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“A Strange, Weird Effect”: The Fisk Jubilee Singers in the United States and England

“Their songs produce a strange, weird effect — they are full of religious earnestness and pathos, and one loses all sense of oddity in the feeling of real and natural piety.”¹ Although this reviewer of the Fisk Jubilee Singers did not explicitly mention race, he and other contemporary writers who addressed the group’s performances frequently focused on their difference and otherness. Though the Fisk Singers were popular and well received on the same stage as white concert performers, audiences and reviewers repeatedly described them in terms of the “strange and weird.” In fact, in the review above, the “strange, weird effect” is the loss of the “sense of oddity”; this audience member was surprised that a black performing troupe could seem so commonplace. Yet, he finishes by remarking on their “natural piety,” a trait commonly correlated with blackness and distinguished from white intellectual cultivation in the late nineteenth century in the United States and Britain.

By the 1870s, when the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the United States and several European countries, racial discourses had created a framework that associated blackness with authenticity, emotional religion, natural musicianship, and primitivism.² Whiteness was its unmarked opposite, but associated with people capable of culture and artistic refinement. The Fisk Jubilee Singers performed amidst these racial expectations and assumptions, and their sounds, performance practices, and successes were all marked in some way by these discourses. Although the Fisk Singers met with racialized and prejudicial responses, they were undeniably popular; after a few disappointing months of their first tour (in late 1871), their concerts were well attended.³ The singers raised \$20,000 in their first six months of American tours and \$150,000 altogether during their American and European tours from 1871 to 1878.⁴ In these concerts, the singers mainly performed songs that were based on slaves’ songs, which came to be known variously as “spirituals,” “jubilees,” or “slave songs.” The Fisk Singers were agents in bringing African American music to public atten-

tion; however, audiences and organizations in the United States and England continually constrained them in a network of difference, positioning them as inferior humans in need of cultivation.

The present study fits into this collection that focuses on audience responses particularly in the United States and England, two countries that, despite their divergent societal configurations, shared similar racial discourses that affected their expectations and interpretations of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.⁵ The difficulty in telling the story of the Fisk Singers in these two countries is to find the differences in responses without erasing the commonalities, to hold the similarities and divergences in tension in order to appreciate the complexity of their reception in both the United States and England. British and North American people shared slavery and abolition in their recent memory; however, as Julia Chybowski discusses (in this issue), British people experienced the end of slavery first and never recognized institutionalized racial slavery in the home country to the extent that had occurred in the American South. Thus the British understandably viewed American institutions, attitudes, and pretensions with a sense of superiority. Class distinctions in England and the recent Civil War in the United States made for an immediate political context that affected audience responses as well. However, though particular trans-Atlantic situations differed in general, natives of European stock in both countries upheld a shared view of race in which black and white were the metaphorical extremities of personality spectra with respect to naturalness and refinement, or emotion and intellect. The Fisk Singers continually challenged these clear distinctions, though, as their spirituals (a musical genre that came to represent blackness in its perceived natural, emotional, and religious qualities) emerged in concert performances, a traditionally white (refined, artistic-intellectual) venue. Reviewers in both the United States and England struggled to fit the Fisk Jubilee Singers into stable categories, often paradoxically reinforcing the divisions by claiming that the group had transgressed the racialized boundaries.

Writers and scholars have told and retold the story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, from books about their career sold at their concerts in the 1870s, to historical studies on the singers and their music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. J.B.T Marsh and G.D Pike, writing first in the 1870s, are central to the discourse I will investigate.⁶ Besides reprinting many contemporary reviews of the Fisk Singers, they provided their own descriptions of events and transcriptions of some of the group's songs. I will also draw on recent research, including studies that explicate the lives, background, and repertory of the ensemble. Andrew Ward's *Dark Midnight When I Rise* (2000) details thirty years of Fisk Singers' tours, as well as the group members' experiences and relationships.⁷ Toni Passmore Anderson's dissertation (1997) on the Fisk Singers' supervisory organization, the American Missionary Association, and the personal histories of the Fisk Singers provides a means to examine the group's success in a larger cultural context.⁸ Sandra Graham's work (2001) presents a thorough study of reviews in

order to compile an image of the Singers' performance practice and repertoire.⁹ These have all laid groundwork for my present critical approach to the reception of the Fisk Singers in the United States and England.

While each of the studies has been important in its own right, none have thoroughly evaluated the responses of United States and British audiences to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, or the impact of the political situations within the two countries that led to different yet similar receptions. In her study, Anderson claims that, “ironically, . . . non-American audiences most appreciated and respected the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their music. This reality of the story vividly demonstrates the stark contrast between the prejudicial treatment received at home and the warm acceptance of audiences outside their homeland.”¹⁰ Similarly, Ward describes the Fisk Jubilee Singers, at the end of their English tour, as “still smarting from their encounters with American racism North and South.”¹¹ Though the evidence of British “warm acceptance” and “American racism” is ample, the Fisk Singers remained objects of curiosity and victims of racial binaries in the supposedly more enlightened England. Although I cannot claim to represent all reviews or all individuals in the audiences, I will highlight discursive traditions that constrained the position of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in both countries. People writing for newspapers in the late nineteenth century almost certainly would have been white, and often the races of the audiences was not mentioned. At the same time, though, the reviewers were speaking to and reflecting the social environment in which the Fisk Jubilee Singers were performing and attaining popularity; the listeners would also have heard them in this context of these racialized tensions. The Fisk Singers themselves and most observers from their time to ours have claimed that British listeners received them with more hospitality than Americans did; however, audiences in both countries repeatedly demonstrated similar expectations based on race.

In order to paint a broader picture of The Fisk Jubilee Singers' reception in the United States and England, I will begin with the influence of Fisk University's founding organization, the American Missionary Association. With ties to British missionary and abolitionist groups, all of which helped position African Americans within the discursive constructions of religion, education, and refinement, this group determined a variety of fundamental attitudes. In addition to their racialized social circumstances, I will describe the contemporary musical expectations for black performances, which presumed minstrel shows to be representative of authentic black music, and how those expectations shifted to include spirituals. I will analyze the group's receptions by reviewers and writers who continually strove for monolithic racial categories, even in the face of racial and musical ambiguity. The descriptions of the group and their musical performances in the United States and Britain continually revealed analogous presuppositions about blackness and whiteness. Even though the group was treated differently in the two countries, responses to the Fisk Singers' performances were based in the same racialized discourses.

“Christian attainment and manly achievement”: Fisk University and the American Missionary Association

The Fisk Jubilee Singers' original mission was to raise money for Fisk University, a school that was founded in 1866 by the American Missionary Association for freed slaves and other African American students. This Association had founded the first of its many educational institutions for freed slaves in 1846, as a facet of the members' abolitionist cause based in religious belief. When the group established Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, twenty years later, the school opened to 1,000 students.¹² Though the institutions had numerous supporters, they were resisted in many quarters. The teachers, who were often Northern volunteers, faced “social ostracism, financial and physical hardship, and at times, physical danger and death.”¹³ The Ku Klux Klan assassinated unnumbered [“more than one”] teachers, whom the Northern abolitionist J.B.T. Marsh likened to soldiers in their dedication and bravery.¹⁴ Despite this opposition, Fisk and its sister institutions remained intact, many eventually flourishing, and some continuing today.

The American Missionary Association provided logistical support for the Fisk Jubilee Singers' career from 1871 to 1878. As the Fisk Singers became more popular, the association also provided them with additional personnel to advertise and manage the details of their tours. Indeed it was only with the American Missionary Association's backing that growing numbers of prominent clergy came to know and support the Fisk Singers. In New York, the endorsement of the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, “the most sought-after Christian speaker in the country,” led to “a welcome change in the fortunes of the Singers . . . [since] newspaper reviews gave additional exposure to the singers.”¹⁵ At the time of the Fisk Singers' arrival in England, Beecher was in contact with the president of Britain's Freedmen's Missions Aid Society, who was also the Earl of Shaftesbury. The Fisk Singers' first performance in London was a private concert with invitations sent out in the name of the Earl and the Society.¹⁶ These connections with well-known Christian speakers in the United States and abolitionist dignitaries in England gave the Fisk Singers more publicity, respectability, and opportunities for concerts and fundraising.

The American Missionary Association's ideologies of religion and education were also influential in the career of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Marsh, hired by the American Missionary Association to write an account of the singers, described Fisk University in terms of common nineteenth-century understandings of its establishment—that its objectives were refinement, religion, and education. He wrote that Fisk

had conquered the respect of those who began by hating it. It had opened to the vision of vast numbers of colored people new possibilities of Christian attainment and manly achievement. It had demonstrated the capacity of that despised race for a high culture. It had raised up the Jubilee Singers, who had done great

things for their people in breaking down, by the magic of their song, the cruel prejudice against color that was everywhere in America the greatest of all hindrances to their achievement.¹⁷

Marsh momentarily erases the day-to-day prejudices the Fisk Singers encountered on and especially off stage. Using the language of uplift, he affirms the accomplishments of “cultivation” in the students’ capacities for “cultured,” “Christian,” and “manly” successes. These discursive signposts point to a common view held by abolitionists—that black people could be cultivated, educated, and given religion, or in other words, become more like white men. The alignment of these accomplishments with maleness also shows the former’s correspondence to reason and intellect, in contrast to the “natural” religious qualities black people (and women) were thought to possess. Though these beliefs in progress acknowledged the humanity of African Americans, cultivation was often cast as an eternal potential for training rather than an attainable achievement. These racialist underpinnings positioned African American people perpetually in need of white influence that was as patronizing as it was affirmative.¹⁸ This effort toward uplift was common to institutions for both white and black students; however, society allowed white (male) university students the prospect of reaching a cultivated state, while descriptions of the Fisk Singers continually implied that the achievement of refinement was only ever a future possibility.

In their concerts, the Fisk Jubilee Singers represented and performed the American Missionary Association’s ideals of education and religion. They strove for a refined musical style and presence, just as the school’s music program was structured to show that black people could participate in a white world—in the first case by singing “white” music. Within a year of the school’s opening, Fisk students offered music concerts around Nashville, which Graham reports in her historical study of the group were “of the kind typically offered in (white) singing schools and conventions, Sunday Schools, and the home, in SATB format. . . . It was certainly a mark of prestige to have black students sing the music of whites, and to sing it well.”¹⁹ The group’s first concert took place at Nashville’s Masonic Hall, and one reporter wrote that the “concert was a brilliant success, the building being crowded, and the audience most pleased with the quality of the music and the accuracy of its rendering.”²⁰ The next year, another concert at Masonic Hall included arias, duets, and other commonly accepted concert repertoire, and in 1871 the choir performed a full cantata, which received “glowing praise.”²¹

Even when the group began to sing arrangements of religious slave songs, they continued to strive for a refined presentation of their music. These songs came to be known as spirituals, or “jubilees,” after the Fisk Jubilee Singers and others like them.²² The group’s shift in repertoire will be discussed below. For now, it is important to note that while the popularity of the spirituals encouraged the fame of a variety of performing

troupes with a range of performance practices, the Fisk Jubilee Singers remained committed to performing cultivation. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first to sing spirituals in public performance, but by the second year of their tours they met with imitators.²³ The various imitative groups represented blackness in many ways, some of them using dialect (more common to minstrelsy), others with African American directors.

George White, a Caucasian soldier from Ohio who became Fisk University's treasurer and the Fisk Singers' director, complained about the lack of talent of some other singers of spirituals. He wrote a letter about a group called the Canaan Jubilee Singers saying, "They sing slave songs in the rough—the rudest and least musical I have ever heard."²⁴ White, by contrast, rehearsed his group meticulously, perfecting ensemble, dynamics, and diction, features that would have been imperative for any group performing art music.²⁵ In the midst of a variety of performance practices, the Fisk Singers continued to perform the education, refinement, and religion that were hallmarks of the American Missionary Association and widely held in the larger society.

Audiences eventually recognized these characteristics of cultivation in the Fisk Singers' performances as well. Anderson's historical account of the group's career notes that one early "factor for the public's hesitation to embrace the singers was found in the religious community's suspicion and aversion to theatrical entertainment in general, and black entertainers in particular."²⁶ That audiences first expected the Fisk Singers to be theatrical—as opposed to spiritual and respectable—points to the fact that the public expected less than cultivation from black performers, specifically in the minstrel show format. However, once prominent religious leaders endorsed the group, the Fisk Jubilee Singers' religious content would have encouraged their popularity by making their concerts an acceptable alternative to secular entertainment. A reviewer in the *New York Times* wrote that "when to the earnestness of their work is added the un-failing fervor of the religious feeling which animates their singing, no one need be at a loss to fathom the secret of their strong hold upon a large portion of the public."²⁷ Marsh, in his contemporaneous account, also declared that the group "furnished a refined and wholesome entertainment, which Christian people who did not care to visit the theatre and kindred places of amusement could attend and enjoy. There was need of, and a wide demand for, just such healthful and elevating diversion as these concerts afforded."²⁸ He granted an association between religion and a cultivating, uplifting influence in their performances. These writers seemed to believe that the Christian content of the Fisk Singers' programs allowed both the performers and the audiences to tap into a broader network of education and refinement.

The American Missionary Association's counterpart in Britain was called the Freedmen's Missions Aid Society, a name that demonstrated the connections its members made between abolition and Christian evangelism. The Freedmen's Missions Aid Society was only one of many such

societies dedicated to the well-being of freed slaves, groups which historian Christine Bolt claims “entertained a clear set of priorities: first, physical hardship must be relieved; then education, industrial training, and (where necessary) Christian conversion should follow.”²⁹ These societies were interested in the freed slaves’ situation (and conversion) in America, but they were at least equally interested in the former slaves’ role in missionizing Africa—which was effectively linked to colonizing the continent. When the Fisk Singers performed at the annual meeting of the Freedmen’s Missions Aid Society in 1873, Marsh recorded one speaker’s words who “eloquently testified to the renewed hope he had for Africa as he listened to the Jubilee Singers. He had been ‘holding his tiny rushlight amidst the desolations of that continent, and holding it with the feeling that his efforts were almost futile.’ But as he thought of the trained missionaries who might yet be raised up among the emancipated slaves of America, he saw light ahead.”³⁰ He saw a direct and encouraging link from Fisk University’s Christian educational and uplift efforts to the possibility of Christianizing and creating British subjects in Africa. Pike, also writing in the nineteenth century, described British evangelists’ excitement at the prospect of more missionaries in the form of American freed slaves; he wrote that the Freedmen’s Missions Aid Society saw hope in “the American Freedman, that he should become educated, and evangelize his fatherland.”³¹ The succession he outlines reveals the hierarchy behind the scheme: black Americans could be cultivated, or be taught to be more like white men, and in turn could help bring a monolithic Africa to this higher level of humanity.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers personified such missionizing forces: they were Christian Americans who had a privileged connection to Africa. When the Fisk Singers made a second visit to the Freedmen’s Missions Aid Society in 1875, a speaker responded to their performance by announcing,

They have returned here, not for anything in their own behalf, but to advance the interests of the colored race in America, and then to do what in them lies to send missionaries of their own color to the nations spread over Africa. When I find these young people, gifted to an extent that does not often fall to the lot of man, coming here in such a spirit, I don’t want them to become white, but I have a strong disposition myself to become black. If I thought color was anything—if it brought with it their truth, piety, and talent, I would willingly exchange my complexion to-morrow.³²

This contradictory testimonial suggests the tensions within the Society member’s statement, which simultaneously upheld inherent racial differences while declaring that the differences did not exist or were not important. Though this declamation very nearly asserts that black was better than white, it was firmly rooted in an attitude of white superiority that drove British missionary work and colonization.

In addition to disguising a racism based on hierarchies and motivating colonization, these receptions that purport to respect the Fisk Singers' Christianity were tied up in the expectations of an exceptional kind of religion marked by race and exhibited in music. Descriptions of the group often referred to a naturalness of religion. The *New York Times* reviewer quoted above described the "unfailing fervor of the religious feeling which animates their singing" just after writing that "there is little evidence of culture in their singing. But it has a spontaneity, a verve, and a natural enthusiasm which would be rare acquisitions for the average singers of the concert stage. Art has done little for these people and nature a great deal."³³ The naturalness of emotion and musicianship for him was firmly tied to religion. A minister from Binghamton, New York, similarly described the spirituals in terms of lack of refinement:

Born of ignorant emotion, uncorrected by any reading of Scripture, they are confused in language, broken in connection, wild and odd in suggestion, but inconceivably touching, and sometimes grand. At first you smile or laugh at the queer association of ideas, but before you know it your eyes fill and your heart is heaving with a true devotional feeling. You see clearly that these songs have been, in their untaught years, a real liturgy, a cry of the soul.³⁴

The naturalness or authenticity of a people who had not yet been cultivated granted the songs their "true" religious feeling.

In addition to naturalness as an indication of the Fisk Singers' unique (black) religious qualities, humor, wildness, and oddness were themes in contemporary descriptions of their religious songs. I will discuss humor below in a section on minstrelsy and its common association with black performers. For an example of constructing the Fisk Singers' religion as wild and odd, I turn to Theodore Seward's preface to his transcriptions of the singers' songs sold at their concerts. He describes the group's spiritual songs: "their origin is unique. They are never 'composed' after the manner of ordinary music, but spring into life, ready-made, from the white heat of religious fervor during some protracted meeting in church or camp."³⁵ The description conjures images of primitive, embodied rituals inexplicably producing music without need of cultivation. A writer in Glasgow commented "how strange it is that these unpretending singers should come over here to teach us what is the true refinement of music, [and] make us feel its moral and religious power."³⁶ The appeal of the group was precisely the listener's perception of an unusual combination of "moral and religious power" coming from "unpretending," or uncultivated, performers. That singers understood as unrefined could "teach *us*" almost allowed the black performers to surpass white musical expression and cultivation.³⁷

“No bones, no end man, no middle man”: resisting blackface minstrelsy

Understanding the Fisk Jubilee Singers' sound and the way they performed spirituals in a concert setting is an important aspect of comprehending their reception. Graham prefaces her study of the group by stating that “while many scholars have written on the reception of the Jubilee Singers, it seems premature to draw conclusions about the reception without first making an exhaustive study of repertory, programming, and performance practice.”³⁸ Her work, with its descriptions of these aspects of their career, enables the comparison of what and how they performed to how they were received in the discourse of reviews and contemporary descriptions of their performances. However, because Graham bases her argument on the descriptions by contemporary reviewers, it is important to remember that those depictions were based on racialized assumptions. Even when the Fisk Singers tried to conform to audience expectations in both performance practice and sound, the public responded in ways that remained focused on their difference.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers' renditions of slaves' songs were probably quite different from the way many slaves sang them on plantations. The slaves' sounds and manner of singing did not conform to white listeners' expectations of concert musical performance; in fact, Dena Epstein writes that “those southern listeners who had observed ‘praise meetings’ were usually horrified by what they heard.”³⁹ The Fisk Jubilee Singers, then, had to present this “authentic” repertory in a manner that would be acceptable to the public's musical expectations for refined concert performances. While slaves most likely sang heterophonically, the Fisk Singers sang arrangements in four-part homophony.⁴⁰ Along with heterophony, Graham adds other musical characteristics of slaves' “folk performance,” which she notes were difficult for contemporary writers to describe, but which we nowadays suspect included call and response style, improvisation, melismatic and syncopated melodies, cross rhythms, “shouts, exclamations, claps,” gestures and movement, and a variety of vocal timbres.⁴¹

Graham argues that the lack of descriptions in reviews of performance practice (e.g. their standing arrangement on stage or the length of their concerts) implies that the Fisk Singers' practices were similar to other art concerts or at least not so different as to provoke comment.⁴² Nevertheless, she claims that even as the Singers assumed more or less traditional concert demeanor, they retained features of folk performance:

Although they sang with a precision of rhythm, the rhythms they sang sometimes seemed inaccessible to the audience and impossible to replicate. In spite of their controlled tone and careful blending, their voices were almost always described as containing pathos, which suggests a timbre or vocal effects that could not be captured in words—a huskiness, perhaps, or catches or small cries.⁴³

Though some reviewers did comment on specific rhythms and timbres, the focus of white, middle-class reviews on difference may have overemphasized the Fisk Singers' actual divergence from standard concert practice. Graham argues that though the Fisk Singers arranged their plantation songs into four-part harmony and presented themselves on stage like white performers, they retained "folk performance" markers that made them intriguing and novel to the audiences. I would add that though they *did* conform in many ways to certain concert performance practices to which cultivated audiences were accustomed, reviewers in both the United States and Britain continually focused on their novelty and otherness.

The performing expectations that the Fisk Jubilee Singers encountered had been set by white performers, and included refined and artistic concert performances on the one hand, and humorous and rowdy blackface minstrelsy on the other. Minstrel shows were popular in both the United States and England well before the Fisk Singers came into existence. The first minstrel group in the United States went to Britain within a few months of its beginning in 1843, and many later blackface performers were themselves British.⁴⁴ These shows stereotyped black people in many ways by feminizing, sexualizing, or portraying them as childlike.⁴⁵ Minstrel performers used music and skits to portray black people as stupid or cunning, or as silly, contented slaves. Richard Crawford, drawing from Eric Lott, claims that "a mixture of curiosity, fear, love, and loathing" was central to the popularity of blackface minstrelsy.⁴⁶ As black performers, the Fisk Jubilee Singers encountered the same sorts of ambivalence, as well as the expectation that they would conform to minstrel stereotypes. They even included some "plantation songs" in their concerts, especially those that had become popular beyond minstrel shows, but they did not incorporate other elements such as dialect, skits, dress, or instruments associated with minstrelsy.⁴⁷ Even though they avoided the most pronounced minstrel conventions in their performances, many reviewers assessed the group in terms of minstrelsy. One Belfast newspaper reported that viewers had "the advantage of enjoying a troupe of real Negro choralists who, without the aid of cornermen, a skedaddle breakdown, a burlesque *prima donna*, or a plantation walk-round, succeeded in delighting the enthusiastic listeners."⁴⁸ Audiences expected to see a minstrel show when they went to hear the Fisk Singers, and reviewers judged them in relation to minstrel performances.

Because minstrel shows relied heavily on humor, the Fisk Jubilee Singers had to struggle with the expectation of comedy as the central feature of their public performances. Thomas Riis notes that "the general public, at least in the antebellum period, regarded 'negro' as a synonym for 'humorous' and considered even the serious black performer as a buffoon until proven otherwise."⁴⁹ Reviewers of the Fisk Singers in both the United States and England exhibited this sentiment as well; at one of their first concerts in Nashville, "a friend of one reviewer supposedly left in disgust, muttering 'no bones, no end man, no middle man.' The reviewer stated

that his friend should have stayed. He could have heard ‘some very fine music, at times funny, but deep and rich.’”⁵⁰ Again, the reviewer referred to features of minstrelsy, finding comedy even in their absence. The Fisk Singers made no intentional references to minstrelsy, but yet reviewers remarked on humor. Doug Seroff quotes an “unidentified Birmingham, England, newspaper” that described the Fisk Singers’ performance as “so curious a compound of the touching and the ridiculous that the audience could scarcely refrain from laughter.”⁵¹ Only slightly more subtle was George McDonald, a British man who had heard the Singers in New York and wrote in a letter that “There is something inexpressibly touching in their wonderfully sweet, round, bell voice, in the way in which they sing—so artless in its art yet so consummate in expression—and in the mingling of the pathetic with the unconscious comic in the rude hymns, shot here and there with a genuine thread of poetry.”⁵² To the authenticity of emotion and naturalness of musicianship, he added “unconscious” humor. To McDonald, the African American Fisk Singers could not help but be funny, even though the group intended their performances to be religious or artful rather than comical.⁵³ That reviewers such as these found comedy in their performances attests to the widespread view of that time that black performers ought to, or necessarily would, emulate minstrelsy.

Even before the Fisk Singers challenged the perceived whiteness of concert performances, the musical expectations they encountered were racially messy—minstrel shows themselves were a complicated combination of blackness and whiteness. Though the public thought of minstrel songs as black music, it was mostly white men who composed and performed them. *Dwight’s Journal of Music* published an article in 1857 titled “Who Wrote the Negro Music?” which listed Stephen Foster as one of the best-known composers of minstrel music.⁵⁴ This conception led to a surprising conclusion, that white people were somehow responsible for “black” music. As Thomas Riis writes, the public believed “that black people’s music and minstrel music [were] one and the same thing. The difference between the model and its imitation—if the imitation was a good one—was not generally thought significant in itself.”⁵⁵ Uncritical consumers apparently accepted minstrel music as authentic folk songs grown on the plantation with exotic-sounding pentatonic scales, syncopation, and dotted rhythms.⁵⁶ In a convoluted act of cross-fertilization, Epstein claims that some minstrel songs actually became so widely known that slaves did sing them on plantations; European visitors to the American South were thus reinforced in their expectations of hearing what they thought were American folk songs sung by the American black folk.⁵⁷ Though the Fisk Singers performed among these racially complicated expectations, reviewers attempted to assign them to stable categories by comparing them to minstrel shows and judging their music in relation to those simple, comic songs such as “Jim Crow” or “Old Dan Tucker,” written down by whites and used on the minstrel stage.

“The wonderful beauty and power of our songs”: the public performance of slave songs

The Fisk Singers challenged contemporaneous musical expectations by performing Western concert repertoire and popular songs, and, when they began to include slave songs, by performing them in four-part arrangements using concert performance practice. It was during the first years of their United States tours, in 1871–1872, that they altered their programming. When the Fisk Singers began their tours, they included four-part *a capella* arrangements of spirituals only as encores or during their church meeting performances where people expected to hear only religious music. A printed program from that period included this announcement: “As occasion offers during these concerts many of the old plantation melodies and genuine ‘spiritual songs,’ that gave hope and comfort to the hearts of the colored people through the dark and sad years of bondage, will be introduced.”⁵⁸ That program listed no spirituals by name, but rather included popular tunes and songs from oratorios and operas such as “We That Goeth Forth and Weepeth. From the Cantata of Esther,” “Quartette. There’s Moon-light on the Lake,” and “Song and Chorus. Star Spangled Banner.”

During the next few months, however, the bulk of the repertoire changed. Fisk Singer Ella Sheppard recalled that “a program of nineteen numbers, only two or three of which were slave songs, was inverted.”⁵⁹ Anderson lists the contents of a program of seventeen songs from sometime in late 1871 or 1872, of which ten are spirituals (e.g. “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Go Down, Moses,” and “Roll, Jordan, Roll”).⁶⁰ Once the Fisk Singers began including spirituals as the core of their concerts, they never returned to programs consisting primarily of arias, choruses, or popular repertoire. The spirituals were so well received—corresponding as they did to American Missionary Association’s and audiences’ expectations of uplift and Christianity—that by the time they arrived in London in 1873, the group had in fact invented what the audiences heard as a new kind of black music.

Audiences and reviewers assumed that the spirituals emerged more or less directly out of slavery (a monolithic notion that did not account for the way the Fisk Jubilee Singers learned and arranged their songs). The reality was far more complex. Not all of the Fisk Singers had been slaves, and those who had been did not necessarily know the same musical repertoire or share performance traditions. For example, singer Maggie Porter had been raised by members of her white father’s family, and had not been allowed to associate with black people. She recollected later that she “had never heard the Jubilee songs and did not know anything about them.”⁶¹ She and each of the other Fisk Singers brought with them particular heritages, as well as particular experiences of interactions between “black” and “white” societies and musics. About the Fisk Singers’ repertoire, Epstein explains, “There is no evidence of which songs each con-

tributed to the common repertory nor of how their styles blended into that unity that so impressed their audiences.”⁶² Ward records several possible sources for the songs, including members of the original ensemble and their families, audience members, and other contacts, at Fisk or on the road. Singer and pianist Ella Sheppard had a hand in transcribing them.⁶³ Official histories of Fisk University do not tell the full story; probably the choir director, George White, helped to arrange the songs, or perhaps “the tradition at Fisk” holds true, “that the students sang the songs of their people after rehearsals, a recreation that was not encouraged by some of the faculty.”⁶⁴ It is likely that a variety of factors shaped their repertoire, though it is clear from descriptions of the group’s performances that their spirituals, at first marginal, eventually formed the core of the group’s repertoire.

This transition in repertoire from popular songs and Western classical selections to slave songs redefined what “black music” was, providing notions of refinement and religion that contrasted to the concepts out of minstrelsy. However, the singers still acted within a constraining discursive framework—in both the United States and Britain—that positioned them as purveyors of neither comic stereotypes nor white religiosity, but of authentic black religious expression. The perceived authenticity of their performances both relied on and denied refinement, as audiences expected the singers (as “real slaves” or “real former slaves”) to need cultivation, but also “naturally” to produce spiritual songs. The singers held similarly conflicting views of their own repertoire; for example, Ella Sheppard described the use of spirituals, saying,

The slave songs were never used by us [in the beginning] in public. They were associated with slavery and the dark past, and represented the things to be forgotten. Then, too, they were sacred to our parents, who used them in their religious worship and shouted over them. We did not dream of ever using [the slave songs] in public. Had Mr. White or Professor Spence suggested such a thing, we certainly had rebelled [*sic*]. It was only after many months that gradually our hearts were opened to the influence of these friends and we began to appreciate the wonderful beauty and power of our songs; but we continued to sing in public the usual choruses, duets, solos, etc., learned at school.⁶⁵

The songs simultaneously signaled a “dark past” and “beauty and power,” and she contrasted the spirituals to the music “learned at school”—even though the Fisk Singers had to learn and practice the spiritual arrangements as well.

Another unidentified Fisk Singer refers to the reception of the songs, revealing similar contradictions:

It was our own expectation at that time to sing the more difficult music—composed by educated & talented artists, and our practice consisted chiefly in rehearsing these pieces. It was not common for us to spend much time singing slave song [*sic*]⁶⁶—the tendencies of the freedmen being to leave them behind in the grave of slavery—indeed some seemed almost to regard them as signs of their former disgrace & to shun them as one would the prison clothes of the days of his incarceration. We did not realize how precious they would be held by those who had prayed for us, and with us till we were delivered from slavery, & how these were the genuine jewels we brought from our bondage. It was our fear that the colored people would be grieved to have us expose the ignorance & weakness incident to the days of their degradation—not know [*sic*] that our songs would be regarded as born of God—and sweet & touching as angels lives [*sic*] might sing.⁶⁶

This Fisk Singer claims that white audiences heard these songs as natural religious relics and not as exposed ignorance. They sang what the audiences expected—not comedy, perhaps—but the racial novelty of natural religion and emotion. However “sweet and touching” they found the singers, audiences failed to accept the group as performers of finished artistic, cultivated songs. As one reviewer in the *Times* of London wrote, “Though the music is the offspring of wholly untutored minds, and, therefore, may grate upon the disciplined ear, it possesses a peculiar charm.”⁶⁷ The Fisk Singers were admired for singing emotional and religious songs, which were novel, honest, and therefore strangely charming. But such characteristics did not prove refinement.

Though they added slave songs to their repertoire, the Fisk Singers’ performance practice continued to reflect Western “cultivated” concert traditions. Even as the Singers concentrated on spirituals, they also performed many of the same songs that white performers sang (such as “Old Folks” and “Home, Sweet Home”⁶⁸), but such overlapping was consistently overlooked in accounts of their concerts. Few reviewers made reference to their rendition of shared Stephen Foster songs and familiar Protestant hymns, and even then their focus was on difference. A *New York Tribune* reviewer wrote, “Their wonderful skill was put to the severest test when they attempted ‘Home, Sweet Home,’ before auditors who had heard those same household words from the lips of Jenny Lind and Parepa. Yet these emancipated bond-women—now that they know what the word ‘home’ signifies—rendered that dear old song with a power and pathos never surpassed.”⁶⁹ He compared them to Lind and Parepa, who were concert singers from Sweden and Scotland respectively and icons of cultivation and whiteness; however, the triumph of the Fisk Singers lay in their emotional power, a characteristic of authenticity or naturalness, rather than artistic refinement. Lind, Parepa, and other white performers were also popular in Britain, but there also, reviewers ignored similarities between

the Fisk Singers and other concert singers. Rather, in both countries, the Fisk Singers were most often described in terms of difference—the strange and weird—which audiences understood as encapsulated in their spirituals.

“Not as black as we expected”: challenging binaries

The Fisk Jubilee Singers operated among categorical divisions constructed between black and white music, between slave and minstrel songs on the one hand and opera arias or popular songs on the other. Some scholars argue that the group was popular simply because of the novelty of their music; however, no performances are received outside of a web of expectations.⁷⁰ It took some time for the Fisk Singers to fit into their web, to sing what audiences expected of them and for audiences to become accustomed to a “new” kind of black music from them. Even after positive responses to initial performances of spirituals, though, their reception was often disappointing. Especially in the first months of their tours—though also later—they received mixed reviews.⁷¹ It was the connections and support from the American Missionary Association along with a network of recent interest in slave songs that garnered attention for this group. Though the Fisk Singers were the first to bring slave songs to public performance, such songs were circulating in transcribed collections prior to their tours. These collections were created by anti-slavery activists and music publishers who looked to the distribution of slave songs both to make a profit and to raise awareness of slave culture and humanity.⁷²

William Francis Allen compiled and first published *Slave Songs of the United States* in 1867, several years before the Fisk Singers were established. Though the slave song books contributed to public interest, they also helped create conceptions of what “real” slave songs were. In a footnote in the preface to his collection, Allen says, “We have rejected as spurious ‘Give me Jesus,’ ‘Climb Jacob’s Ladder,’ . . . and ‘I’ll take the wings of the morning,’ which we find in Methodist hymn-books.”⁷³ Because Allen had previously heard those songs in a context of primarily white singers, or had seen them already published in a book, he believed they could not be “authentic” slave songs. These divisions that were (and still are today) continually negotiated and reified between black and white music were the binaries that helped determine the reception of the Fisk Singers. The sounds they made did not ensure success on their own, rather, they interacted with, challenged, and commented on discourses and historical events.

Fear of miscegenation, a word that came into use only in the 1860s,⁷⁴ affected families and gender relationships around the country. Sexual politics were governed by color lines, divisions that Elise Lemire shows to be partially resulting from artistic and literary depictions in the nineteenth century that portrayed black people monolithically as undesirable. She writes, “in order for an imagined group of people to be deemed universally ugly, they had to be identifiable as a group with shared traits meant

to illicit disgust.”⁷⁵ The traits she discusses included dark skin, coarse hair, particular facial features and smells, and to these I add the sonic traits of dialect and distinctive music. These perceptions are evident in a story quoted by Andrew Ward, of a Northern soldier who encountered “one of the most beautiful white children I ever saw. She was well dressed, and had a fair, clear, rosy skin, and an eye as blue as indigo. Supposing she was the master’s child, I asked her where she was going. ‘Way up Norfh, massa, ‘long wid gran’dad,’ she answered. I was thunderstruck. . . . I never till then realized what an accursed thing slavery is.”⁷⁶ This man was surprised because of the juxtaposition of supposedly white and black features (physical and linguistic) within this one child, and their implication of interracial sexual activity that was allowed by slavery but was still viewed as aberrant. Similarly, responses to the Fisk Singers showed disbelief that these singers, who were *prima facie* classified as black despite diverse physical features and ancestries, could produce a self-evidently cultivated sound. The transgressions of the binaries sent reviewers reeling: the singers were black but cultivated. The only resolution of this paradox: a natural ability that had leap-frogged the need for cultivation. Could it be that black people possessed a natural ability that positioned them as somehow transcending whiteness itself—and if better than white because of this ability, was their status paradoxically desirable even though unattractive and inferior?⁷⁷ Such contradictions contributed to the intrigue and perceived novelty of the spirituals, though reviewers did not address the complexities directly.

The Fisk Singers themselves embodied a variety of physical features, a fact that affected both the way people treated them and the way they treated each other. Ward claims that “color would complicate not only the relation of lighter-skinned students like Georgia Gordon and America Robinson to darker-skinned classmates like Jennie Jackson but Fisk’s own relation to the rest of Nashville’s black community.”⁷⁸ Beyond the group itself, reviewers of Fisk Jubilee Singers’ performances rarely explored these kinds of ambiguous issues; even when they described the Fisk Singers physically, they habitually placed the singers into static categories. Anderson reproduces a review which demonstrates this tendency. The writer undoes the work of the American Missionary Association’s cultivation when he describes the group’s music as the “wild harmonies of a band of gentle savages from Tennessee,” and the Fisk Singers themselves as lots up for auction:

- Lot 1. Negro man, very black, six feet high, worth in old times,
\$2,000 under the hammer—Basso
- Lot 2. Mulatto, \$1,500—Tenor
- Lot 3. Mulatto, \$1,500—Tenor
- Lot 4. Jennie Jackson, full-blooded, brunette; very dark eyes and
hair, which seem light in contrast with a brow like that in which
Shakespeare’s lover saw Helen’s beauty—Soprano

- Lot 5. Maggie Porter, a constructive blond with curly hair
–Soprano
- Lot 6. Miss Shephrd [sic], a handsome, intelligent-looking
quadroon–Pianist
- Lot 7. Minnie Tate, a charming little quadroon, about 15 years of
age, with straight hair, falling loosely down her back
–Contralto and Soloist
- Lot 8. Young girl, with eyes and hair (and face) as black as a
beaver–Contralto
- Lot 9. Pickaninny, about 12 years old, black as the (printers)
[sic] devil–Alto singer and Orator

Is this an attempt at humor that misfires because of its cruelty? Though he described individual singers as “mulatto” or “quadroon,” contemporary references to mixed ancestry, the reviewer grotesquely implicitly upholds the black-white binary by collapsing a whole continuum of physical features into the image of the black slave. He calls the singers “handsome,” with “blond” and “straight” hair, but contradicts any implied attractiveness with the designated “Lot” numbers. These slaves and their “wild harmonies” could be metaphorically controlled, along with the group’s challenge to the binaries of black and white. However, this reviewer’s attempts at categorization simultaneously reveal the limits of those same boundaries.

In Britain, responses likewise betrayed rigidly racialized receptions and discomfort with ambiguity and similarities. When the Fisk Singers performed one of their first concerts in Britain, a reviewer wrote they were “not as black as we expected. They are simply eleven young Christian ladies and gentlemen.”⁸⁰ But there was nothing simple about his response to this group—this reviewer meant well by placing the Fisk Singers in a cultivated white (here, equated with Christian) category rather than negotiating ambiguities, but he paradoxically focused on their difference as he claimed their similarity and relied on confining binaries instead of allowing them freedom of selfhood.

Other British responses to the Fisk Singers’ color also demonstrated the public’s consistently dualistic conceptions of race. Two singers’ reminiscences encapsulate these receptions: “Georgia Gordon remembered how British Critics wrote that ‘Mabel Lewis and Georgia Gordon could pass as fair English belles in any drawing room, and Minnie Tate as coming from the south of France.’”⁸¹ Again, it was a compliment here to be in effect labeled white, which would have meant these two singers were considered more attractive and desirable than the others.⁸² On the other hand, another Singer remembered the incongruous relationship between color prejudices and their listeners’ romantic curiosity: “‘The darker you are the better they like you, and our darker complexioned young ladies got more offers of marriage than the light ones.’ complained the light-skinned Mabel Lewis. ‘Miss Jennie Jackson was very dark, and she had no peace.

She would take her umbrella and beat her way along with it.”⁸³ Black difference in this case was attractive because it was intriguing; lighter skin with its ambiguity and implied similarity could be unsettling or perhaps even alarming, or perhaps merely insufficiently exotic.

Fascination with novelty marked Queen Victoria’s reception of the Fisk Singers’ performance, a reception that the Fisk Singers and writers used to show that Britain was more hospitable than the United States. Ward asserted that “she did love oddities and approached the Jubilee Singers’ impromptu performance with the same undisguised curiosity with which she had entertained the midget ‘General’ Tom Thumb.”⁸⁴ The Queen was reportedly “as much impressed by the color of the singers as by their music,” writing in her journal that she had seen “real Negroes,” and noting that two Singers were “quite white, others coffee coloured, & several quite black. They sang extremely well together.”⁸⁵ Her quick progression from the authenticity of the “real Negroes” to a description of their colors and the blending of their voices gave her account a scintillating insinuation of miscegenation. The familiarity of intermingled voices was made novel by their implication of creolization. All of these reviews show that though audiences noted racial ambiguities, receptions in both the United States and Britain still relied on the binaries of blackness and whiteness.

“No place for freedom like England”? Analogous Receptions in Britain and the United States

Though receptions of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in both the United States and England were based on racial difference, the group claimed significant disparity in their treatment between the two countries. In the United States, the Fisk Singers’ reception involved welcoming responses onstage and sometimes hostile encounters off stage. Marsh claimed that “people who would not sit in the same church-pew with a Negro, under the magic of their song were able to get new light on questions of social equality.”⁸⁶ Though they were accepted as performers, the singers continued to encounter racism, such as exclusion from hotels on the road and in public transportation. Marsh recounts a story from Newark, New Jersey, where the Singers were turned away by a tavern-keeper who “had inferred, it seems, when accommodations were engaged for them in advance, that they were a company of ‘nigger minstrels.’ Although they had already retired to the rooms assigned to them before he discovered that their faces were colored by their Creator, and not with burnt cork, he promptly drove them into the street.”⁸⁷ This man would have accepted white people who were impersonating black people, and perhaps he would have tolerated these black singers when segregated to a stage performance. Nevertheless, the tavern-keeper would not allow the Fisk Singers to sleep, eat, and drink in the presence of his white guests. On another occasion, the group was thrown out of a train car by a policeman “who, with angry profanity, ejected them from the room, amid the applause of a cursing mob of one or

two thousand people.”⁸⁸ However, the superintendent quickly gave them a first-class car, and the “colored faces at almost every window made a sensation at every station where they stopped.”⁸⁹ Though a portion of the population showed them hospitality and assisted in their travels, many other people treated them badly. Even when audiences applauded them, the Fisk Singers were the objects of prejudice outside of the concert hall.

Group members, sponsors, and reviewers reported that in England, in supposed contrast to the United States, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were received with hospitality both within and outside of performance settings. On their first night in London, Fisk Singer Benjamin Holmes said they were “accommodated without previous arrangements, in the nicest manner, and as other passengers who were several shades lighter than the outside of ourselves.”⁹⁰ Holmes also commented on the responses of the train conductors, reporting that “you can ride in any of the three [classes] that you are able to pay for.”⁹¹ Frederick Loudin, another Fisk Jubilee member, described his experiences in a later interview by saying, “When I first visited England it seemed to me as if I had always been walking about blind before. We were astonished to find such freedom there, such an entire absence of race prejudice [. . .] I am an enthusiastic American, but there is no place for freedom like England.”⁹² To sum up their time in Britain, Marsh wrote that “in no way were they ever offensively reminded, through look or word—unless by some rude American who was lugging his caste conceit through a European tour, or by a vagrant Englishman who had lived long enough in America to ‘catch’ its color prejudices—that they were black.”⁹³ These accounts seem compelling in their descriptions of the disparity between the United States and British responses, but they do not account for the many racist responses addressed above that were apparent in both countries. Despite the “freedom” the Fisk Singers saw in England, reviews suggest that they were received as objects of curiosity, tools of missionary colonialism, and beneficiaries of cultivation.

As vessels of white refinement, the Fisk Jubilee Singers fulfilled a desire by the British upper classes to see themselves as generous. Approval from aristocrats seemed to give credence to the Fisk Singers’ popularity; the group was delighted to entertain British nobility and dignitaries such as Queen Victoria and the Prime Minister Gladstone, and writers focused on these events to the point of ignoring their reception by working-class audiences.⁹⁴ Julia Chykowski suggests an analogous reception of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield by British elites (in this issue). In their discussions of the Fisk Singers’ treatment in these situations, critics continually commented on the difference from the prejudicial responses of the American public:

Writing an account of the occasion for the New York “Independent,” the Rev. Newman Hall, alluding to the color prejudices of so many Americans, said: “I wish they had been present yesterday, to see Mrs. Gladstone and her daughters, and the noble lords

and ladies present, taking their Negro friends by the hand, placing them chairs, sitting at their side, pouring out their tea, etc., and conversing with them in a manner utterly free from any approach either to pride or condescension; but exactly as if they had been white people in their own rank in life."⁹⁵

However, the response of this American critic who claimed there was no "pride or condescension" in these British dignitaries' responses belies the racialism in British receptions. In their contact with the singers, both countries' audiences saw race in terms of difference and otherness, and responses suggest that in Britain, it was precisely because higher classes saw the Fisk Singers as different that they were inclined to treat them well. Indeed, in deigning to attend to other "ranks in life," British dignitaries were not only being kind to the Fisk Singers but were flattering themselves. In order to be magnanimous, they needed people to receive their good will—and, as Ward notes, "these American former slaves presented no threat to the British upper classes, who may have welcomed them in part as proof of the backwardness and enduring shame of the upstart American Republic."⁹⁶ Though Americans' denial of housing or transportation to the Singers is deplorable, British condescension, however kindly meant, constitutes another form of dehumanization and prejudice. Indeed, as visitors they threatened no one in any class. Though the divergence between the receptions in the United States and England is striking, the similarities in responses demonstrate certain shared assumptions about race, caste, and difference.

Though factors of management and venue affected the Fisk Jubilee Singers' successes, it was the convolution of racial dynamics as conveyed through music in both the United States and Britain that contributed to their continuing popularity. Their receptions in both countries were bound up in social and discursive networks of such diverse and complex issues as religion, gender roles, musical authenticity, abolition, and colonialism. The audiences' expectations and subsequent responses and the Fisk Singers' own reactions to those expectations were all part of an ongoing process of humans trying to understand and respond to one another. The musical background influenced by blackface minstrelsy and slave songbooks affected what and how the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed, and the audiences received them according to their expectations of how the singers would conform to or differ from minstrel show performances. The special context of the Fisk University, a place that linked emancipation, uplift, and religion, also affected the Singers' repertoire and performance practice. Fisk's constellation of white and black traditions and cultivated behaviors eventually influenced audiences' expectations. Finally audiences brought with them their frequently conflicting assumptions of humorous black performers and Christians linked to abolition. These expectations were often simultaneously upheld and challenged as the Fisk Singers crossed geographical and racial boundaries with their performance prac-

tices and musical arrangements. The underlying theme of difference, however, continued to reinforce the racialized and frequently dehumanizing reception of the Fisk Jubilee Singers that marked both American and British racial politics. The “strange, weird effect” of the performances—their revelation of ambiguous racial categories in both countries—resided not only in the songs themselves, but in their interactions with racial frameworks and audience reactions.

Notes

1. Quoted in J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers; With Their Songs* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1881. Revised edition, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 58.

2. For a discussion of these discursive constructions and especially “a new alignment of blackness and the sacred” in the 1860s, see Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 177–186.

3. Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 127–158.

4. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 186 and Doug Seroff, “‘A Voice in the Wilderness’: The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ Civil Rights Tours of 1879–1882.” *Popular Music and Society* 25, no. 1–2 (2001): 131.

5. The Fisk Jubilee Singers offered new configurations of racial relationships that affected audiences in each country they visited. For example, Ray Winbush addresses Welsh audiences’ responses to the Fisk Singers in light of their own experiences of discrimination: “Women’s Jazz Archive,” <<http://www.jazzsite.co.uk/wja/fisk.htm>> Women in Jazz Swansea, 2000 (Accessed 1 February 2004).

6. The Fisk Singers were so popular during the first decade of their tours that their sponsoring organization, the American Missionary Association, commissioned books about the group and transcriptions of their songs to be sold at concerts. The books of the two contracted authors, J.B.T Marsh’s *The Story of the Jubilee Singers, with Their Songs* and G. D. Pike’s *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, went through various revisions and editions. Marsh’s book was first published in 1873 and was in its seventh edition by 1877; a Revised Edition followed in 1883, and a “New Edition” 1892. Former Fisk Singer Frederick J. Loudin was involved in the 1892 edition, as well as a 1903 edition, both of which included his “supplement, containing an account of their six years’ tour around the world, and many new songs. These were published in several different cities in the United States (e.g., Boston; New York; Cleveland; Alexandria, Virginia), and also in London at different times. Translations of the book in German and Dutch were also published in those countries. Pike’s book was published fewer times, but also in Boston, New York, and London. The title changed to *The Singing Campaign for Twenty Thousand Pounds* in Britain. It was also translated into Dutch by Adama van Scheltema and published by Oosterzee in Amsterdam, *De geschiedenis van de Jubilee-Zangers met hunne liederen*. Theodore Seward was the transcriber in all these collections, and scholars have explored these musical texts in order to speculate on uses and public perceptions of the repertoire. For a succinct summary of the circulation and editions of these transcriptions, see Dena J. Epstein’s “The Story of the Jubilee Singers: An Introduction to Its Bibliographic History” in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, ed. Josephine Wright with Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1992) 151–162. Thanks to Jennifer Barron for directing me to this source.

7. Ward’s chapters “Inching Along” and “The Golden Street” detail the first tour’s rocky but eventually rewarding beginning.

8. Toni Passmore Anderson, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers: Performing Ambassadors for the Survival of an American Treasure, 1871–1878.” Ph.D. diss., Georgia State University, 1997.

9. Sandra J. Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginnings of an American Tradition," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2001. Anderson, Graham, and Ward all rely on special collections at Fisk University, which the Fisk University Web page writes "Includes clippings, contracts, financial reports, music, autographs, scrapbooks, photographs, memorabilia, and the diaries of Ella Sheppard Moore." <<http://www.fisk.edu/index.asp?cat=7&pid=257>> "Fisk.edu: Welcome to Our Online Community!" 2001 (Accessed 5 January 2004).

10. Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 6.

11. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 246.

12. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 11, 7.

13. Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 36.

14. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 5.

15. Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 94–95. Graham also emphasizes that "if the troupe had not failed so miserably in their first two months on tour, requiring appearances at church worship services as a means to attract audiences, spirituals might have remained a relatively insignificant part of the repertory." Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 296.

16. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 206.

17. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 75.

18. In her twentieth-century discussion of this situation, Anderson notes that "paternalistic behavior was not peculiar to these institutions founded for Blacks." Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 46. She quotes Laurence Veysey's study of early American universities, writing "that 'an overriding spirit of paternalism infused the American college of the mid-nineteenth century.'" Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 32.

19. Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 66.

20. Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 57.

21. Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 74, and Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 61–62. Anderson cites the *Tennessee Tribune* as giving "glowing praise to each performer." She identifies the cantata as George F. Handel's "Queen Esther," whereas Graham opts for William Bradbury's 1856 "Esther, the Beautiful Queen." "Concert Spiritual," 81; Ward concurs on the title "Esther, the Beautiful Queen," but gives no composer. *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 90, 117, and 118; Marsh simply calls it "the beautiful cantata of 'Esther.'" *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 13.

22. Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 317.

23. See Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 309–36 for a full discussion of other Jubilee groups. The Fisk Jubilee Singers also broke into several smaller groups later in the 1870s, under different leadership and affiliations; however, they continually endeavored to represent a cultivated singing tradition. See Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, Chapter 27, "Want to Cross Over" for a discussion of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' members after the group's disassociation with the American Missionary Association.

24. Letter to Cravath, October 1872, quoted in Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 317. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 73ff. introduces White and his connections to Fisk University and its singers.

25. Graham describes the sound ideal of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, including vocal blending, dynamic shading, and enunciation, "Concert Spiritual," 229–234. Their director, George White, was not a professional musician, but he "possessed rare musical instincts, a keen sense of musical effect, and great charisma as a director. He was an exacting taskmaster, requiring hours of rehearsal to achieve a quality sound. Though all students engaged in singing at the college, White chose only the best talent for his choir." Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 56.

26. Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 86.

27. "Chickering Hall," *New York Times* 24 December 1885, 4.

28. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 37.

29. Christine Bolt, *The Anti-Slavery Movement and Reconstruction: A Study in Anglo-American Cooperation, 1833–77*. (London: Oxford, 1969), 55. Bolt devotes an entire chapter to this subject: "Freedmen's Aid in Britain: Organization (I)" 54–82. See also

Ward, who writes that the Fisk Jubilee Singers arrived in London amidst “public opinion against the enduring vestiges of the African slave trade and in favor of a missionary effort to shine the light of Christianity upon the ‘Dark Continent,’” *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 209. Midgley explains, “Women saw support of African education as part of a broader project of civilization and Christianisation intended to promote the downfall of slavery and eradicate other aspects of African societies which they found objectionable.” *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), 186.

30. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 56.

31. Gustavus D. Pike, *The Singing Campaign for Ten Thousand Pounds; Or, The Jubilee Singers in Great Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton; Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1874), 52.

32. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 80. Ward also describes this meeting in *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 288.

33. “Chickering Hall,” 4.

34. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 156.

35. Seward, Theo F., “Jubilee Songs: Preface to the Music,” in *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; With Their Songs* by J. B. T. Marsh. (1881; rev. ed., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969): 121.

36. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 67.

37. About this same passage, Radano writes, “what magnified the sense of paternalism and condescension among white audiences also seemed to be working in reverse: the ‘strange’ character of the Fisk songs taught white listeners about the very concepts of musical refinement they assumed to have invented themselves.” Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 260.

38. Graham, “Concert Spiritual,” 5.

39. Dena J. Epstein, “Black Spirituals: Their Emergence Into Public Knowledge,” *Black Music Research Journal* 10 no. 1 (1990): 63.

40. Graham, “Concert Spiritual,” 4.

41. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

42. *Ibid.*, 236.

43. *Ibid.*, 259.

44. Richard Crawford, *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 203 and 870, n. 17.

45. Dale Cockrell, one of many scholars who addresses this issue, states resolutely that “there can be no doubt that black people were misrepresented and viciously stereotyped on the stage.” Cockrell, “Nineteenth-Century Popular Music,” in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, edited by David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 167.

46. Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 197, 218.

47. For example, the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang some of Stephen Foster’s “plantation songs” such as “Old Folks,” “Massa’s in the Cold, Cold Ground,” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” See Graham, “Concert Spiritual,” 214. Graham describes how the song “Old Folks at Home” (performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers) was “initially performed by minstrel troupes” but “by 1870 it had attained the status of a national or folk song” and was closely associated with the performances of the Swedish singer Christine Nilsson. Graham, “Concert Spiritual” 211–212. She also claims that the inclusion of these songs “sharpened the image of the Jubilee Singers as former slaves by providing images of locales and a way of life that the spirituals did not provide” and gave new meaning to the songs “so that they came to be seen not in the narrow sense of Ethiopian delineations but in the broader sense of representations of America.” Graham, “Concert Spiritual,” 214. Though this may be accurate to a point, the probability remains that audiences saw the songs as markers of lacking cultivation.

48. Pike, *The Singing Campaign*, 124. The *New York Herald* also announced the Fisk Singers in 1872 as “Beecher’s Negro minstrels . . . The great Plymouth preacher as an end man . . . a full troupe of real live darkies in the tabernacle of the Lord . . . Rollicking choruses but no sand shaking or joy dancing.” Silveri, “The Singing Tours,” 109.

49. Thomas Riis, “The Cultivated White Tradition and Black Music in Nineteenth-

Century America: A Discussion of Some Articles in J. S. Dwight's *Journal of Music*," *Black Perspectives in Music* 4, no. 2 (1976): 173.

50. Louis D. Silveri, "The Singing Tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers: 1871–1874," in *Feel the Spirit: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Music*, edited by George R. Keck and Sherrill V. Martin. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, no. 119 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 106.

51. Doug Seroff, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers in Britain," in *Under the Imperial Carpet: Essays in Black History 1780–1950*, ed. Rainer Lotz and Ian Pegg (Crawley, England: Rabbit Press, 1986), 46. The newspaper he quotes is from 27 February 1874.

52. Pike, *The Singing Campaign*, 71. Also, a *New York Times* (13 February 1880, 5) review combines the authentic and religious with humor: "Their concert is not to be judged from any artistic stand-point, and they make no pretensions to this. Their singing appeals rather to the emotions than the artistic senses, and, therefore, should be considered for what it is, the peculiar melancholy, or else the rollicking songs with the strange mixture of religious sentiments and grotesque humor, in which the former slaves were wont to indulge."

53. Graham argues throughout her dissertation that the Fisk Singers followed performance practice traditions of Western concert music, which are not meant to be humorous.

54. Riis, "The Cultivated White Tradition," 170.

55. *Ibid.*, 174.

56. Discussion of these musical features can be found in Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 67.

57. Epstein, "Black Spirituals," 58.

58. Quoted in Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 126, and reproduced in Anderson "Performing Ambassadors," 384.

59. Anderson, "Performing Ambassadors," 100.

60. Anderson makes the judgment on the date of the program according to the names of the singers listed. Some of the songs are not listed by title, such as "Song" or "Vocal medley." "Performing Ambassadors," 100–101. To the question of the definition of "spiritual," I look to discursive conceptions, which are not always clear-cut. Nine of the ten spirituals listed by title in the program under discussion appeared in Seward's 1872 "Jubilee Songs" transcriptions. However, the abolitionist song "John Brown's Body" and the chant "Lord's Prayer" were also included in this collection. Marsh, 222 and 223.

61. Quoted in Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 193.

62. Epstein, "Black Spirituals," 60.

63. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 110, 160.

64. Epstein, "Black Spirituals," 61.

65. Graham, "Concert Spiritual," 117.

66. About this passage, Anderson writes, "Doug Seroff suggests, and I concur, that this was probably the text of a speech made by one of the Jubilee Singers. [From the] Jubilee Singers Archives, Fisk University Special Collections." "Performing Ambassadors," 85.

67. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 210. His citation is from *Times of London*, 7 May 1873, 5.

68. These two songs, along with the others in their repertoire that were not spirituals, had their own range of associations with them by the time the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed them. "Home Sweet Home" was the most popular song in the earlier part of the century and was made famous by Swedish vocalist Jenny Lind, while "Old Folks at Home" was originally a minstrel song and later sung by another Swede, Christine Nilsson. Graham discusses these and other "songs from the White Tradition" in "Concert Spiritual," 209–211.

69. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 31. On Euphrosyne Parepa (a Scottish soprano, 1836–74), see Harold Rosenthal and Elizabeth Forbes, "Parepa (-Rosa), Euphrosyne," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 30 January 2004), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

70. An example of attributing their fame to spirituals is "The Original Fisk Jubilee

Singers,” a Web page which states, “public reaction to the group’s typical program, classical pieces, hymns, and anthems was lukewarm,” but that to the first public performance of the spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus,” “the response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Without hesitation, White [the choir director] shifted the musical thrust of the remaining appearances to spirituals.” <<http://gospelhighway.50megs.com/JUBILEE/gospeljubilee.htm>> Personal Web page, content from various published books, 2003. (Accessed 15 October 2003).

71. Epstein, “Black Spirituals,” 61. Ward’s chapters “Inching Along” and “The Golden Street” detail the first tour’s rocky but eventually rewarding beginning. *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 127–158.

72. Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 413. Radano writes that these collections “circulated widely in mostly white middle-class households during the second half of the nineteenth century.” Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 166.

73. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States: The Classic 1867 Anthology* (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867. Unabridged republication, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995) vi.

74. Elise Lemire, “*Miscegenation*”: *Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 8 and 116.

75. Lemire, “*Miscegenation*,” 3.

76. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 426–427, n. 42. The quotation is from Edmund Kirke, *Way Down in Tennessee* (New York: Carleton, Publisher, 1864): 16–17.

77. For more discussion of this paradox, see Radano, who discusses perceptions of black music as “charting realms beyond the access of whites.” Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 168.

78. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 94.

79. Anderson, “Performing Ambassadors,” 99.

80. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 209.

81. *Ibid.*, 226.

82. Lemire writes, “‘preference,’ or desire, was racialized, it was biologized. Normal preference was construed as the desire to sexually couple and reproduce with someone who has not only the same supposedly racial features as oneself but also the same source of these features: namely, what was imagined as race blood.” Lemire, “*Miscegenation*,” 3. Thus, it would have been most proper for white audiences to desire the Fisk Singers only if they could “pass for white.”

83. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 226.

84. *Ibid.*, 213. Tom Thumb was also an American export.

85. *Ibid.*, 214.

86. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 18.

87. *Ibid.*, 35. Another example of the Fisk Singers being treated badly in the United States was when hotels in Chillicothe, Illinois, refused them in the first few months of their tours in 1871. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 130. The *New York Times* (24 December 1885, 1) reported the same problem: “Refused by the Troy Hotels: The Galling Experiences of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.” The title of this article suggests that the writer was concerned about this problem, which is why I call the responses “conflicting”—The Fisk Singers encountered some people who rejected them and others who defended them.

88. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 39.

89. *Ibid.*

90. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 208.

91. *Ibid.*

92. Quoted in Seroff, “A Voice in the Wilderness,” 136.

93. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 73.

94. By contrast, Paul Gilroy briefly points out “the history of the choir’s performances to enormous working-class audiences in British cities.” Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 90. Gilroy does not pursue this inquiry, and a thorough treatment is also outside the scope of this study. Winbush describes the situation in Wales, where some “audiences unable to afford the 2s. ticket price could place their pennies in buckets at the door,” but

does not analyze the class dynamics. Winbush, "Women's Jazz Archive."
95. Marsh, *The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, 53-4.
96. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*, 227.