical of laborers from the region, Pearl worked "pounding rice," like many Gullah people who were brought from the coastal lands of Africa where they had learned to cultivate rice.⁵⁰ When the Federalists raided rebel states, the Gullahs were the first black people to be liberated. The Union Army came in to seal off the port. Plantation owners fled to the mainland, abandoning their homes and leaving the rich land unoccupied. To this day, descendants of the Gullah people once enslaved still occupy these coastal islands. This is why the box that Susannah recovers as she is tracking Pearl's daughter is so significant. It contained a worn blue handkerchief that Susannah assumes has some clandestine power. She mistakenly associates it with voodoo rituals. "Why you white people like it so much when somebody colored talks hoodoo?" Pearl asks.⁵¹ She presses Susannah on her assumption that the hanky represents witchcraft.

SUSANNAH: You're making me feel foolish.
PEARL: You're makin' my people look foolish.
SUSANNAH: No. That kerchief means something to you. I thought it might.
PEARL: Is that why you paid the back rent? Coz you think it's voodoo?
SUSANNAH: No.
PEARL: Yes. You think this is a magic kerchief.
SUSANNAH: I didn't know what it meant to you. I paid the rent because I thought it was important.
PEARL: You was right. This blue got power. Can't you tell what this blue is?
SUSANNAH: ...It looks old.
PEARL: In the War That Freed The Slaves, the Union Army, they come to the island right at the start. Drive the rebels off, free the slaves. Some of the men, they go to fight for the Union. My grandfather be one of 'em.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁵¹ Ibid., 33.

“agitators” as to the ways of Southern “civil society.” It was in their interest to keep whites from breaking rules in their presence. Pearl tells Susannah, “you a woman in trouble.” Without a spiritual foundation Susannah will not know when to draw the line as to what she would be willing to sell, which parts of herself she would be willing to sacrifice to achieve her dreams. Indeed it is Pearl’s sense of spiritual and ancestral connection that prevents her from sharing an ancient song with Susannah. This is where she draws the line. “I’m a woman who gets things done,” Susannah retorts.⁵⁵

Indeed she does. Susannah paints a portrait of Pearl as a cultural treasure on the brink of expiration under the hard toil on the prison farm. She refashions Pearl’s story to make her more palatable to powerful whites with the means to liberate her should they take interest. Pearl gets paroled, but the story Susannah has spun sweeps her up into a net of obligations that will delay her search for her daughter.

PEARL: I be a free woman. I go wherever I want to now and the govner [*sic*] won’t know.
SUSANNAH: Not exactly.
PEARL: ...what else you not tellin’ me?
SUSANNAH: You have been paroled into my custody. And I say we need to go to New York.
PEARL: So I’m your slave girl now.
SUSANNAH: You are not a slave. And don’t you say that to me.
PEARL: I have to go where you say? Do what you say? That be a slave.⁵⁶

Though she has been willing to manipulate Pearl to coax her to sing, Susannah is reluctant to acknowledge the power she now wields over Pearl. Pearl, on the other hand, calls it like she sees it; without the ability to enact her own free will, she might as well be enslaved. However, an encounter with the man who owns the land on which she has been working convinces her to “look to the future,” and she agrees to accompany Susannah to New York.

It is here that Susannah plans to unveil Pearl to an audience eager to witness “an authentic doorway to the past,” a black woman who embodies the injustice of American slavery, but whose music alleviates the sense of guilt for it is proof of cultural survival. Susannah is convinced that she has a real find in Pearl and pays close attention to any anecdotal stories Pearl shares with her. “We need to put that in the show. You see, Pearl? When you talk, it’s gold.”⁵⁷ Still, she is unsatisfied. Susannah wants songs with “more meat on” them, by which she means pain. She wants the pain but cares little for the conditions that cause the pain, even less for her part in it.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 51.

PEARL: But what about my trouble? They gonna be put off by prison.
SUSANNAH: They *love* that you were in prison. The program tonight is sponsored by the radical women at the historical society—they call it *heristorical*. “She sings *and* she cut off a pecker? Perfect!”⁵⁸

Susannah explains to Pearl that “we are creating an image of who you are,” that can be billed and draw crowds.

Their first performance at Cooper Union is successful, and a reviewer writes a column about Pearl in the newspaper. While Susannah is thrilled for the press, Pearl is disheartened to see herself portrayed as a “homicidal harmonizer.” The reviewer, who refers to himself as “humble” and her as “Black Pearl,” calls Susannah a “genius” for “discovering” Pearl, and likens the spectacle of a black woman singing to King Kong. His chief criticism, however, is that Pearl is improperly costumed and disappoints his expectations. “In the movie when King Kong is exhibited on Broadway, he’s not in a tuxedo. Why costume Black Pearl to look like a Lady when Pearl was found in prison?”⁵⁹ With that, Susannah sets out a prison uniform and asks her Pearl to wear it for their next performance. Ironically, even as Susannah explains the uniform will make Pearl more authentic, it is dissimilar from the uniform she has worn for the past ten years. When Pearl refuses, Susannah reminds her, “we never meet unless you’re in prison. Don’t run away from who you are.” Pearl protests that prison is not who she is.

PEARL: But it’s not who I am. If I do all these things you want, how am I still authentic? You want me to be a dancin’ chicken.
SUSANNAH: No.
PEARL: Yes. Like in a carnival. People real entertained by the dancin’ chicken, but nobody stops to think that dancin’ chicken got a heart full of hopes.
SUSANNAH: I do not want you to be a dancing chicken.
PEARL: Cluck cluck cluck.
SUSANNAH: Don’t do that!
PEARL: Cluck cluck cluck.
SUSANNAH: Can’t you get this through your head?! People want to know you!
PEARL: You don’t study me or my people for a *little while* and then *know* me.
SUSANNAH: What I’m suggesting is common sense.
PEARL: Would you be happier if I sang in blackface?
SUSANNAH: Don’t you dare say that to me.
PEARL: If we’re gonna be prison strippers, why not blackface? Let’s do a real minstrel show.⁶⁰

While Susannah is reluctant to see how the performance is exploitative, Pearl draws a clear parallel between it and the blackface minstrel shows wherein even black actors had to darken their skin, exaggerate their features and don rags in order to satisfy audience expectations of black people and culture. Ironically it was a white man who orchestrated the minstrel show and

⁵⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66-7.

black face and set the parameters for how blacks would be perceived in theatre and film for decades to come.

In the end, Pearl does not have to perform before an audience in prison stripes. A telegram arrives with word of her daughter—she has died as a result of infection from childbirth. She bore a little girl and before she passed, she named her Pearl. She had boarded a train to Atlanta, hoping to catch a ferry to the island on which she was born, just as her mother had assumed she would.

Pearl unravels at the news of her child's death and in need of consolation she turns to Susannah, who mistakenly assumes that Pearl blames her and wants to do her harm, "you can have anything," she says desperately. "Oh, Miss Susannah. When I need you the most, you think I'm the Homicidal Harmonizer? You think that? This is who you is?"⁶¹ It is another tragic example of how racial fear (particularly fear of retribution) divides and disappoints.

The play closes with Pearl performing a ceremony of sorts, not unlike the *Tenjami* ceremony performed by the people of Senehun Ngola. In fact, the song the playwright has chosen for her to privately sing to send her daughter home is the very same that Amelia Dawley sang for Lorenzo Dow Turner, the very same that Joseph Opala recorded her daughter Mary Moran singing, and the very same that Bendu Jabati recognized as her genealogical birthright. Pearl sings the *Tenjami* and sends her daughter off with the simple truth that kept black American slaves spiritually connected to their ancestral homelands, "even if there be only one person singin' this song, it be all of us in one mouth."⁶²

Conclusion

Black Pearl Sings! affords Penumbra Theatre the opportunity to consider the way in which history gets made, who gets to tell it, how it's told, and more importantly from our standpoint as the nation's preeminent African American theatre, *what gets left out*. The play sheds a unique light on this historical moment, creating space for two disenfranchised voices from the period—one by virtue of her gender, the other by virtue of her race and gender—to speak, radically resituating history to give audiences a glimpse of what happened when suddenly those people whose commodity value had been extinguished with emancipation, were considered valuable once more.

Over the last thirty years Penumbra has debunked more than a few insidious and popular myths about African Americans and black culture. Our audiences come away from our theatre with a broad sense of the contribution black Americans have made toward building these

⁶¹ Ibid., 69.

⁶² Ibid., 76.

United States. We continually challenge ourselves to practice responsible civic membership, to create art that can instigate social change, to perennially rediscover and examine the human condition through the lens of authentic African American stories. Like the fictive audiences in *Black Pearl Sings!*, so our audiences will feel themselves become more fully human as we revisit our shared history.