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Abstract

Gospel music affects every aspect of African American culture, and the similarities between the African American sacred music aesthetic and the Romantic aesthetic share a theme of religiosity that is contained in the correlative of the mythopoetic “seam.” This seam meshes together analysis that explores the natural sublime, as suggested in the writings of such scholars as William Wordsworth, Pierre Proudhon, Samuel Coleridge, James Weldon Johnson, Henry L. Gates, and Anthony Heilbut.

Keywords: African American, gospel music, aesthetic, Romanticism, sublime

African American Sacred Music and the Romantic Aesthetic

Of all the qualities of Art, the sublime is that which appears to be the most vague, irregular, and undefined . . . for those who talk rationally on other subjects, no sooner touch on this than they go off in a literary delirium; fancy themselves, like Longinus, “the great sublime they draw” and rave like Methodists, of inward lights, and enthusiastic emotions, which if you cannot comprehend, you are set down as un-illuminated by the grace of criticism, and excluded from the elect of Taste.

—Martin Shee, *Elements of Art* (as cited in Pipkin, 1998, p. 597)

Gospel music speaks to the inner soul. It reflects religious conviction associated with Christianity and relies on lyrics that draw heavily on the Bible and a dedication to worship. Because of the origins of gospel music, the historical circumstances of people of African descent in the United States have shaped the genre. Gospel is traced to the days of slavery and allowed those suffering from the yoke of bondage to express themselves, their hopes, their sufferings, and their faith in justice. Lyrics also contained secret meanings and hidden messages that introduced a level of complexity to the music that embellished repetition and call/answer interaction among those who were singing. Gospel enabled worship when enslaved communities were prevented from building churches and gathering for religious services. After the Civil War, gospel became the music of worship in the churches that were established in every community.

Because of this background, gospel permeated every aspect of African American life, and more. Gospel was related to spirituals, and it was closely associated with blues and, ultimately, the spread of jazz. As a genre of music, however, gospel has suffered a peculiar form of discrimination. Often it has not been taken seriously as a genre. Gospel music’s close association with church worship and Christianity saw it face a reaction from mainline Protestant churches of

the European tradition—Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal/Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran—where gospel was considered a corruption of hymns and other religious music. Among music theorists, gospel has often been ignored as a genre, almost as if music theory embodies racialized perceptions of what constitutes “serious” music to be analyzed and studied and what types of music are to be ignored and trivialized. During the last century, as the rich variations in musical genres have swept the world, however, this restricted interpretation of gospel has come under close scrutiny. Today, gospel is not embedded in church services but is performed to large audiences throughout the world, from Germany and Spain to the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America. Gospel fills the airwaves, and its performers are conscious of their influence on other musical genres.

In this article, I intend to examine aspects of gospel that help to elucidate its magic as a musical genre. My reflections are based on extensive research into gospel, including interviews with most of the key gospel singers of the past 40 years, and inspired by my own teaching and my performance of gospel in the United States, Canada, Central America, and Europe. Wherever I have performed, I have found that people understand more clearly the interconnections of gospel with spirituals, blues, and jazz and, by extension, the African American experience.

In Search of an Argument

When I first noticed a hint of similarity between the African American sacred music aesthetic and the Romantic aesthetic, I was reluctant to move forward, especially with reference to gospel music. A few rhetorical commonalities do not necessarily create a valid thesis or a supportive argument. The research, however, of four scholars—H. Abrams (1973), Pierre Proudhon (2012), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1997), and Anne K. Mellor (1999)—albeit from

different vantage points, provided just enough evidence to support my belief that both aesthetics share a theme of religiosity that is contained in the correlative of the mythopoetic seam.

According to Abrams's (1973) *Natural Supernaturalism*, the fusion of the natural and the supernatural began with the establishment of Christianity, then gained speed in the Renaissance and Neoclassical periods. The Romantics took the combination to a new, more comprehensive level, offering an edge: "Romantic writers revived these ancient matters with a difference: they undertook to save the overview of history and destiny, the experiential paradigms and the cardinal values of their religious heritage by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being" (Abrams, 1973, p. 66).

Though there are several key concepts in Abrams's words, the word *heritage* stands out because it provides a smooth transition, or segue, naturally into the concept of relevancy or, more specifically, the relationship between culture and hierarchy, as well as the subjects and the objects within that human ecology. According to Eileen Southern (1971), the first African American music began with the slaves who brought it with them from Africa. Thus, the background to gospel can be traced back a long way. Ironically, the remarks of Pierre Proudhon (2012), whose statements were probably aimed at a very specific racially and economically situated audience, bear credence to the continuity proposed by the Romantic seam: "We are full of Divinity; our monuments, our traditions, our laws, our ideas, our languages, and our sciences—all are infected with this indelible superstition, outside of which we are not able either to speak or act, and without which we simply do not think" (Proudhon, 2012, p. 32). Through imperialism, colonialism, and forced assimilation, the European explorers brought their God to the Africans, and a chain was created in which a shared religious consciousness took root.

Anne K. Mellor (1999) also spoke to the “Divinity in us,” noting the “false consciousness” undergirding the traditional concepts of British Romanticism that seek to reorder the Romantic canon. She went so far as to reconceptualize literary Romanticism as a cultural dialogue between competing public discourses to include “radical social change,” “personal transcendence,” and “working class issues” (Mellor, 1999, p. 138). Pertinent to the study of gospel music, Mellor called for reclamation of the aesthetic as a category in which teachers and students go beyond traditional identifications of the aesthetic, especially in light of the traditional emphasis on form alone. She wrote: “Rather we must recuperate a concept of the aesthetic as an aspect of the ethical, as the fusion of content and form” (Mellor, 1999, p. 40). Not only must a work be beautiful according to principles of a specific culture, it must transcend concrete particulars. Then, aesthetics would seem more appropriately characterized as the name given to that hybrid form of cognition that can clarify . . . perception and historical practice, disclosing the inner structure of the concrete (Eagleton, 1990, p. 16).

Similarly to Mellor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of Humanities at Harvard University, called for an extended aestheticism, as noted in his chapter on gospel, spirituals, and blues found in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Gates & McKay, 1997). The genres of spirituals and gospel music are a case in point, providing a certain academic credibility that was recognized as early as the first years of the 20th century among African American scholars such as Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, and, later, Dr. Horace Boyer (Gates & McKay, 1997), but was hardly noticed by non–African American academicians (e.g., Anthony Heilbut’s *The Gospel Sound* [1971], Eileen Southern’s *Readings in Black American Music* [1971], Kip Lornell’s *Happy in the Service of the Lord* [1995], and Jerma Jackson’s *Singing in my Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* [2004]). Despite an

approach that views the gospel text aesthetically, more often than not, the emphasis is on other subtexts, such as history, sociology, and biography. Inclusion in the academic disciplines that do not specifically resonate with race is rare. Furthermore, when there is emphasis on aesthetics, the focus is performance, and, strangely enough, the performance is still referenced racially. Note that Gates's text is African American literature, not simply literature. Of course, Mellor and Matlak moved toward inclusion of other racialized texts, but the emphasis is still, for the most part, historical; that is, it links with slavery (1996).

It is my contention that gospel music is worthy of consideration within the Romantic tradition, as its content and form show similarities in the emphasis of personal narrative that ultimately becomes public discourse. It transforms ordinary speech as well as figurative language, with constant references to nature and God—which are both found in the literature of William Wordsworth and other Romantics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Using the Romantic correlative of the seam, my analysis of gospel explores the natural sublime as illustrated in Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" (1896), Book I of *The Prelude* (2001), "Steal Away," (Johnson & Johnson, 1953, p. 114) and "Were You There?" (Johnson & Johnson, 1953, p. 136). Both "Steal Away" and "Were You there" are spirituals, and "Peace Be Still" (Baker, n.d.) is an 18th-century madrigal reformulated by James Cleveland (1964), the Crown Prince of African American gospel music (Heilbut, 1997).

The Seam and the Sublime

In my unpublished *The Aesthetics of African American Gospel Music* (Harrington, 2006), I expound upon the concept of seamlessness, which was initially introduced in *Shirley Caesar: A Woman of Words* (Harrington, 1992), a seminal text on race, gender, and spirituality as found in the lyrics of Reverend Caesar's work (Harrington, 2006, p. 5). It is my belief that the

seamlessness trope is definitely comparable to the “fusion” between the secular or natural and the spiritual or supernatural that Abrams (1973) mentioned or that exists in Blake’s contraries (2000) and Wordsworth’s natural sublime (Boise, n.d.). Specifically, as this seam relates to the comprehensiveness of African American music and life, it encompasses within the music a message taken from the artist’s personal narrative or the lives of church members, the black race, or other oppressed individuals. This seam also includes the meshing of genres: the reinterpretation of hymns and spirituals, sometimes adding gospel phrasing. In the situation of Thomas Dorsey, there was a cross-referencing of blues and gospel in his signature piece “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” (1932; Heilbut, 1997). Robert Harris, lead singer for the gospel quartet Hummingbirds, began in the gospel genre, but through his contacts with Lil Green, a blues gospelteer, and the Baxter Quartet, he fused both blues and hillbilly music in his work (Heilbut, 1971). Even period politics and historical eras overlap themselves. Note Charles Tindley’s “I’ll Overcome Someday” (1901), which began as a 1792 hymn, “O Sanctissima” (or “Prayer of the Sicilian Mariners”), which ultimately became “We Shall Overcome” (Horton, 1963), an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement (Wallechinsky & Wallace, 1975). In the seam, there is more dialogue than conflict with the emergence of a third situation in which an experience is created and the integrity of both opposites is recognized. More importantly, there is recognition of an additional opportunity for enrichment.

Accordingly, the concept of the sublime incorporates the idea of the seam, the contraries, and fusion. Zac Watson (2008) stated that the sublime has received so much criticism that it “threatens to buckle under the weight of analysis” (p. 2). Nevertheless, he also explored the sublime, finding it representative of a reaction to experiences that exceed the limits of reason.

These experiences exist in a state of liminality, but only momentarily, whereupon there is a return to the original physical stance, albeit in a state of transformation. Watson also noted that there are two great “camps” that have explored and defined the sublime: “[T]he first one denounces the sublime as oppressive; the second re-inscribes it as a liberating force. While the first set of ideologists is given to masculinist mastery of the ‘Other,’ the revisionists, who are mostly feminists, seek recovery of relationships and would replace oppression with respect” (Watson, 2011, p. 3). In the first camp would be such individuals as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, the former dealing with the sublime in terms of its opposition to beauty. According to Burke, the sublime is characterized as excessively “dark,” “obscure,” “infinite,” and “vast,” but also “magnificent” and “powerful” (Armstrong, 1996, p. 218). The initial reactions to the sublime are terror and fear, but can be changed once the danger is at a distance: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (Armstrong, 1996, p. 218).

Whereas Kant and Burke shared some ideas about the sublime, there were differences that eventually surfaced within Romanticism. The most relevant aspect of the Kantian sublime for the Romantics was the application of the sublime to nature *only* as an experience that, solely, provided “a pure instance of aesthetic judgment” because there was no “artist” of nature, outside of God. Consequently, “there was no artistic intent to interpret when judging the object” (Smith, 2003). In order to perform the aesthetic judgment, it is necessary that certain *a priori* ideas are carried into the phenomenal world without which one could not make sense of the world. These ideas cannot be derived from empirical incidence gained from experience but come from the power of reason. Because of this reason and ideas, we are able to transcend the phenomenal.

Hence, the way to pure aesthetic judgment is through transcendence, an idea Coleridge followed with qualification.

Another idea inherited from Kant that served the Romantics well was the sense of subjectivity. The sublime appears to have moved from the object to the person encountering said object. One of the most important concepts in Romanticism was the interjection of the subject, a movement away from majority emphasis upon the object. The elements of infinity and power were still present, but Kant believed that at the sublime moment when the imagination encounters an object too vast to be understood without reason, the reason reduces the situation between the object and subject to a position that the latter can manage. Therefore, in contrast to Burke, whose sublime focuses upon the moment of terror, Kant's sublime is concerned with the resolution of the crisis in which man elevates himself over "nature" through the power of his intellect (Stone, 2007).

Similarly to Kant, William Wordsworth employed nature throughout his poetry, in particular in his concept of the sublime, although there are different particularities in their usage. On a most basic level, he used the concept of "nature" to help change the "nature" of poetry from an aesthetic peopled with and directed toward a sophisticated class to an instrument, at least on the surface, that deals with "ordinary" individuals. In the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," (Wordsworth, 1800) his definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," the choice of subjects of the "low and rustic life," the selection of their language, and the role of the imagination in the embellishment of the poetic incidents, illustrated a definite use of the sublime, despite the fact that he did not often use the term sublime in that text (Stone, 2007). His decision to restructure poetry is itself, in a sense, evidence of the sublime.

The second use of nature proceeds from Wordsworth's belief that the

human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability. (Damrosch, Dettmar, Wolfson, & Manning, 2010, p. 397)

Therefore, nature itself provides theme, setting, inspiration, and accessibility to all who encounter it in Wordsworth's work or in reality. "The Tables Turned: An Evening Scene on the Same Subject" (Wordsworth, 1896) written in 1798, subtly extolled the sublime powers of nature. The effect that nature's "sweet music" had upon the poet, an interjection of the autobiographical, pointed to the powers mysteriously hidden in the voice of the thrush, which he compared to a preacher. Wordsworth indicated that nature is more beneficial because the "meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beautiful forms of things:—/We murder to dissect" (1999). This reference to the violent intellect hearkens back to the Burkean sublime. This poem, in which Wordsworth expressed a lack of respect, ironically, for books—a receptacle for his work—speaks to a natural theology that is open to all men; they need only to have a "heart/That watches and receives" (Wordsworth, 1999, p.11). The language, the subject, and the role of the imagination that he emphasized in the "Preface" are on full display in this particular poem. There is no darkness or infinity, nor terror or fear, other than what lives in the hearts of men buried in books instead of inhaling the lessons of nature. The sublime illustrated in this poem is somewhat subtle and muted, but a sublime nevertheless.

Although, according to Matthew Brennan, the use of the sublime in "The Tables Turned" (Wordsworth, 1896) was antithetical to the Burkean sublime to which Wordsworth was exposed and made use of, the poet's use of the sublime was far more obvious in *The Prelude*

(Wordsworth, 2001). A hint of the sublimity of nature opened the “Book First Introduction, Childhood, and School Time” (Wordsworth, 2001), when the poet wrote, “O there is blessing in this gentle breeze/ . . . it beats against my cheek/And seems half conscious of the joy it gives” (Damrosch et al., 2010, pp. 3–4). However, one must not be fooled by the brevity of the statement and the quietness it exudes. An inherent religiousness, albeit secular in nature, is contained within the few words; there is a deep abiding intuitiveness in that the poet was receptive to the invisible spirit made tangible through a breeze on his face. Nature was the inspiration for the poem as well as a guide as the poet/child ventured on his journey without any fear: “I chuse/Be nothing better than a wandering cloud/I cannot miss my way” (Damrosch et al., 2010, pp. 17–19). Out of the city, he could breathe again and shake off “That burthen of my own unnatural self/The heavy weight of many a weary day/Not mine, and such as were not made for me” (Damrosch et al., 2010, pp. 20–22). A complete transformation took place in this section of the poem, the poet becoming a new person. Whereas “The Tables Turned” (Wordsworth, 1896) hinted at what could happen, in this particular section of *The Prelude* (Wordsworth, 2001), the divine powers acted upon the poet/child (Freeman, 1995).

In the boat-stealing episode, all of the vastness, darkness, fear, and trembling that accompany a Burkean sublime rang true for Wordsworth, the child boat thief. The young rower’s actions were those of a “troubled pleasure,” which became fearful but exciting because of the danger he encountered. His fearfulness, which grew out of guilt, allowed his imagination to run full throttle, endowing the cliff with the powers of a god: “With measured motion, like a living thing/Stroke after me” (Damrosch et al., 2010, pp. 412–413). The effect of the episode haunted him, altering his thoughts, even after he had returned:

And, through the meadows homeward went with grave

And serious thoughts: and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermin'd sense
Of unknown modes of being: in my thoughts/ There was a "darkness." (Damrosch et al.,
2010, pp. 418–423)

In this scene, nature is represented in masculinist terms as a vast entity to be feared and not to be tamed. The way for man to deal with it, from the standpoint of the sublime, would be for him to appropriate it, bring it under his control. Even though Wordsworth as a child was not able to do that, in an ironic sense, he did it by recollecting and writing about it many years later in this work. At this point, he was engaging in the masculinist sublime. The nature that had blessed him so positively in the beginning of this book suddenly turned menacing because of the act of thievery that the young man should not have committed. His imagination changed, and the way it responded to his surroundings changed also. In the first episode, when the invisible spirit wafted within the breeze onto Wordsworth's cheek, filled with blessing, the poet/child was receptive and embraced the feminine sublime when there was no appropriation of nature, simply a profound respect for it. In the words of Barbara Claire Freeman (1995), "the masculinist sublime seeks to master, appropriate, or colonize the other, whereas the politics of the feminine sublime involves taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness" (Pipkin, 1998, p. 599).

The African American Spiritual and the Romantic Sublime

According to Johnson and Johnson (1953), African American spirituals evolved naturally, as from one culture to another, adding to the importance of the correlative of the seam in this music genre. Characterized by a heavy emphasis on performance and audience

participation, these songs combine form and content with improvisation, another important element of African tradition. When written down, the songs represented one performance in which meter, refrain, and basic outlines remain stable. All else could change from performance to performance (Debose, 2005). These songs combine the complicated rhythms of Africa with harmony and messages learned in American churches: “[A]t a precise and psychic moment, there was blown through or fused into the vestiges of his African music the spirit of Christianity, as he knew Christianity” (Johnson & Johnson, 1953, p. 20). James Weldon Johnson further stated that without Christianity, there would have been no spirituals. These songs voiced all of the cardinal virtues—patience, forbearance, love, faith, and hope—though modified by primitive African music and the hymns of noted composer Dr. Watts. Thus, just as Wordsworth learned from Coleridge, who learned from the philosophers Kant and Heder and others, the Africans and later the African Americans learned from the slavemasters and other non-African Americans in their respective environments (Stone, 2007). Further, one may conclude that this music, too, was born out of a hybridity of genres, the visible and invisible spirits of the earth, political rebellion, and personal narrative that becomes referentially collective. The correlative of the seam is very much a part of the origins and fiber of spirituals and gospel music.

The spiritual “Steal Away” is called a “signal song” for runaway slaves (Gates & McKay, 1997, p. 10). It is credited with being the spiritual that Nat Turner, the slave revolutionary, used to alert other slaves to meetings. After the revolt and Turner died, slaves could no longer speak his name, although it worked itself into another slave song. Therefore, just as Wordsworth combined his poetic aspirations, secular theology, and the French Revolution, the slaves also slyly incorporated rebellion and spirituality. Double entendre can be gleaned easily from this spiritual’s lyrics: “Steal away, steal away home/I ain’t got long to stay here” (Johnson &

Johnson, 1953, p. 114). Although the plantations were physical spaces in which the slaves lived, they were not homes, so the slaves wanted to run away and create their own living spaces and their own identities. Therefore, it would seem that this line could definitely be interpreted as part of a coded message expressing slaves' desire for liberation.

Likewise, this spiritual speaks to the natural sublime. These spirituals are replete with the dialect of the slaves, a broken English, and the incidents from their lives, interpreted through their relationship with God and nature. In constant dialogue with God, the slaves did not fear the thunder or lightning referenced in stanzas two and four. If it were not for slaves showing no fear of the natural forces, one could mistake their conversation with God through the elements for being more Burkean than Wordsworthian. Further, they are linked to the spirit of God by the trumpet sound in the soul, reminding the reader of the blessing in the breeze or the light from the moon that the Idiot Boy does not understand but enjoys.

Another spiritual, "Were You There?," contains the natural sublime, but one has to look closely, as not all versions of the song contain the reference (Johnson & Johnson, 1953, p. 136). The structure of the song consists of a rhetorical question inquiring as to whether the listener was at the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. Never waiting to hear the listener's response, the speaker presents three distinct images: the nailing of Christ to the cross, the placing of Christ in the grave; and the resurrection. The aforementioned images would certainly bring about the sublime response of trembling on the part of the speaker. One never knows the exact timing for the song because it is based on a "spot in time," which does and does not bring the peace of Wordsworth's speaker in "Tintern Abbey" (Wordsworth, 1985). However, the instance of sublime that truly links African American sacred music and the Romantic sublime is found in the line: "Were you there when the sun refused to shine?" This line, as indicated before, is not

found in all verses, but Gates and McKay reference it in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997, p. 1005). One can hardly imagine witnessing a more terrifyingly sublime moment than when the sun “refused” to shine. The power inherent in the action of the sun (a symbol often used for the Christ) can be certainly classified as something that would cause one to tremble both from fear and awe.

“Peace be Still” (Baker, n.d.) was originally a madrigal, but became a signature song for Reverend James Cleveland, who rose to prominence in the 1960s and effectively transitioned African American sacred music from the spiritual and hymn to full-blown gospel music that bordered on pop art (Heilbut, 1997, pp. 213–214). Discovered by Thomas Dorsey, he gained experience in sacred music with the help of Roberta Martin and Mahalia Jackson, known as the Queen of Gospel. He played by ear, something involving a natural talent for which there is no accounting, since it is not a formally learned art. It is somewhat comparable to a pure aestheticism. His voice, which was initially a falsetto, quickly changed into a raspy growl, which went on to become a vocal signature. The Dixie Hummingbirds’ Ira Tucker’s scream also became an insignia for separating African American sacred music from other religious songs. Both Cleveland’s growl and Tucker’s scream would be classified as residing outside of traditional musicality’s listening pleasure because, without a spiritual context, they can be grating on the ears. However, both became tropes of African American sacred music expression, examples of the sublime in miniature, albeit with a slight twist. Instead of frightening people, these songs brought the church listeners to a rapturous frenzy, providing, according to the *Boston Globe*, “an emotive edge” that Ira Tucker began in his throat and ran vocally from a high register to a deep baritone without missing a beat (Martin, 2008). In terms of the Romantic aesthetic, the effect of the growl and scream on their listeners was also comparable to the state of rapture that

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was much more overtly religious than Wordsworth, often wrote about in his work, such as in “Response: Samuel Taylor Coleridge”: “I sate, my being blended in one thought/(thought was it? Or Aspiration? Or Resolve?)/Absorb’d, yet hanging still upon the sound—/And when I rose, I found myself in prayer” (Damrosch et al., 2010, p. 506).

It almost seems as if “Peace Be Still” (Baker, n.d.) should not be discussed in conjunction with the spiritual, but according to Gates and McKay (1997), the distinction between gospel music and spirituals is often one of interpretation. Polytextual in discourse, “Peace Be Still” stems from Mark 4:49, and musically, it runs the gamut from soprano to bass and is capable of being sung by highly orchestrated musical choirs as well as unaccompanied a cappella groups (Harrington, 2006). Further, it is my contention that, far more than the aforementioned spirituals, this gospel-madrigal epitomizes the Romantic sublime on many levels. Engaging in a dialogue with God, the speaker confronts the creator of nature, a courageous act that can be frightening and awesome. The singer speaks directly to God, and although he does not fear God, he sees the unruly natural forces as a threat. The natural imagery is replete with black skies, a raging tempest, an angry, deep and a desperate, puny man, characters and characterization straight from the Burkean sublime. The singer incorporates the Biblical text, interpreting it literally while he aesthetically aligns it with the masculine sublime. Following the precedent within the chorus when Jesus identifies himself as the Master who has power over a “storm tossed sea,” “demons, men,” or “whatever it be,” whose will all nature obeys, the men in verse two, using the masculinist sublime, call upon the Master, “to haste and take control.” By verse three, “the terror is over, the elements sweetly rest/Earth’s sun is mirrored in the lake and/heaven’s within my breast” (Baker, n.d.). According to Schiller, the forces of nature are so great that no human is physically strong enough to withstand their superior power; one can only become one with them

through submission (Pipkin, 1998, p. 612). The natural sublime here incorporates the transcendent while also bearing witness to the natural sublime as witnessed in the boat-stealing scene in *The Prelude* (Wordsworth, 2001).

There are few direct parallels between the aesthetics of African American sacred music and the Romantic traditions, in particular the sublime. Nonetheless, there are enough similarities to warrant a closer look at the songs so that teachers and students can begin to engage in a dialogue on global aesthetics. Or, as Mellor (1999) indicated in her plenary address, there will be little to separate those who teach English from those who teach history.

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (Ralph Ellison, as cited in Cotkin, 1995, p. 36)

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