

Throughout my brief first exploration of the *Call and Response* anthology, what struck me was the musical element. Music plays an important role in any culture, however, during our class discussions and study Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, it appeared to play a much more prevalent role in my understanding of the book. The entire structure was rooted in a musical compositional technique, thus highlighting the significance of music in African American culture. Since this is a literature course, I want to emphasize the idea that music is a type of literature.

The close relation between music and literature can be best explored, in my opinion, through poetry. Given that the oral tradition of poetry is strongly exemplified in hymns and chants, having such pieces distributed amongst the different *Response* sections is powerful. The fact that poems were often sung in history also brings my mind back to Bill Moyers' interview of Bernice Johnson Reagon, and her idea that "When we sing, we announce our existence." The use of voice, of song, of poetry, of literature, to demand to be heard is a practice that may be neglected by current generations yet is all the more powerful when used.

The structure of this anthology, put together by Patricia Liggins Hall and a team of editors, was in no way an accident. According to Masterclass.com, the call-and-response technique in music originated in Sub-Saharan Africa and was subsequently brought to the states with the slave trade. Every section of this anthology, or the *Call*, is led with lyrics of well-known hymns and several bars from sheet music. The poetic inclusions throughout give an overwhelming sense of emotion in an already melancholy and spiritualistic expression. The presence of the spiritualism and the Church in the States gave way to countless pieces about the mercy of God, the greatness of redemption, and the idea of a Promised Land. In the section of the anthology, "Voices of Slave Poets," (69-105) under the *Response: Black Literary* Declarations of Independence, the celebration of Christ and His grace served as a strong will, a calling to higher power that one day might be reached. In several of these poems, many devices are used that are still common today, no doubt passed on through the generations. The use of repetition and rhyme in these pieces creates a rhythm, one that makes the telling of stories and morals easier to remember and forcing a heavier impact on the readers, who pass on the oral tradition.

The musical element continues through the book, notably on page 214, featuring more bars of sheet music. More importantly, I believe, on the following page, there is a spiritual. Spirituals "contained hidden meanings, with the slaves' longing for freedom couched in biblical symbols" (215). The example shown is that of a song that represented the coming of their "black Moses," the historic and courageous Harriet Tubman:

*Dark and thorny is de pathway
Where de pilgrim makes his ways;
But beyond dis vale of sorrow
Lie de fields of endless days.*

This song (or piece of poetry, depending on mode of delivery) contains a certain cadence along with its rhyme. The apparent notoriety of the piece no doubt has multiple reasons, though I think

it suffices to say that the formatting of said poetry plays a major role in that fact. The symbolism of this spiritual has long outlived its need to be used yet serves as a strong reminder of the past and why its presence is reserved in history.

The use of song continued to serve its purpose throughout the Civil War, as shown throughout the calls-and-responses put together by Patricia Liggins Hill. At this point, it appears as though generations had long picked up the traditions of those before them and begun to use them in their own way. “Go Down Moses,” a popular spiritual at the time, had been rehashed to reflect a new issue going on at that present. The new refrain sang as:

*Go Down, Abraham,
Way down in Dixie’s land;
Tell Jeff Davis,
To let my people go.*

The idea of rehashing well known songs to fit a particular goal or statement is a standard practice among modern protests all over the world but seen often today in the United States of America, thus proving the pasts movements relevant and substantial. Following this period, with the Emancipation of the enslaved people of the South, even more spirituals made their way through the communities; notably, *Wade in nuh Watuh Children*, *Steal Away*, and *You Got a Right*. Recognizable today, I couldn’t help but to once again think back to Dr. Reagon, who had mentioned these in her interview with Bill Moyers.

The *Call* named “Cross Road Blues,” brings us to more modern times, in which African American music and literature has found a new movement to embrace. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s brought a host of new voices and new forms of literature to the expanding community. With new year’s bringing new struggles on African American people, a boom in a new form of poetry took place. One that did not conform to traditional principles as they had in the past, but a style that still empowered the black voice and their heartbreak and sorrow, or their triumph and celebration. That trend continues even now, with contemporary artists putting out new works on their experiences as a black person in America.

As I was constructing this paper, I came across the interview of Monique “Big Mo” Matthews on rhythm and poetry on pages 1876-1878. The last several lines are what struck me most about literature and music coinciding. In her words,

“You have to have something that flows.
You have to be def.
D-E-F.
I guess I have to think of something for you that ain’t slang.
Def is dope, def is live
when you say somethin’s dope
it means it is the epitome of the experience
and you have to be def by your very presence
because you have to make people happy.

And we are living in a society where people are not happy with their everyday lives.”

Her requirement of excellence in craft is what I would like to leave on for this paper. To celebrate happier times through music and poetry is essential, as she so correctly points out—people rarely appear to be happy in their daily lives. The oral tradition should not be lost to new generations, as the messages of the past and messages for the future ought to survive on. This anthology, which encapsulates so many incredible voices, is teeming with musical structure, and I believe that through that musical structure, more will be able to encompass the truth of African American literature and to celebrate it.