

**Eileen Guenther's *In Their Own Word:
Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals***

A Book Review by Dr. Beverly Eileen Mitchell

Professor of Historical Theology, Wesley Theological Seminary
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It is a privilege to have been asked to review Eileen Guenther's new book, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals*. This is true not just because our mutual interest in the history of black enslavement, and the fruit borne of that history, has created a bond that we have as colleagues and friends. I am also pleased to do this because she has done a masterful job of demonstrating the ways in which the Spirituals mine the complexity of human experiences as they “*sing of joy and sorrow, hope and despair, enlightenment, and motivation.*”¹ This, despite the fact that African Americans have so often been viewed as creatures lacking the capacity for such human complexity.

In Their Own Words is the culmination of painstaking research that Eileen did over the course of more than a decade. What started as a contribution to the history of spirituals as a *musical genre* morphed into a *tour de force* in which the historical context is highlighted in ways that illumine the uniqueness of this art form as an expression of genius and grace granted to an enslaved people who survived the attempt of cultural genocide against the odds.

What's critical and striking about Eileen's approach is revealed in the book's title, which by doing so she stresses how important it is to capture the experience of African Americans: *in their own words*.

The cover art for the book is a replication of a painting of local artist Cynthia Farrell Johnson, a black female, who was an artist-in-residence here at Wesley in 2011. This painting, titled “Jacob's Ladder,” was part of her exhibit titled, *Many Thousand Gone: Songs of My Father*, and was inspired by the Spirituals, which Johnson's own father sang.

The style of writing and the layout of Eileen's book are quite accessible to a diverse, expansive audience that would include not only musicians and musicologists, but also historians of African-American studies, students, congregants, and the general public alike.

The book is divided into three major sections. The first section traces the origins of Spirituals, their musical characteristics, and the performance practice of them. In addition, Eileen gives a thorough treatment of the socio-historical context of this music through slave narratives and oral

histories. We learn the role of Christianity as a theological resource for many of the songs, which were shaped by the fires of revivalism as a result of the Second Great Awakening. Christian themes, such as deliverance, redemption, freedom, conversion, and the longing for the reign of God in all its fullness can be discerned; and we are also informed of the multivalence of the lyrics through coded language that sometimes successfully subverted the death-dealing institution of slavery.

The second section of the book gives the details of the challenges of daily life on plantations. The last section addresses the publication of Spirituals beginning in the late 1860s, with brief biographical information regarding some of the noted early arrangers of this music, including Harry Burleigh, James Weldon Johnson, his younger brother J. Rosamond Johnson, and R. Nathaniel Dett.

There have been a variety of fine volumes written on the Spirituals, among them: Wyatt Tee Walker's *Somebody's Calling My Name*; Howard Thurman's, *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*; the Johnson brothers' *The Books of the American Negro Spiritual*; Arthur C. Jones' *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*; and James Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues, An Interpretation*, which all in their own ways provide critical insight and understanding of the Spirituals. Eileen contributes an encyclopedic work that builds upon this storehouse in ways that make use of the continuing scholarly attention given to the Spirituals and their role in African-American history.

Eileen maintains that the Spirituals are among the most powerful music ever created; and notes the universal dimension to them, beyond the context out of which these songs arose. Thus, she affirms, with Arthur C. Jones, that this universal dimension to the Spirituals makes these songs “*available to all persons who are prepared to open themselves to the unsettling healing power that inhabits these marvelous songs of life.*”²

This statement reminds me of the impact of the Spirituals on the privileged German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, later martyred for his participation in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer led Bible studies and attended regular worship services at New York City's famous Abyssinian Baptist Church, an African-American church in Harlem, while he attended Union Theological Seminary as a post-doctoral fellow in the 1931-1932 academic year. His discovery of this music had such an impact on him that he took a collection of recordings of these songs with him when he returned to Germany.

Later he shared this music with the seminarians attending the underground seminary he founded at Finkewalde – to train pastors in the

Confessing church – an alternative to the German churches which had capitulated to the ideology of Nazism. He and the seminarians listened to the Spirituals and were strengthened in their resolve to resist the seduction of National Socialism whatever the cost, by the power of this music that transcended culture, time, and place.

It seems to me that part of the power of this music is that it can resonate beyond its community of origin in ways that bear witness to the interconnectedness which envelops us all.

This ability of the particular to speak to the universal reflects the theological and spiritual connection that binds us by virtue of our having been created in the image of God. This divine imprint, and the kinship it fosters, facilitates our capacity to transcend our particularities to communicate with others through our *human* experiences, across the barriers which often divide us. This is especially true through music, which has the capacity to reverberate deeply, profoundly, and mysteriously.

Eileen's tremendous respect for the people who are the subject of this history comes through and it is evident that she's keenly aware of what is at stake in the telling of the story of the emergence of the Spirituals. Her approach and the masterful quality of this work *honor* the African-American community and help to disseminate its treasure to an even wider audience. Because of this, we are all the richer for it.

¹Eileen Guenther, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals*. St. Louis, Missouri: MorningStar Music Publishers, 2016, 83.

² Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993, xi, quoted in Guenther, *In Their Own Words*, xvi.