

Places of Power and Promise:

A Pilgrimage Into the Enslaved African Hush Harbor

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Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced.

-Philosopher Edward S. Casey¹

O yes sir, de master would make us go to church every Sunday and he taught us to always tell the truth, then the Saviour he save us. He said we would go to *negro* heaven.

-formerly enslaved African Harriet Barrett² (emphasis mine)

Church was what they called it but all that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal. Nothing about Jesus was ever said.

-formerly enslaved African Charlie Van Dyke³

Yass ah, we went ter church in brush arbors and had logs ter sat on...

-formerly enslaved African Mattie Gilmore⁴

From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master. In the...seclusion of the brush arbors (“hush harbors”) the slaves made a Christianity truly their own.

-African American Religion scholar Albert Raboteau⁵

Introduction: The Place of the Hush Harbor

Place is not just where we are; place is who we are. As Edward Casey reminds us, life itself is placed. He goes on to contend that, “A placeless world would amount to an unremitting realism of regions...Without places, being-in-the-world would be merely diffuse and disjointed – overt and public and yet shapeless.”⁶ The baseball player is not a baseball player without the place of the pitch; the baker is not the baker without the place of the kitchen; the professor is not the professor without the place of the classroom; the dancer is not the dancer without the place of the stage. The

¹ Edward S. Casey. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, ix.

² George P. Rawick. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol 2, Texas Narratives, Part 1. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979, 200.

³ Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 213-214.

⁴ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 5, Texas Narratives, Part. 4, 1493.

⁵ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 212.

⁶ Ibid, Edward S. Casey. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, 251.

Christian is not the Christian without the place of the sanctuary (or at least, not the fullness of whom God calls them to be in community). Place – rather than space – language is key here, for as Tim Ingold stresses, place is not equivalent to, or held captive within, space. He writes, “Of all the terms we use to describe the world we inhabit, [space] is the most abstract, the most empty, the most detached from the realities of life and experience.”⁷ Therefore, while many Christian ecclesiologists, theologians, and churchgoers write and speak of worship *space*, my work will intentionally avoid such language, in favor of the generative, meaning-making vernacular of *place*.

Here, the reader is invited into a very particular, and at times termed peculiar, place of Christian worship: the enslaved African hush harbor. Sometimes named brush arbor or brush harbor, this is the place where enslaved Africans worshipped God and developed a Christian ecclesiology all their own. This was their sanctuary, the hallowed place in which their Christianity found its fullest expression. This paper serves as an invitation to pilgrimage: a spiritual sojourn into the place of the hush harbor – where enslaved Africans “stole away” from the fetters of slavery to what bell hooks named the “wild places.”

This pilgrimage leads first through the differing physicalities of hush harbors, both those constructed and those in naturally-grown shelters. Such green, brown, and blue wild places are then contrasted against the order and subjection of the white plantation church, as we explore why enslaved Africans needed a place of their own to worship God. Finally, we will discover how the hush harbor without led to an ecclesiological hush harbor within: generating an African American ecclesiology marked by lament, deliverance and freedom, and spiritual power. The reader is invited to consider that African American ecclesiology did not simply develop as a reaction to the institution of chattel slavery, the ordered subjection of Black lives, or the hateful theologies of white Christian slave owners. African American ecclesiology developed as a placed reality, and that place is the enslaved African hush harbor.

This hush harbor pilgrimage is made possible by a tapestry of many sources. Primary texts include selections from George P. Rawick’s impressive forty-one volume interview series, *The American Slave*. I centered my readings of these volumes in those narratives from Texas (though many of the interviews contained within described plantation life across the South, as is typical of the transience of chattel slave life). My reasoning for this selection was autobiographical: the place from which I come is South Texas, and for the purposes of this project, it was important to ideologically intersect the lived narratives of formerly enslaved persons with my own narrative (that of a white woman). Rather than a distanced analysis, I desired to hear of slavery and post-slavery (if there is such a thing) life in towns I knew, communities in which I grew up, in the places of my own placed identity; this has added rootedness to my analysis, and a call to repentance to my spirit.

Secondary texts include works from historians and theologians of slavery, “post-slavery”, and African American life, such as those by Albert Raboteau, Noel Leo Erskine, Dwight Hopkins,

⁷ Tim Ingold. “Against Space: Place, Movement, Knowledge” in *Boundless World: An Anthropological Approach to Movement* (Peter Wynn Kirby, ed.). New York: Berghahn Books, 2009, 145. Attention to Ingold’s place-within-a-place (and meshworks of meaning) will be tangentially explored later in this paper in the “ring shouts” within the place of the hush harbor. For a compelling contemporary architectural iteration of the centrality of the ring shout within the hush harbor, and the hush harbor within enslaved African spirituality, see <http://uvmagazine.org/articles/enslaved-laborers-memorial-approved>, an article in the University of Virginia magazine (written by Ernie Gates), outlining plans for the construction of a memorial to enslaved laborers inspired by the ring shout and the hush harbor.

James Cone, and bell hooks. When placed in fruitful conversation with one another, these sources awaken the imagination to the where of the hush harbor, and the who of the Christian enslaved African who worshipped there. We now begin our pilgrimage into the hush harbor.

Solace in Wild Things: The Hush Harbor Without

The journey into the heart of enslaved African worship – the hush harbor – requires attuning the eyes to the “invisible institution” hidden in the deep places of green, brown, and blue, where nature herself colluded in the seditious realization of freedom (spiritual, mental, and physical) for those whose bodies were held captive by the visible institution of chattel slavery. Entering such sacredly subversive places requires jettisoning the trappings that prove burdensome and unnecessary for such a pilgrimage: namely, assumptions that African American ecclesiology owes its existence to the work of white missionaries (thus denying the agency of enslaved Africans in responding to the work of the Holy Spirit), and articulations of enslaved African spirituality as a footnote in the history of American Christianity rather than its pneumatological heart (or better, lungs).

The pilgrimage into the hush harbor also invites the reverence with which any place dedicated to the worship of God is held, realized through a spiritual and physical treading lightly, mingled with the earthy, grounded gravitas of a wild encounter with the One whom cannot be contained in any one place, but who chooses to be made known in special incarnate (that is, placed) glimpses of grace. The enslaved African hush harbor is one such place of incarnate revelation.

As we approach the hush harbor with newly attuned eyes, we will begin to notice guideposts on the way, such as the bent branches of trees, seemingly at random, and yet not, as they point the way to the locus of clandestine worship.⁸ We will find those natural liturgical signs – stations of the cross of the saving tree⁹ – leading us to a place that provides seclusion in its very spatiality: a swamp, river bottom, gully, or thicket. Perhaps we would come across Andrew Moss’s mother in her favorite hush harbor of “an ole twisted thick-rooted muscadine bush.”¹⁰

Or perhaps, we would find ourselves in a thicket of sugar cane, where prayers for deliverance swirl through the saccharine air, sweet with the eschatological promise of freedom. We might encounter formerly enslaved preacher Calvin Woods in one such thicket, and notice wetted rags and quilts strewn among and atop the green things “to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air.”¹¹ An overturned pot near the hush harbor might serve a similar purpose – keeping the sounds of liberating worship from reaching the ears of the captor, a central liturgical instrument in the sanctuary of this clandestine worship.

Once we enter that sanctuary, we might discover that it is a borrowing of a natural habitat without making any modifications to it, something akin to Dwight Hopkins’ description of being “on the

⁸ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*. Account of formerly enslaved African Peter Randolph, 217.

⁹ Douglas E. Christie. *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 1. Here, Christie writes of the “saving wood of the cross” or “the verdant cross” on which salvation was achieved by Jesus, naming it as a place of profound mystery and Christian contemplation.

¹⁰ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*. Account of formerly enslaved African Andrew Moss, 219.

¹¹ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*. Account of formerly enslaved African Calvin Woods, 215.

branches”: a place of utter liberation that could only be discovered among the freedom of nature. He writes,

“To be with their own oppressed kind where they could walk, talk, and have pleasure signified the risk of their surreptitious gathering suffering from discovery and punishment. Yet talking among themselves brought them power to be themselves alone in the midst of God’s created nature – “on the branches”. They could only talk when they were isolated in the space of nature’s surroundings...But talking and walking in nature without the permission of the plantation authorities granted a true freedom and place for pleasure in the midst of their faith in a protective power greater than themselves. In this time and space, one sees and hears illegally created new creatures communing in holy greenery (“on the branches”) and speaking in a liberated tongue unknown to the masters.”¹²

Hopkins also describes these worship places as “permanent seizures of space” in which enslaved Africans developed their own Christian sensibilities (and ecclesiologies), away from what he names as the demonic Christianity of the plantation.¹³ This greening holy ground might have a more constructed character, which Noel Erskine describes as “a cherished meeting of their own where they could relax and enjoy the form of worship that pleased them and uplifted their spirits...they would steal away into the woods and meet in what they called the invisible church, or the hush harbor, where they constructed meeting places made from the branches of trees.”¹⁴

If we were in Georgia, Della Briscoe might invite us to the hush harbor in which she worshipped, a place less borrowed and more built (but with reverence and measured utility). Made of a brush roof, and supported by wooden posts, we would take a seat on a small sapling nailed to short stumps.¹⁵ Mattie Gilmore would echo Della’s experience of a constructed hush harbor deep in the woods, with logs to sit on.¹⁶ Pierce Cody describes for us the elaborate hush harbor he worshipped in while enslaved, saying,

“As a beginning, several trees were felled, and the brush and forked branches separated. Four heavy branches with forks formed the framework. Straight poles were lain across these to form a crude imitation of beams and the other framework of the building. The top sides were formed of brush which was thickly placed so that it formed a solid wall. A hole left in one side formed a doorway from which paths extended in all directions. Seats made from slabs obtained at local sawmills completed the furnishings.”¹⁷

¹² Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 117. It is important to note that here Hopkins is using the term “space” as a tool of power, or sovereignty, or right. He is not working within the ideological constructions of space used by Ingold.

¹³ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 138.

¹⁴ Noel Leo Erskine. *Plantation Church: How African American Religion was Born in Caribbean Slavery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 133.

¹⁵ Ibid, Noel Leo Erskine. *Plantation Church*, 134.

¹⁶ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 5, Texas Narratives, Part 4, 1493.

¹⁷ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 138.

While the description of a wooden slab seat might sound mundane, it is important to remember that enslaved Africans were rarely given a place to simply sit – their captive bodies were in near-constant motion. Perhaps this is formerly enslaved African preacher Frank “Uncle Bud” Adams in Jasper, TX in 1937 recalled the response to freedom (the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865, outlawing slavery and involuntary servitude) as this:

“W’en freedom come, you could hear bells, whistles, an’ shoutin’ eb’ry way. Dey axed ‘em all w’at dey gwine [going to] do. One feller say, “Don’ know w’at I’s gwinter do, but I do know one t’ing, I’s gwine git ‘nuf sleep fo’ onct.”¹⁸

If our pilgrimage took us to the Caribbean, we might go to a cotton tree, that site of the indwelling of ancestral spirits that bore the unique syncretistic character of enslaved African Christianity,¹⁹ or have a chance encounter with the bold escaped enslaved persons called the “Bonga Men” of the Jamaican Blue Mountains, claiming those secluded, lush hills as their sovereign own.²⁰

Or perhaps this pilgrimage would take us to the Kentucky mountain hush harbors, sacred places where ancestral magic and incarnational Christian worship mingled as well, as later described by bell hooks, writing,

“Reclaiming the inspiration and intention of our ancestors who acknowledged the sacredness of the earth, its power to stand as witness is vital to our contemporary survival. Again and again in slave narratives we read about black folks taking to the hills in search of freedom, moving into deep wilderness to share their sorrow with the natural habitat. We read about ways they found solace in wild things.”²¹

So, whether we gather in the tangle of a muscadine bush, under a thicket blanketed by leaves and sodden cloth, among the silent sentries of sugar cane stalks, in a secluded swamp or riverbed, or in a meticulously-constructed natural harbor away from the ever-vigilant eyes of watchful masters, we find ourselves surrounded within and without by subversive holiness. Simply put, we find church, but a church perhaps much riskier, and in greater rhythm and reliance with the natural world, than any we’ve known. With the risk comes the reward: an untamed Spirit discovered in the ring shout, where biblical languages of liberation were learned, and deep African memory was cultivated from earth, branch, root, and sky.

Naming the richness and reach of such rooted memories, Noel Erskine writes,

“Enslaved people remembered Africa, and the memory of Africa became a controlling metaphor and organizing principle for Africans in the New World as they countered the hegemonic conditions imposed on them by their masters. They

¹⁸ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part 1, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid, Noel Leo Erskine. *Plantation Church*, 139.

²⁰ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 17.

²¹ bell hooks. *Belonging*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 48.

remembered the forests and they relived this experience of the forests through the practice of religious rituals in the hush harbors, often down by the riverside.”²²

While our initial journey has demonstrated that hush harbors were, at times, a borrowed sanctuary with minimal human intervention, and, at others, a careful construction creating rest and solace among the wild things, a common invisible architectural feature pervades that invisible institution: hush harbors were made of memory, crafted with tools of resistance, built on a foundation of African ancestors, and supported by a natural world in which God brought protection and provision to all who sought to be “on the branches.” While we have begun our pilgrimage in exploring the physicality and locale of hush harbors, that is, what and where they were, it is equally important to explore what they were *not*, namely, white plantation churches. If hush harbors functioned as places of solace in wild things, white plantation churches functioned as places of subjection in ordered things. It is to that very different place our pilgrimage now takes us.

Subjection in Ordered Things: The White Plantation Church

As we arrive at the plantation church, our eyes immediately register that enslaved African hush harbors were in stark black-and-white contrast to the churches of their masters. While hush harbors were “on the branches”, that is, as an experience and expression of agency and freedom, we discover white-owned churches as often “in the balcony”: an experience and expression of theological, social, and spatial subjection. Relegated to the back or the balcony, if they were allowed in the place of worship at all, enslaved Africans were spiritually and physically kept in their place by the Christianity of their masters. Of course, some experienced profound connections with God in that space²³ of subjection, but on the whole, particularly from firsthand formerly enslaved African narratives themselves, the white plantation church is described as morality devoid of Jesus, and worship devoid of the Spirit.

Such Jesus-absent-morality is discovered in a catechism shared by Dwight Hopkins,²⁴ written particularly for enslaved Africans joining Protestant plantation churches. One key question peppered among the catechistic liturgy of faith in this Jesus Christ and his church, is as simple as it is damning:

Q. What does the USA stand for?

A. United Slave-holding America.

Dwight Hopkins continues his indictment of white plantation churches, writing, “The ultimate goal of [white] churches provided for African Americans was not to teach the individual faith in Jesus Christ, but to mold slaves into believing in and acting as if the white race were God on earth.”²⁵ He further names that these slavery churches, for the most part, did not have a primary purpose of salvation, but rather, of fracturing black spirituality and imagination in order to promote the prosperity of a chattel slave economy predicated on fear and reverence of whites.

²² Ibid, Noel Leo Erskine. *Plantation Church*, 28.

²³The term “space” is intentionally used here to describe white plantation churches, in contrast to the place of the hush harbor.

²⁴ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 91.

²⁵ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 84.

As a collusion of white supremacy and spirituality, the plantation church either highly regulated enslaved African experiences of worship, or outright prevented them to preach to or spiritually nurture one another. The following edict proves the extent of such a worship injunction, naming that not one, not two, but five “respectable slave-holders” must be present for any enslaved person (or formerly enslaved person) to preach to other slaves.

“If any slave or free person of color shall preach to, exhort, or harangue any slave or slaves, or free person of color, unless in the presence of five respectable slave-holders, any such slave or free person of color shall...receive...39 lashes for the first offense, and 50 lashes for every offence thereafter.”²⁶

Forced worship at white-owned churches did not often engender gratitude from enslaved Africans, as repetitive prooftexted themes (and the obvious excision of any reference to the Moses and liberation narratives) riled as much as the regimented modalities of worship space and movement. Formerly enslaved Simon Brown names this clearly:

[Enslaved Africans] hated repeatedly being told “Obey de Massa...” while their masters and overseers oppressed and physically abused them. They disliked having to sit in the rear of the church or in galleries set apart exclusively for them. They cherished meetings of their own where they could relax and enjoy the form of worship that pleased them and uplifted their spirits. ...they would steal away into the woods and meet in what they called the invisible church, or the hush harbor, where they constructed meeting places made from the branches of trees...there was no pretending in those prayer meetings. There was a living faith in a just God Who would one day answer the cries of His poor black children and deliver them from their enemies. But the slaves never said a word to their white folk about this kind of faith.²⁷

Brown is in good company with those formerly enslaved Africans who share his disdain for the white plantation church, such as Wes Brady who said,

We went to a church there on the place. You ought to have heard that “Hellish” preaching... “Obey your Master and Mistress, don’t steal chickens, don’t steal eggs and meat,” and nary word ‘bout having a soul to save. All the slaves had to go to Church. They preached to the whites in the morning and the colored in the afternoon.²⁸

Formerly enslaved African Harriet Barrett describes that plantation churches not only signaled racial distinctions in the place of worship, but in heaven itself:

O yes sir, de master would make us go to church every Sunday and he taught us to always tell the truth, then the Saviour he save us. He said we would go to negro

²⁶ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 85.

²⁷ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 107.

²⁸ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 401.

heaven.²⁹

Formerly enslaved African Charlie Van Dyke found the plantation church to be missing its savior:

Church was what they called it but all that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal. Nothing about Jesus was ever said.³⁰

Formerly enslaved African Sarah Ashley names the contrast between prayer meetin's and camp meetings [vernacular sometimes used to describe hush harbor worship] punishable by the whip, and forced Sunday School attendance to take care of white children. She wasn't allowed to sing because she had no spirit (soul).

Dere warn't no meetin's 'r' no kin' 'lowed in d' quarters. D' boss man eben whip dem w'en dey hab prayer meetin'. Sometimes' us run off at night t' go t' dances 'n' camp meetings's but I was plumb growed up fo' I eber went t' chu'ch. I go t' Sunday school wid d' w'ite children t' tek care 'r' dem. Dey couldn' learnt me t' sing no songs caise I didn' hab d' spirit. I hear dem sing, "Let d' light shine." Nobody can't sing w'en dey ain' got d' spirit t' sing.³¹

Frank "Uncle Bud" Adams, former slave and Missionary Baptist preacher, discovered he had a soul that could sing in that segregated white-controlled place, though he names its forced and segregated reality:

Dey mek us all go to chu'ch on Sunday. De cullard folks sot in de back er de chu'ch. De sung de good ol' hymns, sich as, "Am I bo'n to die, to lay dis body down?" Amazin' Grace, how sweet de soun' dat saved a wretch like me," an' sich like.³²

Formerly enslaved African Stearlin Arnwine, perhaps because "church" was a white institution, did not give her spiritual home that name:

The only church service I know any thing about was when the slaves would get together once in awhile at night and have prayer meetins and sing.³³

Neither did Jake Barrens, who more explicitly named church a white place:

We never did go to church. It seemed like de church was jus fo de white folks.³⁴

William Smith describes prayer meetings in arbors, with guards posted in case masters came, and the dangers of praying to a liberating God.

²⁹ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 200.

³⁰ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 213-214

³¹ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 89.

³² Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 3.

³³ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 84.

³⁴ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 195.

No sah, no church on dis plantation...dey had a big arbor for de cullod people. Dey was all good preachers, dey would do lots of singin, we aren't lowed to have prayah meetin er singin wid out havin guards roun ter notify us when de white folks were cumin.³⁵

Albert Raboteau claims that the danger of discovery did not dampen the spiritual impetus of enslaved Africans to create their own place for prayer, singing, and preaching, because, "they liked their own gatherings better."³⁶ Elvira Boles names the threat of violence hush harbors held, and names what happened in those secret places "church":

We had to steal away at night to have church on de ditch bank, and crawl home on de belley. Once ovaseers heard us prayin, give us one day each 100 lashes.³⁷

Violence was the price of worshipping in places beyond the control of whites. And yet, "stealing away" continued as enslaved Africans resisted the rigid control and spiritual subjection of the white church with the verdant, liberating place of the hush harbor. It became, not just an inadvertent place for the occasional prayer or song, it became church (which is why the task of tracing such a place theologically is the work of ecclesiology). The hush harbor became the fertile ground, made of plantation soil mingled with memory of the African earth, watered with blood, sweat, and tears, for the growth of African American ecclesiology.

This ecclesiology claimed a Christianity that was quite unlike the often-militarized piety of the white plantation church. Born of the hush harbor, it was marked by lament, deliverance and freedom, and spiritual power, realized in ring shouts and rich biblical solidarities with the enslaved people of Israel. Leaving behind the careful order of the white plantation church, we follow the pilgrimage path once again, returning to the hush harbor with new understanding of the risk and reward of such a place, and newfound eagerness to unearth the liberating ecclesiology that germinated within that rich soil.

Stealin' Away: The Hush Harbor Within

Albert Raboteau names the hush harbor as the secluded place wherein enslaved Africans developed a Christianity that was truly their own. Physical stealin' away to the shelter of the hush harbor initiated a spiritual stealin' away resulting in, not just the counter-hegemonic assertion that enslaved Africans had souls, but the articulation that God desired those souls (and the bodies in which they were housed) to know freedom.

If the heart of African American ecclesiology was the hush harbor, the heart of the hush harbor was the ring shout, what Tim Ingold might understand as a place-within-the-place. In that ring shout, where African ancestor worship meets Christianity, we discover a frenzied circle of singing and dancing so integral to their worshipping life that one formerly enslaved African claimed, "sinners won't get converted unless there is a ring."³⁸ We find that first-hand accounts of worship

³⁵ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 256.

³⁶ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 215.

³⁷ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 338.

³⁸ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 68-69.

in hush harbors often included this encircled place of bodies and songs and prayers within the sacred green place.

Formerly enslaved Lou Austin tells us of the melding of song and shape that occurs in the ring shout, a temporary architectural movement of souls and bodies:

Atter de reg'lar preachin' us'd gather fer a ring shout an' sing:
'Sit down, sister, sit down, walk right in an' sit down.
W'en I gits ter heaven, gwine ter sit down, sit down an'
res' er little w'ile;
My Laws tol' me fer ter sit down, sit down an' res' a little w'ile.'

De folks 'ud git in er ring an' march 'roun in time ter der singin' and den w'en dey git wa'amed up, dey shout an' clay an' dance an' sing. Some on 'em 'ud get weak an' drop down den de odders 'ud keep on wid de singin' till mos' come day. Some on de w'ite folkses 'ud whip dar sarbants effen dey cotch dem at er ring shout meetin'. Buy dey shore had er big time down in de thickets an' in de deep woods.³⁹ (emphasis mine)

The ring of bodies we discover in hush harbors are said to have made heaven ring, something remembered with nostalgia by one formerly enslaved African, who preferred that secretive sanctuary to open weekly worship in their own buildings, saying,

"Meetings back there meant more than they do now. Then everybody's heart was in tune, and when they called on God they made heaven ring. It was more than just a Sunday meeting and then no godliness for a week. They would steal off to the fields and in the thickets and there...they called on God out of heavy hearts."⁴⁰

Such a reflection unearths a key feature of African American ecclesiology that occurred in the ring shout of the hush harbor: calling on God out of heavy hearts, that is, lament. We cannot journey into the hush harbor without experiencing the heavy heartedness of chattel slavery. Another former slave articulates the hush harbor as a place to both forget and to remember: forgetting overwhelming suffering, while remembering the trials of the week, and responding to that lament with the bold eschatological assertion, "Thank God, I shall not live here always!"⁴¹ This shouted lament is perhaps what bell hooks locates as the need for "solace in wild things."⁴²

But in these hush harbors, we are not just confronted with lament and hope in the language of prayer: we also find both in the language of the Christian scriptures. Lament linked with eschatological hope (that is, solace) finds its ecclesial rootedness, not only in the ring shout, but also in the biblical text that, rather than used as a legalistic tool for white hegemony, is the source

³⁹ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 129. Note again the power in a sung promise to "sit down and rest for a little while" for a slave constantly in motion.

⁴⁰ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 217.

⁴¹ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 217.

⁴² Ibid, bell hooks. *Belonging*, 48.

of radical solidarity. The texts former slave narratives invite us into reveal a very different take on scripture than those aforementioned “obey de massa hellish” proclamations of the word of God.

In the hush harbor, we find that texts attributed to Paul about slaves obeying their masters, and those highlighting the so-called “stain of Ham” are hushed, as the ringing narratives of freed Israelite slaves and Jesus the Christ, who identified with the poor, are elevated and celebrated. While most enslaved persons were illiterate, these biblical stories were taught in song, such as “Go down Moses, way down in Egypt’s land. Tell old pharaoh to let me people go.”⁴³ Thus, we discover that, just as the ring shout melded African ancestral worship with Christianity, so the proclamation of God’s word in the hush harbor melded song with story. Such story-songs were often threatening to the internal subjection upon which chattel slavery was predicated. Many slave owners feared exposure to the liberation of Christianity would make their slaves “saucy,” or equal to white folk in the eyes of God, and thus, in their own eyes.⁴⁴

This “sauciness” was belief in a liberating God who both hears and answers lament cries, and would one day act to deliver enslaved Africans from their enemies.⁴⁵ Herein lies the seed of the hush harbor within: the hope of a God for whom the way things are is not the way things should be; the hope of deliverance. This secret deliverance became an internal hush harbor within the theo-ecology of enslaved bodies, hidden from the violence of the master, generating solidarity with wrongfully violated captive body and Savior alike. In stealin’ away to a sacred place on the branches, so too were enslaved souls stolen away from the soulless space of eternal enslavement. Raboteau describes it as, “This place the slave kept his own. For no matter how religious the master might be, the slave knew that the master’s religion did not countenance prayers for his slaves’ freedom in this world.”⁴⁶

Thus, our journey into the hush arbor smells, looks, feels, sounds, and tastes like freedom for the enslaved body and soul. Dwight Hopkins ruminates on this key hush harbor marker, writing, “First, this new Christianity of spiritual and material freedom called forth a politics that seized territory for those without wealth resources. Politics, here, suggests the right of the poor to call on God to work with them in implementing the right of self-determination. The power of this space-place dynamic would make a way – a new location and a novel horizon where black workers could openly worship their freedom God and be their freely created new selves.”⁴⁷

This new form of Christianity, that is, African American ecclesiological identity, was not just an ecclesiology of (present tense), but also an ecclesiology for (future tense) freedom. George Womble named this reach for freedom:

“I know that some day we’ll be free and if we die before that time our children will live to see it.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid, Noel Leo Erskine. *Plantation Church*, 134.

⁴⁴ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 102.

⁴⁵ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 107.

⁴⁶ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 219

⁴⁷ Ibid, Dwight N. Hopkins. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 139. This space-place dynamic might complicate Ingold’s rejection of that language. (see text related to footnote 7)

⁴⁸ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 219.

The prayers we hear in the place of the hush harbor, muffled by sodden blankets and the overturned pot from the ears of their masters, but not muffled from the hearing of the God to whom they prayed, were not often prayers for endurance, acceptance, happiness, or everyday provision. They were prayers for deliverance; they were prayers for freedom. William Smith named this as the reason why enslaved persons weren't allowed to openly pray:

We warnt loed to pray either cause dey Lord might hear us and free us.⁴⁹

The freedom prayer articulated in ring and shout, and in story-song, unearths for us a final marker of African American ecclesiology: a deep reliance upon and respect for the power of the Holy Spirit. Often termed “fire in the bones”⁵⁰, there was a conjuring that occurred in the hush harbor, and within that, in the ring shout, and within that, in the ecclesial community gathered. This conjuring, akin to conjuring practices in African ancestral worship, invited the Holy Spirit to indwell, revealing a “respect for spiritual power wherever it originated.”⁵¹ This Spirit empowered worshippers for disordered worship unbound by the time and order of white plantation churches, which is why some describe singing and praying all night, regardless of the threat of discovery. Formerly enslaved Peter Randolph describes the rhythm of this liturgical movement in the Spirit's power:

The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthy, and talks very slowly, until feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time, there fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence.⁵²

This falling out, a physical and verbal response to the power of the Holy Spirit, stood (or rather, fell) in contrast to the fencing in of slaves in the rear or balconies of white plantation churches. Other accounts name this Spirit-fueled fire in the bones as “every heart beating in unison, with sorrows below told to God above.”⁵³

If the hush harbor as a place of natural freedom was the generative ground in which African American ecclesiology grew, then the fruits of that ecclesiology are, as I've argued, lament, the eschatological hope of freedom and deliverance, and spiritual power, nourishing a Christianity all their own that persists still in the internal hush harbors of their ancestors.

This internalized hush harbor prominently lingers in African American theology and ecclesiology (the living out of that theology in the context of the church). Echoes of the ring shout and the story-songs of biblical liberation shared in the hush harbor are heard throughout this tradition. One fundamental example (though there are many, many more) is found in James Cone's seminal work, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Cone writes, “the task of Black theology...is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of the oppressed black so they will see the gospel as

⁴⁹ Ibid, Rawick. *The American Slave*, Supplemental Series 2, Vol. 2, Texas Narratives, Part. 1, 253.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 64.

⁵¹ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 5.

⁵² Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 217.

⁵³ Ibid, Raboteau. *Slave Religion*, 64.

inseparable from their humiliated condition [lament], and as bestowing on them the necessary power [of the Spirit] to break the chains of oppression [eschatological hope].⁵⁴

Conclusion

Our pilgrimage into the hush harbor has now completed, but like all true pilgrimages, it has also just begun: inviting all wanderers into the landscapes of our own bodies, spirits, and minds. Perhaps this pilgrimage has brought comfort and solace in wild things to those who began it seeking solidarity, deliverance, and hope. Perhaps it has brought displacement and discomfort (and God willing, repentance) to those who began it with certainty in a pure Christianity, unstained by racial prejudice and the legacy of chattel slavery. Perhaps for all who undertook the journey, it has brought a newfound desire to discover the God revealed in the hush harbor, that fire in the bones, realized in story-song “on the branches.”

What we have begun to discover here is that Christianity is not unrooted or shapeless, but deeply placed, and, as one of its holiest and riskiest incarnations, Christianity practiced by enslaved Africans was as well. That place was the hush harbor, a shelter of being-in-the-world (but not of its hegemonic powers and principalities) for Christian enslaved Africans. The particular ecclesiology developed there was marked by lament, spiritual power, and the eschatological hope of freedom, and lingers still in the internalized imaginary of the hush harbor for African American Christians. So, too, the memory of the hush harbor should linger for all Christians: informing and illuminating all incarnations of Christian theology and ecclesiology. The memory of the hush harbor beckons any who would “steal away” to follow those who have come before on a journey into a church that was built, not of money and concrete, endowments and stained glass, but of branches and dirt, sodden quilts and an overturned pot; a church that was built by nature and the powerful promise of freedom.

⁵⁴ James H. Cone. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986, 5.

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