

Sounding “Black”: An Ethnography of Racialized Vocality at Fisk University

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## ABSTRACT

### Sounding “Black”: An Ethnography of Racialized Vocality at Fisk University

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Through the example of students at Fisk University, a historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee, this dissertation ethnographically examines how vocality is racialized as “black” in the United States. For students at Fisk, voice serves as a mechanism of speaking and singing, and mediates ideological, discursive, embodied and affective constructions of blackness. Fisk built its legacy by cultivating and promoting a specific kind of New World blackness through vocal expression, and the indispensability of Fisk’s historical legacy shapes how the university continues to promote the self-worth of its students as well as a remembrance of and recommitment to the social justice and citizenship journey of black people through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The relationships between expressive culture, the politics of racial inequality, and higher education experiences overdetermine Fisk students’ vocality in relation to blackness, in addition to students’ agentive choices to express and (re)form black racial identity. This dissertation traces the differences between curricular and non-curricular vocality to foreground the ways that students resist 21<sup>st</sup> century forms of racial violence and create paths towards the world they desire. The project opens with an analysis of the role of diction in the performance practice of the Fisk Jubilee Singers®. The following chapter compares the repertoire and rehearsal style of the two primary choral ensembles at Fisk. The dissertation then explores how the neo soul genre figures in the *Fisk Idol* vocal competition. The concluding chapter describes students’ different renditions of singing the

university's alma mater, "The Gold and the Blue." These analyses of students' embodied, ritualized vocality show how Fisk students' voices performatively (re)construct blackness, gender, class, genre and institutionality.

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To Whitney  
and for voices yet unheard

## **Introduction**

This ethnography is a study of racialized vocality in the United States, with a focus on blackness. I examine how, for students at Fisk University, a historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee, voice—a mechanism of speaking and singing—mediates ideological, discursive, embodied and affective constructions of blackness. This project does not naturalize definitions of “the black voice,” nor does it describe a “dark” vocal timbre of Fisk students. Rather, I approach this study within an anti-essentialist framework, detailing the performance of blackness through vocal acts, as well as the ethics of listening for “blackness” in voices, with the goal of denaturalizing the “blackness” of Fisk students’ speaking and singing voices.

My approach is organized around the differences between curricular and non-curricular vocal activity at Fisk, in order to foreground the role of higher education in racializing vocality. I emphasize the processes through which vocal acts are racialized as “black,” including how students perform repertoire selection, diction, self-presentation on stage, and speaking and singing style, as well as how they navigate administrative expectations and the threat of racist persecution. As questions about “post-racial” social construction materialize, my project investigates how individuals use their speaking and singing voices to mediate modern constructions of blackness with postcolonial racial positionings, and offers an example through which to analyze constructions of blackness and privilege in the United States. At a broader theoretical level, this project also contributes to poststructural detanglements of embodiment and text in relation to voice.

## **Terms**

### HBCU

Historically black colleges and universities, referred to as “HBCUs,” were established primarily throughout the US south just after the Civil War (1865) with a mission to provide literacy skills to the newly emancipated population of black people who were forbidden the right to read and write under anti-literacy laws (Brown 2013; Gasman and Tudico 2008; Allen et. al. 2007; Brown and Davis 2001). Under slavery, demonstrating literacy was punishable by death for black people. However, both enslaved and free black people exercised their literacy before emancipation, as seen through the entire corpus of slave narratives as well as writers such as Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) and Frederick Douglass (1818-1895).

At the conclusion of the Civil War, “less than 5% of the approximately 4.5 million African descendants in the United States were literate (Anderson, 1988)” (Brown and Davis 2001: 40). Thus, as the reconstruction of the country commenced, establishing literacy among the masses of black people was a primary, crucial task for those invested in the journey towards full citizenship for black Americans. Before the Civil War, Amherst College, Dartmouth College, Middlebury College, and Oberlin College were some of the exceptional institutions admitting and granting degrees to black people before emancipation (Titcomb 2014).

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, HBCUs continued to refine their mission. As Alcorn State University President Christopher M. Brown II explains, “The amended Higher Education Act of 1965 defines historically Black colleges and universities (commonly referred to as HBCUs) as any accredited institution of higher

education founded prior to 1964 whose primary mission was, and continues to be, the education of Black Americans (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Garibaldi, 1984; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Williams, 1988).<sup>1</sup>

Christopher M. Brown II and James Earl Davis argue that “Without question, the historically black college is the tangible manifestation of America’s social contract with free African Americans immediately following the Civil War” (Brown and Davis 2001: 34). There are 103 federally designated public, private, four-year, and two-year historically Black colleges and universities in the continental United States. With a few exceptions—Michigan, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories” (Brown 2013: 2-3). The 103 HBCUs cluster primarily in nineteen southern and border states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Popular media representations of HBCUs circulate through films such as *School Daze* (1988), *Stomp the Yard* (2007, 2010), *The Great Debaters* (2007) and *The Butler* (2013), television shows such as *A Different World* (1987-1993) and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and nationally syndicated telethons hosted by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). Federal support for HBCUs continues through President Barack Obama’s White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

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<sup>1</sup> The year 1964 is significant because it marked the passage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in federally assisted programs and activities (Hendrickson, 1991; Williams, 1988).

## Fisk University

Fisk University is a coeducational, private, historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee. Founded in 1866 by the American Missionary Association and the Tennessee Freedman's Bureau, which were both mixed-race abolitionist organizations, Fisk is Nashville's oldest university. The curriculum is based on a small liberal arts educational model, and the university awards the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Bachelor of Science (B.S.), Bachelor of Music (B.M.), Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.S.N.), and Master of Arts (M.A.) degrees. Fisk's Phi Beta Kappa chapter, the first on an HBCU campus, was founded in 1953.

The university prides itself on the individualized attention students receive from faculty, with a very low student-to-faculty ratio of 8:1. Students who identify as "black" primarily comprise its student body. During the 2011-2012 academic year the enrollment of 533 students included those who identified themselves as African American (445, 83%), Native American (2), Bi-Racial (11), Caucasian (12), Hispanic (4), Pacific Islander (1), and unknown (58) (*Fisk University Fact Book 2011-2012*: 23). Most students are American, the majority of whom are from California, Illinois, Tennessee and Ohio (*ibid*: 25). International students' presence on campus is sizable, with students from the Bahamas (3), Ghana (2), Jamaica (6), Nigeria (23), the United Arab Emirates (1), and the West Indies (1) (*ibid*: 26). The student body was 63% female and 37% male (*ibid*: 22). Fisk's cost for room and board that academic year was \$35,148, and over 90% of its students are enrolled full-time.<sup>2</sup> There were 55 full time faculty members, 36 of whom

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<sup>2</sup> During the course of fieldwork for this dissertation, the bulk of which took place during the 2011-2012 academic year, Fisk faced enormous challenges produced by the post-2008 economic effects on higher education institutions and experimental approaches to fundraising. The increased difficulty in securing financial aid precluded many accepted students from enrolling at



are tenured and 47 of whom hold doctoral degrees, as well as 27 part time faculty (ibid: 35). The most popular majors were biology, business, English, political science and psychology. Fisk's strength in the sciences has been bolstered by the Fisk-Vanderbilt Masters-to-PhD Bridge Program<sup>3</sup> and has been recognized with the R&D award for technological innovation, of which Fisk has won four.<sup>4</sup>

The American Missionary Association's (AMA) impact on Fisk extended beyond early administrative, financial, and faculty support, significantly shaping a focus on Christian morality on the campus (Anderson 2010; Ward 2000). Toni Anderson explains that the AMA believed that both education and Christianity were required to rectify the horrors of slavery, and that "...true freedom must include liberation of the soul and the mind...[in order to] transform African-American men and women into productive

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Fisk during the 2011-2012 academic year. In August 2011, Fisk welcomed its smallest incoming class of 130 students. Along with a decreasing endowment, Fisk's shrinking enrollment directly affected its financial stability. In one of the many responses to the university's dire financial straights, former President Hazel O'Leary proposed to rebuild the endowment by selling half of the rights to Fisk's Alfred Stieglitz Collection of American and European Modern Art (housed in the Carl Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk) for \$30 million. The State of Tennessee sued Fisk for their attempt to profit from a gift that was to remain on the campus. A bitter battle between Fisk's administration, the State of Tennessee, and the Georgia O'Keefe Estate caught national attention, as well as that of Fisk students and alumni. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the accrediting body, was also concerned by Fisk's financial challenges. While the student body, faculty and administration defended the viable financial future of the university, SACS gave Fisk a warning status in May of 2010, with the mandate to meet specific financial and enrollment goals. In 2012, Fisk won the lawsuit and now shares the art collection with the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art. Additionally, its accreditation has been reaffirmed as of December 2013 and the university has a new president, H. James Williams, Ph.D.

<sup>3</sup>"In 2012, the Bridge Program graduated five Ph.D. recipients in the physical sciences... This is ten times the national average for physical science Ph.D. programs" ("What Everyone Should Know about Fisk University" 2012).

<sup>4</sup>Fisk students freely participate in both the arts and the sciences, and Fisk's strength in science does not conflict with students' investment in Fisk's musical life. One student shared with me: "I love it, the rituals. The fact that music is just ingrained in every part of everything that Fisk is, even though, you know, a lot of our money comes from the sciences. Which, in that department, I do appreciate. But it's just like music is what got us here, music is what's keeping us going, and music will preserve it forever" (Walker 2011).

citizens ready to participate fully in the mainstream of American society” (Anderson 2012: xii). Anderson asserts that this ideology undergirded the formation of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers®, Fisk’s famous choral ensemble, as well as the Singers’, early tours and even “Fisk University’s organizational identity and purpose” (ibid). Additionally, according to Anderson, “The AMA proposed to instill in African Americans the necessary skills and values to ensure an educated citizenry, not only the salvation of their souls but also for the survival of the nation” (Anderson 2010: 9). For members of the AMA, the performance of Christian morality was the hope of the country’s future, as morality was not to be had through the nation state, but through churches and schools (Jones 2009; Hollyday 2005; Richardson 1986). This inflected the concert spiritual performances of the early Fisk Jubilee Singers with the enormous task of both representing literate, pious black people and reconstructing the union of the nation (Ward 2000).

My work in this dissertation is to expand the arc of our understanding of Fisk students’ vocalizing, reconsidering it historically, through the present moment and pointing towards the future. I do this following the way that Farah Griffin describes the singing black woman as a figure in times of American national crisis. She recounts how black women’s singing voices are “...called upon to heal a crisis in national unity as well as provoke one,” as “...a figure that serves the unit, who heals and nurtures it but has no rights or privileges within it” (Griffin 2004: 104).

The original Fisk Jubilee Singers did this same kind of vocal labor, singing to fulfill the promise of a free, democratic nation that was racially divided. I argue throughout the dissertation that current Fisk students continue a complex legacy of

vocalizing through racist oppression while expressing and making a world for themselves. I also argue that detailing this vocalizing process unpacks the racialization of vocal acts as “black.”

### Racialized Vocality

My use of “racialized vocality” throughout the dissertation labels a process through which the relationships between expressive culture, the politics of racial inequality, and higher education experiences overdetermine Fisk students’ vocal acts in relation to blackness, in addition to students’ agentive choices in expressing and (re)constructing black racial identity. I consider “voice” to be a broad category of analysis, one that follows the emergent field of vocal anthropology (Feld et. al. 2004), in which political agency, individual and group ideology, individual expression, vocal production and listening meet in moments of vocal practice. I privilege embodied vocal expressions throughout the dissertation as a way to unpack how voices mediate blackness, the body, objectivity and subjectivity, as well as performatively (re)constructing blackness, gender, class, genre and institutionality. I examine the stakes of black college students using their speaking and singing voices to assert both political and personal agency—a “somebodyness” (King 1967)— and the stakes of making selfhood and personhood audible. I consider what the vocal acts of Fisk students sound like: what students say, how they say it, and how I hear it, as well as what students sing and how they sing it and how I hear it. While I vary between the use of “black,” “African American,” and “of African descent,” in descriptions, my use of each term follows how students at Fisk identified themselves and is grounded in an awareness of the connectivity

of expressive culture throughout the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) *and* grounded in the particularity of the context and experiences of black college students in the United States.

## **Context**

### A Sense of the Campus: Unfixing Place and Time at Fisk

The field site of this ethnography, Fisk University, is a college campus fixed geographically just south of downtown Nashville. The bounds of the university, however, extend through cultural space by way of social flows, importantly through students' singing. Historically, Fisk circulates in Reconstruction-era musical and philosophical imaginings of black America, in particular through the vocal labor of its famous concert spiritual choral ensemble, the Fisk Jubilee Singers®, and the writings of alumnus W.E.B. Du Bois. In the contemporary moment, Fisk students' singing and speaking continues to be influenced by Fisk's past, as these vocal acts forge the exploration of self, construction of a class identity, and a relationship with the possibilities of (re)constructing and/or (de)essentializing blackness.

I found that Fisk students' relationship to blackness exemplifies what Fred Moten contends in theorizing Aunt Hester's scream. As a child, Frederick Douglass witnessed his enslaved aunt, Hester, being whipped, and described her scream. This harrowing event shaped Douglass' understanding of enslavement, and also freedom, which he wrote about in his 1845 autobiography. With a poststructuralist position, literary scholar Fred Moten theorizes Aunt Hester's scream as a vocal example through which to explain a black radical aesthetic, or the "freedom drive" (Moten 2003: 7). He analyzes Douglass' discussion of vocalicity through Aunt Hester's screams at the blood stained gate, as

knowledge of enslavement, and the choral work-song singing of her fellow enslaved Africans as knowledge of freedom. I follow Moten's argument and show how black performance and black politics are inseparable through an existential argument—that violence is the evidence of existence for an oppressed black bodied-commodified-object, and the resistance of said violence constitutive of blackness. Blackness then ontologically operates as ((re)productions of) instances of resistance most profoundly enacted in sound, particularly vocal sounds. I trace the materiality of “blackness” in Fisk students' voices in order to unpack a black radical aesthetic and describe the vocal acts that constitute what Moten defines as blackness. He writes:

Blackness, in all of its constructed imposition, can tend and has tended toward the experimental achievement and tradition of an advanced, transgressive publicity. Blackness is, therefore, a special site and resource for a task of articulation where immanence is structured by an irreducibly improvisatory exteriority that can occasion something very much like sadness and something very much like devilish enjoyment... Rather, blackness, in its irreducible relation to the structuring force of radicalism and the graphic, montagic configurations of tradition, and perhaps most importantly, in its very manifestation as the inscriptional events of a set of performances, requires another thinking of identity and essence. This thinking converges with the re-emergent question of the human that self-critical articulation demands. Such articulation implies and enacts an unorthodox essentialism wherein essence and performance are not mutually exclusive. How does this field of convergence, this ensemble, work? By way of the affirmative force of ruthless negation, the out and rooted critical lyricism of screams, prayers, curses, gestures, steps (to and away)—the long frenzied tumult of a nonexclusionary essay (2003: 255).

The vocality of Fisk students is part of a long, rich black radical aesthetic tradition through which people of African descent have negotiated their subjugation with dominant forces and insisted upon their humanity through vocal activity. I bring Moten's broad and fluid theoretical strokes into my observations of the current social life of vocality at Fisk to hear how collective vocal soundings produce resistances to objectified norms of what black people sound like in the United States.

As students vocalize symbols of the past towards a postcolonial future on the Fisk campus, “space and experience align along different physical and imaginary scales,” emplaced in a local knowledge about sounding like a “Fiskite” (Fox 2004: 81). A term referring to any graduate of Fisk University, as well as faculty members, “Fiskite” also designates a personhood peculiar to the performances of educability, respectability, social mobility ritualized through campus experiences at this historically black college organized around concert singing.

This expressive culture at Fisk, however, as well as the vocal acts I investigate, are not exclusively localized to the campus proper, but rather encompass a changing constellation of the long arc of black music-making, US regionality and nationality, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and individuality. While I discuss the vocal activity of Fisk students through an examination of their social life on and off campus, I do not assert their vocality as a fixed set of sounds heard only at Fisk, but as a more generalized practice of black performativity through which students construct and listeners hear Fisk as an institution of higher education with global reach. The implications of this exemplify a practice of voicing the college-educated black subject. As college students, many living away from home for the first time in their lives, constructing a “place” is very important in sensing residence at Fisk.<sup>5</sup> This study, then, is not about vocal acts in a particular location *per se*, but about how Fisk students dialectically vocalize the stakes, transformations, resistance to and reifications of black American college culture and black vocality.

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<sup>5</sup> The dormitories, all single sex, house a majority of students, and many upper-year students live off-campus in rental properties.

## Voices Mapping the Campus

A property of forty acres<sup>6</sup> inclusive of a library, science labs, multipurpose classrooms, dormitories, a cafeteria, an art gallery, a chapel, administrative offices, a theater, a football field, and faculty homes, the campus also includes open, landscaped lawns. A roadway, which proceeds through one end of the campus to the steps of Jubilee Hall, is shaped in the Egyptian hieroglyphic character of an ankh, symbol of eternal life and, in the modern context, Afrocentricity. In order to critically reprocess the representation of the campus places as illustrated on the university's campus map, I observed students' movement through the space and traced how "encounters of contestation and coherence accrue" on Fisk's campus (Novak 2006: 52). I found that listening to students' vocal acts allowed me to map the campus through differentiating vocal sounds, with sensitivity to the emplaced variability of student life at Fisk.

The university's campus map<sup>7</sup> represents a perspective of sanctioned campus places, but a vocal map directs and orients perceptions with respect to social life. Though obvious, perhaps, this kind of sonic mapping refigures the way that the official map represents the campus. Maps purport to represent an objective set of information that a reader encounters through emplacement. When Fiskites speak about different parts of campus using place names, they are participating in the agreed-upon understanding of how to occupy the campus, and how to act in each of its spaces (Basso 1992: 222). The differences between vocal acts sounded in outdoor spaces, and in various buildings and off-campus, marks territories of curricular and non-curricular arenas. As Edward Casey

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<sup>6</sup> Now a trope in everyday talk signifying African Americans' rights to property as access to wealth, the phrase "forty acres and a mule" refers to an unfulfilled Reconstruction-era promise of reparations from the federal government.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix, figure 1.

explains, “there is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it. Knowledge of place is not, then, subsequent to perception...but is ingredient in perception itself” (1996: 18). The modes by which people at Fisk vocalize with respect to different parts of campus disclose larger questions about the construction of blackness in the United States through higher education experiences—both through temporality and spatiality (Ruitenberg 2007:10).

Three buildings are of particular prominence in this study: the Harris Music Building, Jubilee Hall, and Fisk Memorial Chapel. Built in 1876, the Harris Music Building, named after Richard Harris, the first African American trustee of the university, is the home of the Music Department. Jubilee Hall, the historical landmark sitting atop the highest hill in Nashville, its steeple on the north-east corner shooting towards the sky, was constructed through the profits of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers’ early concert tours. It is the first permanent building constructed in the US south for the education of African Americans. Jubilee Hall, serves as a classroom, public assembly space, and dormitory, and since its construction was completed in 1876, this building has served as a watchtower to anticipate encroaching Ku Klux Klansmen aiming to destroy the campus and its students. In the Appleton Room, where the Havel portrait<sup>8</sup> of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers hangs, dignitaries regularly assemble with students.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, in rooms on either side of the foyer, The Blue Room and The Gold Room, campus guests meet with students and faculty. Fisk Memorial chapel, built in 1892, is next to the music

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<sup>8</sup> George Edmund Havel (1835-1908) was a court painter for Queen Victoria, who painted a life-size portrait of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, “Jubilee Singers at the Court of Queen Victoria” (1873) at her request.

<sup>9</sup> For example, I took a class, while an exchange student, with former US Vice President Albert Gore and the Congressional Representative for Georgia’s 5<sup>th</sup> district, John Lewis, a Fiskite and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader.



building. Similar to the Appleton Room in Jubilee Hall, convocations, rehearsals, and student-led events take place in the Chapel, in addition to weekly worship on Sunday. The chapel hosts sacred and secular singing, public speeches, and curricular and non-curricular activities, and represents religious and educational “institutionality,” the substance of which I discuss throughout the dissertation.

Finally, another significant part of the campus, particularly for this study, is “The Yard”—an open lawn and roadway in the center of campus that figures as an important site for students’ social and vocal interactions.

### Fisk’s Neighborhood in “Music City”

The original Fisk Jubilee Singers established the city’s musical fame during their international tours in the 1870s. Upon hearing them, the British Queen Victoria declared that they must be from a “musical city,” a reputation the city continues to enjoy (Ward 2000), even as many people, Nashville residents included, believe that the nickname “Music City” speaks to the flourishing commercial country and contemporary Christian music recording and performing industry in the city and are unaware of the role of the Singers in raising international awareness about the city’s musical life. In the area surrounding Fisk, however, racial stratification persists. Fisk is located in a predominantly black neighborhood. Lucius Outlaw, Fisk class of 1967 and Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University, asks, “Why will people go to the other side of the world, but not go across Charlotte or down Jefferson Street?”<sup>10</sup> A railroad track, with

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<sup>10</sup> I argue that this lack of awareness of the provenance of Nashville’s reputation as a “music city” is an example of how racial stratification shapes not only neighborhoods in Nashville, but constructions of local identity as well. An African American student who grew up in Nashville

frequently sounding train horns, marks the eastern end of the campus. Meharry Medical College, the oldest historically black medical school in the US south, founded in 1876, continues to train the vast majority of African American medical professionals, and neighbors the southern border of the campus. Jefferson Street, a thoroughfare filled with black commerce, delineates the western end of campus; the northern edge of campus opens to a residential area.

### “Everybody Can Sing”: Students Contextualize Singing on Campus

At the December 2011 commencement celebration, graduating senior Camille told me “Fisk is the only place where you go to breakfast, lunch and dinner where people start singing.” Both during my time as an exchange student there and during my fieldwork, students consistently spoke about “everyone” on the campus as singers, suggesting that “everybody at Fisk can sing.” While Fisk does not have a marching band, and thus does not participate in the rich HBCU marching band tradition made famous by the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University’s “Marching 100,” every day students sing together and individually, in both public and private spaces. Students’ identification with the original Fisk Jubilee Singers informs their collectively agreed upon vocal ideal, as well as their belief in each person’s ability to perform it. A freshman

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told me “A lot of Nashville doesn’t know the other side of the history of Nashville—that there are actually black people in the Country Music Hall of Fame.... My dad grew up with DeFord Bailey, the harmonica player. My dad grew up next to him, like *next door* to him. And most people still don’t know that man is, he’s country music royalty....Nashville is really, it’s sketchy on what it teaches you. It’s weird” (Johnson 2012). A celebrated harmonica player, Bailey (1899-1982) was the first African American to perform at the Grand Ole Opry, debuting in 1927 and continuing to perform until the end of his life. For more about Bailey, see Morton and Wolfe (1991).

student told me that she did not sing before she enrolled at Fisk. “I sing now that I am here,” she said, “When I was at home, nobody knew that I sang at all.”<sup>11</sup>

Even while students sing with an aesthetic investment in the Jubilee Singers’ vocal style, their vocal ontology is inclusive of each student. A Jubilee Singer and voice major, Marquis, explained to me:

Everybody can sing. I don’t feel like everybody can play [an instrument]...everybody can hear; I feel like everybody can sing. Everybody could—like, if they have their favorite song, they are going to sing it, even if they get not one note right. They’re gonna sing it. But everybody can’t hear. A good singer has good voice and ear coordination. I just love hearing people—especially when people can’t sing and they try...[he sighs]. I just love it. I just listen.

And sometimes it gets me in trouble. Sometimes I have to tell people “sorry” cause, you can’t sing with me, or you can’t do this, or you can’t sing with me in this show, cause I don’t be like, you know, ‘please be quiet.’ You know, I listen to people tell their story and stuff like that. But when it comes to like putting on a show, then, that’s—it gets hard for me (Murphy 2012).

Marquis, like many other Fisk students, appreciates sincere vocal performance and embraces amateurism (Newland 2009). At the edge of vocal collaboration with him, however, he draws a line of talent evaluation. Throughout the dissertation, I explore the historical and cultural specificity of students’ vocal judgments at Fisk, including its relationship to blackness, popular culture, Fisk ideals, and individual identity. This follows Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno’s contention:

Anytime anyone makes a discursive judgment of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ this is first and foremost a positioning gesture, which serves to construct or reimagine specific modes of subjectivity or to restructure social relationships by asserting deliberate musical agency....[which have] vitally important impact on our own sense of identity as well as on how we chose to present ourselves in the world. The very act of passing aesthetic judgment assumes and bestows authority upon the judge. By explicitly disaffiliating ourselves with certain forms of musical expression, we make a claim for being ‘in the know’ about things, we demonstrate an educated

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<sup>11</sup> Conversation in April 2012.

perspective and activate a wide range of underlying assumptions about what is ‘good’” (2004: 3).

Fisk students are not unique in regard to singing together on campus. As explained by J. Lloyd Winstead, “While singing always existed on American college campuses and reflected the singing habits of American society, students made singing a unique component of undergraduate life...students sang from the beginning of American higher education” (Winstead 2013: 237).<sup>12</sup>

Internalized pressures to participate in racial exceptionalism by representing the humanity of black people through individual behaviors shapes students’ approach to speech style expectations as Fisk students. When speaking with a group of female students in the campus yard, one told me:

I don’t necessarily think that there’s a certain way that you have to talk, but I think that as an African American woman in college, I think there’s more expected from you. When you come to college, you’re already setting yourself up to be a higher class of a citizen. And I think you have to carry yourself in a certain way because you are an African American woman in college getting an education, a quality occupation.<sup>13</sup>

One of Marquis’ fellow Jubilee Singers, Kondra, a music education major, shared how she resists expectations for exceptional vocal performances.

Normally, I don’t tell people I’m a Jubilee Singer. I don’t, in open, in public, say “Oh, I’m a Jubilee Singer!” Because then when I say that, they put me in a whole different level. It’s like I’m not even human...they are like “she has an amazing voice.” But I’m going to make mistakes, so...we get that a lot in my department [Music]. We can’t fully express who we are, because we have that Jubilee type over us, which makes us ambassadors of the school (Lewis 2012).

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<sup>12</sup> J. Lloyd Winstead discusses this through the examples of the early Puritan Harvard graduates, choirs at HBCUs Fisk and Hampton, the nineteenth-century college songbooks compiled at Wellesley, Vassar, Elmira and Bryn Mawr (2013). The Yale Wiffenpoofs are another example.

<sup>13</sup> Conversation with MKN 3/11/2012.

By not announcing that she is a Jubilee Singer to people she encounters both on and off campus, Keondra works to manage listeners' conflation of character and vocal activity.

### Campus Safety

Like other universities, the Fisk administration and faculty feel responsible for keeping the student body safe during their matriculation. However, current forms of racial violence targeting black youth--what Michelle Alexander (2012) calls "the new Jim Crow"--inform a certain specificity to the approach. Both national and local policies emulating the legalization of murder as "self-defense" (as in the case of "stand-your-ground" laws) (McClellan and Tekin 2012), the sanctioning the police's right to assault without warrant (as in the case of "stop-and-frisk" protocol) (Spitzer 1999), and the epidemic of the US justice system's construction of the prison industrial complex (Marable 2007; Davis and Shaylor 2001), imprisoning massively disproportionate numbers of black men, concern the Fisk community. Regulating when students must be in their dormitories or within the campus borders is one way that administrators approach this task. The current approach to "keeping watch" over students (addressed more in chapter three) differs from many predominantly white universities where social regulations are minimized in an effort to encourage students to learn how to manage time and interactions in society as independent citizens in public. Many universities, parents, and students value college years as a time to explore social boundaries, where school mandated rules would work against this goal. At Fisk, and many other historically black colleges and universities, the historical subjugation of black people, and black youth and young adults in particular, still looms large in how the university protects its students

from and prepares its students for the anticipation and avoidance of racial violence. In addition to the realities of racial violence, Fisk administrators work to prepare students to challenge centuries-old stereotypes of black people as hypersexual, untrustworthy and dangerous. This preparation is accompanied by a black middle-class politics of respectability, most evident in the rhetoric that espouses the social practices of a “Fisk lady” and a “Fisk man” that I discuss later in this introduction.

These campus rules, expressed by administrators and orientation leaders from the moment new students arrive to campus, shock the vast majority of the incoming classes. Students’ resistance to these rules and standards is heard throughout the dissertation (Alford 2013). Most difficult to adjust to, students told me, is Fisk’s enforced curfew for first-year students. All first-year students are required to be in their dormitory by a designated time, around 10:00 pm on weekdays and midnight on weekends. As students progress through their second year and after, the curfew is relaxed. Residential assistants check for the presence of each of their residents nightly and discipline those who disregard the curfew with a report to the dean of student affairs. Females of the freshman class tell me that gender determines how strictly resident assistants enforce the curfew. The male students have curfew, “but no one’s really watching,”<sup>14</sup> one student said. Frustrated, another female student shared that “It’s a double standard. If I have to be here [in my dorm] before 11:57, they [male students] should be there [in their dorm]. I don’t think that just because you’re a boy, you should get a pass, and just because you’re a girl, you should be put on this high pedestal and you have to be in by twelve.” Others have no problem with the curfew. For example, a female student told me “we can’t really do

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<sup>14</sup> In conversations with students about curfew students asked that I not reveal their names.

anything legally [under the age of 21], so I don't really see the point [of being out past curfew]." Even so, one female member of the junior class remembered freshman year curfew fondly. She explained:

I enjoyed, when I was a freshman, having curfew. Because it meant that somebody cared enough about me to get in on time. It's so much that goes on after dark. And we are in Nashville, everything in this area closes at ten. So why would you be out past twelve? They really enforced curfew when I was a freshman. When you would come in, there would be two RAs at the bottom [of the stairs to Jubilee Hall's front entrance], taking names, saying "you're late."

The 2012 murders of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis bolstered this raced and gendered mode of protection at Fisk. One student told me, "I think they make a big deal of curfew. Like, 'It's dark. Y'all are going to get shot.' And I think, 'No. You can get shot when it is daytime.' Seriously. Anything can happen at any time of the day." The appearance of Martin's sweatshirt hoodie and the sound of "loud" music, for which Davis was murdered, reignited Jim Crow-era discussions among Fisk students, and their guardians, about how to look and sound as "safely" as possible in public spaces.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to curfew, Fisk's faculty members express their sincere concern for students' safety and their investment in their personal and academic success during freshman orientation. "You have become part of a tradition where students are

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<sup>15</sup> Tonyaa Weathersbe, in her blog post "How Keeping Our Sons Safe Makes It OK for Whites to Be Racist," argues that the kind of respectability politics that Fisk administrators impose teaches racial submission and reifies white supremacy. She writes: "I don't like it because as practical as it is, it inadvertently feeds the notion that black youths, and black males in particular, ought to capitulate to racist whites in order not to suffer at their hands. And any white man who believes that black kids ought to turn down their music because he doesn't like it, even if they are only sharing the same parking lot for a few minutes, isn't seeking respect. He's expecting submission. Any white store owner, or night watchman, who expects a black youth to take off his hood because it scares him, even though that black youth has no plans to do anything scary, isn't asking for respect but for his irrational fears to be coddled." 27 February 2014. *WCHB News Detroit*.

important,” Fisk professor of history Reavis Mitchell told the class.<sup>16</sup> During Keondra’s first year, she adjusted to the care faculty members expressed. One of her professors wrote a note, asking to speak with her, in the comments of her graded assignment. Keondra did not respond. Only one day passed before a note from this professor appeared on her dorm room door reading “I need to see you.”<sup>17</sup> “I’ve never had anyone care about my education like that,” she told me, “They [Fisk faculty members] will go above and beyond.”<sup>18</sup> Fisk’s faculty and administrative assumption of “custody” encompasses conscientious safekeeping, invested in students’ holistic wellbeing, examples of which I discuss in chapter three.

### The “Fisk Lady”

The upper floors of Jubilee Hall house all of the female students of the freshman class, as well as upperclass female students. On weekday nights in March and April of 2012, resident assistant Keondra invited me to have “girl talk” with Jubilee Hall residents after curfew. In our pajamas, with our hair wrapped in silk scarves, we talked about personal and academic issues concerning the students, and I responded to their questions about post-college life. In a lounge with bright white walls and twelve-foot ceilings with the lights of Nashville sparkling through large-paned windows, three couches, a coffee table and a flat screen television were the only furnishings in the room. In the spirit of a slumber party, the students enjoyed an array of snacks that I brought as a treat—potato wedges, chicken wings, chocolate chip cookies, assorted fruit, water, soda and sparkling

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<sup>16</sup> Mitchell, Reavis. “Fisk History” Lecture. 8/17/2011.

<sup>17</sup> Keondra and MKN conversation on 4/1/2012.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



lemonade. I found that these students had come to Fisk from different cities around the country, including Birmingham, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Madison, and Oakland, and had already declared their college majors of history, pre-law, English, business and accounting, Spanish, music education, political science, sociology, and chemistry.

Their command of the conversation highlighted two aspects of their experiences: dating and the tradition of the “Fisk lady.”<sup>19</sup> “It’s challenging to meet a man,” one student said, “I can date, but the possibility of me sitting there and not thinking the one thing on my mind—‘Is he gay? Is he gay? Is he gay? Like, well, is he gay?’—is slim. Show me a sign or something.”<sup>20</sup>

“Is that one of the first questions on your mind?” I asked her.

“Yes. Now I ask ‘Are you gay?’ or ‘Are you interested in men?’”

Her classmates shared her concern. I heard the repetition of the question “Is he gay?” as an expression of her doubts about the possibility for her to participate in heteronormative ideals of courtship, an oscillation between the desire to move outside of the limited sexual possibilities she feels and her desire to date a male she meets on campus. Yet, by repeating the question, she vocally circles a male suitor’s potential subject position, addressing the large sphere of how structural racism and (hetero)sexism affect interpersonal interactions as she works through hegemonic ideology in her individual predicament.

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<sup>19</sup> In chapter four, I discuss further in the institutional ideology of the “Fisk lady” through the university’s aphorism: “ever on the altar” and “Her daughters true.”

<sup>20</sup> Conversation with MKN in April 2012.

I also heard prosodic differences between the female students' speech during our late-night "girl talk" in the dorm and our conversations in public spaces on campus. Outside of the dorm, in the daytime, intonation varied widely. The pitch range of speech is higher and has a tendency to cadence ideas with an ascending melodic contour, similar to what Cynthia McLemore describes as the phrase-final rises in her interpretation of English intonation in sorority speech (1991). Students participate in the gendered norms of speaking in a pitch range representative of "soprano" and "alto" Western voice parts. In our girl talk, however, I heard the students exercise a significantly lower speech pitch range, closer to that of contralto, or even tenor, voice parts. I argue that this lower pitch range vocally marks a leisurely, private, non-curricular space—a vocal "mellowing out" of sorts—in response to the pressures to "speak up" as "Fisk ladies" and perform femininity through speaking in a high pitch range. This private moment of talk reveals a vocal representation of the labor of living through black female subjectivity, the implications of which reach the public sphere, an example of which I discuss in chapter three through the commercial popular music genre, neo soul.<sup>21</sup> Sounding like "Fisk ladies," "daughters true" to their alma mater, which I argue is a curricular expectation, maps these students' personhood and impacts how they speak in public and in private, in curricular and non-curricular spaces alike.

During fieldwork, I did my best to manage students' interest in this project, especially when, in October of 2011, I noticed that the majority of my primary interlocutors were male students at Fisk. While unintentional on my part, these students

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<sup>21</sup> In chapter three, I explore students' consumption of the neo soul genre and describe their understanding neo soul singers' commercial recordings as performances of "natural" singing, referencing what they hear as a freedom to "be oneself" through the lower vocal range of Nina Simone's singing, in comparison to the higher vocal range of Diana Ross' singing.

approached me, invited me into their social activities. Female students, while also embracing the project, were, as a whole, less assertive in facilitating interaction with me beyond curricular group encounters. As more time with students unfolded, I observed how black middle class sensibility depends upon affiliation with a black woman performing “Fisk ladiness,” the iteration within the Fisk community of what Elizabeth Brooks Higginbotham calls the “female talented tenth” politics of respectability (1994).<sup>22</sup> Lisa B. Thompson builds upon Higginbotham’s work and asserts the role of region, namely the US south, as further authenticating the imagination of the “black lady” (Thompson 2009: 72). Listing examples of Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice, Dorothy Height, Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, at whose funeral “...many spoke about her poise, grace, dignity, and ‘regal bearing,’ ...The South,” she writes “and the southern women, epitomized by women like Coretta Scott King, remains at the root of middle-class black identity”(Thompson 2009: 73). For Fisk students, whether male or female, affiliation with “Fisk lady” performances stabilizes black middle class sensibilities on campus and serves as a means through which to achieve class mobility.<sup>23</sup> I find that

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<sup>22</sup> Higginbotham’s seminal work articulating the crucial role of black women in constructing black middle class sensibility focuses on the social life of the black church. Insisting on a gendered reevaluation of Du Bois’ intraracial class stratification model, she discusses the “female talented tenth” and the “politics of respectability.” Michelle Alexander explains that Jim Crow Era “politics of respectability” “...was born in the nineteenth century and matured in the Jim Crow era. This political strategy is predicated on the notion that the goal of racial equality can only be obtained if black people are able to successfully prove to whites that they are worthy of equal treatment, dignity and respect...They must demonstrate through words and deeds their ability to live by and aspire to the same moral codes as the white middle class, even while they are being discriminated against wrongly...[This] made sense to many black reformers during the Jim Crow era, since African Americans had no vote, could not change policy and lived under the constant threat of the Klan. Back then, the only thing black people could control was their own behavior” (Alexander 2012: 212).

<sup>23</sup> In her study of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, the first sorority founded by African American women, Deborah Whaley concludes that “...a black middle-class collective might more effectively see its work not in terms of uplift of others and inclusion into a capitalistic regime but,

Houston Baker's consideration of this black bourgeois position, through the work of Nathan Hare's *Black Anglo-Saxon* (1965/1991), elucidates the concomitants of gender, race and class as performed through Fisk students' vocality. Quoting Hare:

The bourgeoisie is a *moment* [emphasis mine] of affiliation and transition; it is genuinely about resources, cooperative business, relevant group-oriented education for class advancement, and collective ownership. It creates and sustains public spheres that challenge old regimes of power and knowledge. It is a concerted enterprise at betterment, complete with operating manuals and clear marching orders (Young and Tsemo 2011: 45-46).

Sounding like a "Fisk lady," in bourgeois "moments," is a part of the vocal labor of female students at Fisk—representing a particular response to racist stereotypes. Female students outnumber male students by a ratio of at least two-to-one (Howard 2013). The majority status of female students pressurizes the role of a "Fisk lady" in the performance of black middle class sensibility. Through "Fisk lady" performances, and affiliations with it, students connect to a long lineage of non-violent, anti-racist demonstration in the struggle for racial equality, in effort to contrast the contemporary imaginations of black people as a social problem.<sup>24</sup> I also assert that the disproportionate oppressions that black males face, through the *kind* of social death and erasure of citizenship the prison industrial complex produces, inflects this gendered response as well (though black females are certainly affronted as well).

Female students have divergent responses to the gendered politics within this bourgeois sensibility. "I don't like the instruction I've been given," one first-year student

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rather, in terms of how it might relinquish privilege and redistribute power and resources outside and within its own racial and ethnic formation" (Whaley 2010: 149). I observed that Fisk students "redistribute power and resources within [their] own racial and ethnic formation" through their vocal acts, the vocal performances abiding by and resisting the Fisk ideals established by the original Jubilee Singers.

<sup>24</sup> Along with the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, classical vocalist Coretta Scott King is an example.

told me, “I was good before I got here. I don’t feel like you [the university] should tell me how I should talk and how I should dress.”<sup>25</sup> Another student welcomes the feeling of protected, Victorian virtuous womanhood that she feels the social life of the “Fisk lady” offers. She said, “I like being treated as a Fisk woman. I’m put on a higher pedestal. I don’t want to be put—I will never compare myself to a man. When you think of a man in his college years, you are thinking that he did all kinds of things. But as a woman, I can say that in my college years that I was on a pedestal, that I was respected. I kind of like that.”<sup>26</sup> An upper class female student responded, imparting her perspective:

I think that they [the university administrators] are just stuck on “the Fisk woman,” or the “Fisk lady.” This is the imaginary woman that they made according to the tradition of Fisk. And in many cases, a lot of girls come here from different backgrounds and everybody has their own definition of woman. And when they get to Fisk, especially during orientation, one thing that I know that they do is they tell [students]: you gotta wear pearls, you gotta wear suits [snap], you gotta do this [snap], you gotta do that [snap]. No. You came to school to get an education. When I got here, they told us to wear pearls. I don’t own a pair of pearls. . . . I’m not down with the pearls. But then when I got in University Choir, it was their uniform, you wear pearls and earrings. So I was like, well, I might have to adapt in that kind of way. But when it comes to me just being myself, on the yard and stuff, just chilling, I’ll put a chain on.

The reason that they say ‘Fisk lady’ is because when you go out into that real world—and believe it or not, I have been in places singing, and I say that I go to Fisk University, people instantly [snap] “Lets hold a conversation with her, *she’s* a woman,” verses a girl who’s at TSU [Tennessee State University, a historically black university located approximately a mile south of Fisk on Jefferson Avenue]. And they really stereotype. But let me get all I can out of this because what our former alumni, and what this school holds, they [the non-Fisk community] put us to their higher standard. You have to think about the history.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Conversation with MKN on 3/12/2012.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Conversation with MKN on 4/1/2012.

This extended response shows how singing figures in the process of performing the “Fisk lady,” as well as this student’s understanding about the utility of this performance—from which she believes she benefits and wants her classmates to benefit as well. Annual pageantry formalizes the practice of the “Fisk lady” through the *Miss Fisk* competition, like many other historically black colleges and universities, the winner of which serves as an ambassador for the university, an official hostess and an ultimate example of a Fisk lady.<sup>28</sup> In the next section, I broaden the discussion about the “Fisk lady” in an overview of class politics at Fisk.

Contemporary student life at Fisk reflects part of the long effects of gendered campus rules on HBCU campuses. As first-year female students shared with me, strict social regulations shape students’ ideologies about musical possibility, creativity and belonging for African American musicians. Several of George E. Lewis’s interlocutors in his 2008 book on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians recalled the effects of HBCU rules and music curricula. For instance, AACM composer Ann Ward, born in Chicago (1949- ), attended the HBCU Kentucky State University on a “four year music scholarship in piano” (Lewis 2008: 462). She told Lewis, “...girls did not wear pants on Sunday. We had to wear a dress on Sunday, and you had to go to the chapel. The school was angry at me because I was wearing pants, desert mules, and a poncho.... We had a dormitory matron who looked like Cruella DeVil, but folks was gettin’ down all over the campus. You couldn’t walk in a dark spot” (2008: 462). She went on to tell Lewis “gospel music was frowned on, it was not ‘cultured’” (ibid).

AACM composer, pianist and singer Amina Claudine Myers (1942- ), born in Arkansas, was a second-generation black college graduate, majoring in music education

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<sup>28</sup> In the 2012-2013 academic year, the *Mister Fisk* post was added to the university’s royal court.

at Philander Smith College. Focused on practicing Beethoven for her degree requirements, she also experimented with jazz performance. Like Fisk students, she lived in campus housing during her first year. Lewis reports, “Myers lived in the dormitory, where female students had to be chaperoned to attend Monday evening movies” (Lewis 2008: 125). After her first year, Myers moved off campus where she was presented the opportunity to play piano in a club in Memphis, but the owners were dissatisfied with her repertoire and did not invite her back. “I played about two nights,” she said, “and the man had to let me go because my repertoire was too small. I knew Bach’s two-part inventions, ‘Misty,’ and ‘Greensleeves’” (Lewis 2008: 127). Regardless, she continued to work with local musicians and it was during her time off-campus, through her non-curricular musical activities, that Myers’ musicianship expanded, setting her on the journey she continues to blaze.

Non-curricular and off-campus spaces were important arenas for musical exploration not only for female students, but for male students as well. AACM drummer Donald Moye (1946- ), born in Rochester, attended HBCU Central State University and started a percussion ensemble, for which he was reprimanded by the faculty and administrators. “I got in trouble because I was hanging out with blues cats in town,” he said, “At school they took me on the rug about that—hanging out with blues dudes wasn’t good for your English. The music school rehearsal facilities and auditorium were off-limits to people playing blues” (Lewis 2008: 245).

### “I’m First Class, friend”: The Bourgeoisie and Class at Fisk

Race continues to trump class in US social life; whiteness allows for access to middle-class privileges, regardless of status, just as blackness makes one susceptible to racism, regardless of status. In a discussion about African American citizenship in the twenty-first century, E. Patrick Johnson and Vershawn Ashanti Young maintain that the nature of racism in the US has always marked African Americans’ class position,<sup>29</sup> and that in the post-civil rights era desegregation, “...the increased influence of class on African American identity has benefited the middle class” (Young and Tsemo 2011: xiii, 3). The student previously quoted at length exemplifies this in her decision to “get all she can” out of the black middle class position the “Fisk lady” performs.

The vocalization of black middle class sensibility at Fisk extends beyond the efforts to discipline the speech style of female students. Starting at orientation and throughout students’ matriculation, explicit discussions about “being” middle class transpire between students and between students and faculty. The late Dr. L. M. Collins (1914-2014), professor of English at Fisk from 1945-2014, was a pillar of the Fisk community. A friend to Harlem Renaissance artists such as Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson, Dr. Collins’s English classes invited students to engage with African American literature, and also incorporated his personal stories about witnessing the development of the now-canonized literature he assigned. He lived on the campus until his later years, usually found in the library, the cafeteria, or walking in the yard between them. In my thirteen-year relationship with Fisk, I never saw him dressed in anything but a suit, tie, and top hat, and alumni express the same.

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The other, perhaps most distinctive and consistent characteristic of Dr. Collins' presence was his greeting. When asked how he was doing, he immediately responded, "I'm first class, friend." Other students, following him, also greet each other with this response. To declare a class position as a greeting is one of the more direct vocal acts constructing a class sensibility at Fisk, but not the only one. A graduating senior told the freshman class how their enrollment at Fisk constructs their class position. She said:

Only 30% of Americans go to college. When we talk about African Americans, it's even smaller. So the fact that you're here, automatically means that you are special, that you are part of a talented tenth, or an elite class, whether you believe it or not. And Dr. Mitchell, I don't know if he said this yesterday or not, but it [going to college] automatically means that you are part of the middle class. Because you're saying, right now, definitively, that I want to make something of myself. So, while making something of yourself, also remember that you need to give back. That's why, when you hear 'sons and daughters on the altar,'<sup>30</sup> it's not just a religious thing. Not that we're just Christians. But that we have a service element that, 'we're always on the altar' means we're always willing to serve. Not just serving God, but serving our communities, service our school, especially, but serving the community at large.<sup>31</sup>

The earnestness of her discussion with the first-year students was similar to the student who told freshman female students about the "benefits" of performing "Fisk lady" ideals. One freshman, in her second semester at Fisk, already experienced the transformative potential and the critique of such a social practice. "My family calls me sadiddy and boojie," she said, "They are basically just saying that since I came to college,

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<sup>30</sup> She refers here to the lyrics of the school song, "The Gold and the Blue," as well as a university motto discussed in chapter four.

<sup>31</sup> Seniors talk with the first-year students on 8/17/2011. Vershawn Ashanti Young concurs with this student's rhetoric of being elite servant leaders, writing "In black Marxist ideology, production is not primarily industrial but is intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, as illustrated in relationship between, say, teachers and students, church leaders and congregants, intellectuals and the community. Thus the black bourgeoisie, who lack control of industrial production, should recognize the elements of their own oppressed state (benefited by class, oppressed by race) and use their primarily social and material production, however minimal, to help uplift the black lower class. Then both groups can challenge the dominant (white) bourgeoisie that oppress them" (Young and Tsemo 2011: 9).

the stuff that I used to do back home, I don't do anymore."<sup>32</sup> Using either "boojie"<sup>33</sup> or "sadiddy" to label someone critiques the performance of black middle class sensibilities. Nathan Hare explains, "To be boojie, in contrast [to bourgeoisie], is to ape the dominant bourgeoisie; boojie is black comprador performance for money and awards. Boojie is without commitment or black majority affiliation" (Young and Tsemo 2011: 46). Dr. Reavis Mitchell challenges this critique, and prepares students to challenge derogatory comments about their self-presentation as Fisk students. He shared the following story:

At Fisk, maybe those Negroes are starting to think too much about themselves, and think they are too smart. Just maybe that happens. They are out of place....Some of the problems that Barack Hussein Obama's having is that some folks think that Negro thinks he's too smart. He speaks too well. He's too articulate. He lectures just like a professor. He's not a good ol' boy. He's arrogant. I ask you: how come a smart, black man shouldn't be arrogant? And how come there shouldn't be some place in America that would be able to make me not equal, not one of the boys and girls, but large and in charge?<sup>34</sup>

Sociologist Mary Patillo clarifies the difference between "bourgeoisie" and "boojie" in black middle class performances like those at Fisk. She argues that "bourgeoisie" is a Marxian term and that "boojie" is a Weberian phenomenon (Young and Tsemo 2011: 332). She explains that the creator of the term "boojie"

must have been a Weberian, someone who understood that stratification happens on many different planes, not just in the world of production....Boojie is about consumption, not production....Status, and the social honor or dishonor that it

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<sup>32</sup> Conversation with MKN on 4/1/2012.

<sup>33</sup> Sometimes spelled "boogie." As with many cultural tropes, definitions of boojie in everyday talk conflict. I quote Vershawn Ashanti Young's outline of the divergent usages: a "...derogatory term to describe those who live outside of their social or economic means in order to distance themselves from common blacks"; "a racial sellout"; "...a positive term...people from the 'folk' background who elevate their class station," which could be read negatively as well; "...as a subversive sobriquet to label blacks who mimic the (white) bourgeoisie that Karl Marx critiques" (Young and Tsemo 2011: 7-8).

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, Reavis. "Fisk History" Lecture. 8/17/2011.

bestows, is directly related to consumption...we *perform* our consumption...boogie-ness has its sensual pleasures, its psychological tolls, and limits transformational politics because it represents an attempt to divide a group by status that is already set apart and subjugated by race (Young and Tsemo 2011: 332-333, 338).

Dr. Mitchell concluded his discussion with a statement that explicates, with brevity, Fisk's ideals as bourgeois and not boogie: "You've come here to be educated. You are educated for life, not for work. And that's a tradition at Fisk."<sup>35</sup>

## **Methodology**

Part of my goal in this project is to highlight the enduring, contemporary significance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The ensemble has garnered careful historical attention by scholars, but studies about their current performance practice and significance are scarce. Additionally, I call for a serious consideration of the role of higher education in racializing vocality. University settings are rich site for the experimentation, contestation, and reformation of students' sociability. I treat the moment of college "education" as a perpetual process achieved by interfacing with one's environment, what Herve Varenne calls the "continued effort" to manage, process and/or understand current conditions, whether they be incidental, intentional, familiar or unfamiliar (Varenne 2007: 1563). My approach augments this definition of education by emphasizing the role of temporality in social, and vocal, change. This temporal focus is key in framing the endeavors people at Fisk make to understand and participate in campus life, and highlights the propensity for change(s) in vocal acts as well as the (re)construction of blackness among people at Fisk. As students at Fisk reconcile their pre-Fisk awareness of sounding "black" with their current curricular and non-curricular

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

experiences at Fisk, I traced the details of their vocal actions (Lave 1991; Steele 2010). This ethnography prioritizes Fisk students' everyday vocal activity in the representation and analysis of vocal acts. Paying special attention to shifts in Fisk students' vocal acts, I listened to their speaking and singing, keeping my ear tuned to the differences between students' vocality in curricular and non-curricular moments and spaces.

Classic methods utilized by ethnomusicologists—including participant observation, individual and group interviews, audio-visual recording and dialogic editing—organized my methodological approach to analyzing students' vocality. While I listened to vocal acts, I also looked at gestures associated with vocal acts like facial expressions and dress. The scope of my data is heavily influenced by Steven Feld's assertion that speech *about* vocal acts is as important to constructing meaning as vocal acts themselves (1984). In addition to students speaking and singing, I paid attention to the students' speech *about* vocality during curricular and non-curricular moments. I observed and participated in rehearsals, classes, private lessons, meals in the cafeteria, socializing in the yard, hanging out in dormitories, formal campus events, students' off-campus performances, parties, and chapel services. I also assisted Professor Valija Bumbulis, the voice faculty member, in teaching private voice lessons, which allowed me to discuss practices of vocal production with students. I shared recordings with students in an interpretive dialogic editing process in order to allow them to describe and analyze the meanings and feelings associated with their own vocal acts (Geertz 1973; Feld 1987). While in-person encounters were the primary mode by which research was conducted, throughout fieldwork I also engaged in mediated contact with the Fisk community through Facebook and the Fisk Young Alumni website.

## Chapter summaries

The scope of the dissertation is not a total representation of Fisk students' rich and varied vocal acts. Rather, I present selected moments and practices that specify the vocality shaping Fisk's campus life, particularly during the 2011-2012 academic year, when I conducted the majority of the fieldwork for this project.

Chapter one considers students' individual vocal agency with regard to diction, through the example of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' performance practice. I examine how students participate in and/or resist the implicit and explicit expectations for the speech style of people identifying as black in dominant US culture and at Fisk, and I overview the development of concert spiritual repertoire and performance practice, as well as concert spirituals' relationship to "art" music and "black" music. I then chronicle how a vocal practice of over-articulating consonants embraces both African American vernacular English and the bourgeois aspirations bound in these specialized iterations of General English. In this vocal practice, students' concerted effort to enunciate consonants, especially those beginning and ending a word, is intertwined with elision and results in the sound of what is perceived as "proper talk." I show how overarticulation of consonants is, for students at Fisk, a response to the dangers of their presence as black youth in public space, of which the murder of Trayvon Martin was a tragic reminder, by sounding "articulate while black" (Smitherman and Alim 2012).

In the second chapter, I offer a comparative analysis of the two primary choral ensembles at Fisk, the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Fisk University Choir. I examine how the choral conducting approaches, repertoire choices, and goals for audience reception factor into racializing the vocal work of Fisk students who participate in the choirs.

Significant portions of the student body are members of a choral ensemble at Fisk. Both the University Choir, open to all students, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a select ensemble, represent the university in specific ways. During University Choir tours, which include annual trips to Chicago and Atlanta—two cities with large African American populations and Fisk alumni—the choir members recruit prospective students by inviting them to submit partial applications at concerts. Meanwhile, the Fisk Jubilee Singers concert ticket and recording sales have continued to garner funds and prestige for the university since their first international tour in 1871.

Aware of the public role of the ensembles, I concentrate on how singing in the choirs serves as a ritual process that anchors legacies of African American excellence and a desire for cultural cohesion with black audiences through an economy of vocal symbols. Vocal loudness and quietness feature here in the differing repertoires and choral conducting approaches used in rehearsing each ensemble; University Choir sings contemporary gospel, classical anthems, and occasionally concert spirituals, while the Fisk Jubilee Singers only sing concert spirituals. I also describe how these choirs mediate institutionality through an outward, collectively sung expression of the university's agenda for representing the academic excellence and class mobility of its students, as well as how participation in these choirs educates students about vocally presenting themselves as college-educated black people.

Chapter three presents an examination of non-curricular vocal activity through the example of the 2011 *Fisk Idol* vocal competition. Addressed with an awareness of what Fisk students describe as both “fun” and “serious” non-classroom endeavors, their categorization of non-curricular activity aligns with imaginings of student life in the US

college experience in which both frivolous activities (parties) and professional/personal development (debate teams, community service) comprise aspects of self-exploration during college. Here, popular music emerges as important in Fisk students' vocal choices. The Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia fraternity annually sponsors the *Fisk Idol* competition, a heightened moment of students' public engagement with popular music on campus. Students sing selections from popular music genres constructed as "black music," including R&B, soul, funk, hip-hop, and neo soul. The event recalls the *American Idol* television series produced by Simon Cowell—with student-produced video publicity, student adjudicators, and online voting. Students' palpable excitement in vocally expressing themselves outside of University Choir and Jubilee Singer vocal norms brings into relief the urgency of their participation in popular "black" speaking and singing as a form of cultural coherence. While curricular vocal norms present themselves in classroom standards, the university also supports students' experimentation with non-curricular vocal activity without having to leave the Fisk environment. These non-curricular events demonstrate the importance of staying on-campus, in a culture of confinement built up at Fisk that has its roots in the dangers of Jim Crow era racial segregation of public spaces and extends into the current threats of police brutality and other forms of violence that daily concern students, parents and the faculty.

The concluding chapter addresses religiosity through different renditions of singing of the Fisk alma mater, "The Gold and Blue." I describe the process through which students learn the alma mater—a traditional singing of the piece and an example of a personalized variation of the beloved song—to highlight the relationships between "sacred" singing and black institutionality. Every incoming class learns the alma mater

during each night of the weeklong orientation. Meeting in small groups of five to ten students in various historic locations on campus, like the W.E.B. Du Bois statue (Class of 1888) or the steps of Jubilee Hall, first-year students listen to upperclassmen repeatedly sing the alma mater and eventually join the singing. Composed by John W. Work I in 1895, “The Gold and Blue” is a chorale that demands lyric singing and dynamic nuance. Mastering how to sing the alma mater is a key element in orientation, as it is required to participate in campus events. At each official occasion, members of the Fisk community stand and sing the alma mater in harmony with a sacred reverence for “her,” the term by which students affectionately refer to their university. This examination of Fisk’s culture of vocal convocation follows a Durkheimian approach to religiosity, as well as a reconsideration of the relationship between black religious vocality and black institutionality.

### **Situating the Ethnographer**

This project began when I was an undergraduate in Oberlin’s double degree program, pursuing a voice performance degree in the Conservatory of Music and an African American Studies degree in the College. Questions about vocal aesthetics, repertoire, casting and race emerged from my experiences as a black classical singer thinking critically about race in the United States. During my junior year, I wanted to study away from campus and remembered my parents’ college stories. Namely, I remembered my mother’s spirited stories about her time as an exchange student at Hampton University, an HBCU in Virginia. She also attended a small liberal arts college in Ohio, Wittenberg University, and her time at Hampton was a highlight of her undergraduate years. I also remembered my dad’s stories about his college years as an



important period of self-exploration and social mobility, and felt a strong desire to engage in another kind of college experience. It took one visit to Oberlin's study abroad office to learn that the college had maintained an exchange program with Fisk University since the 1960s. (The relationship between Fisk and Oberlin extends back to 1866, however. Many of Fisk's first faculty members were Oberlin graduates). It seemed a perfect opportunity, and it was. I knew about the Fisk Jubilee Singers and longed for the chance to sing with them. When I went to get approval from the African American Studies Department for the exchange, I found out that the professor who introduced me to African American Studies, Dr. Adrienne Lash Jones, was an alumna of Fisk. She took the reins, arranged the details of my exchange and ushered me into a semester as an exchange student at Fisk, a time that continues to impact me as a scholar and a singer in foundational ways.

In the 2001 spring semester, I attended Fisk. Dr. Paul Kwami, director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, invited me to sing with the ensemble. It was in the rehearsals with the ensemble that the research questions that I address in this dissertation first emerged. My semester there was also the first time that I was in the racial majority in an educational environment, an experience that transformed my understanding of the construction of race. But in a way, the project began from my earliest memories of hearing my parents talk about their college experiences—discussions frequently shared with my sister and me. I grew up as a black girl who loved to sing in Cincinnati, Ohio. The Mason-Dixon line of the Ohio River was a constant, tangible reminder about the experiences of black people who lived enslaved on the southern side of the river, and the promise of freedom on the northern side. Local iterations of centuries-old racial tension have yet to be

resolved in the area and my parents, raising two black daughters in the post-Civil Rights Era, made us aware of that reality and guided us to respond to it.

One of the many ways they did this, as was the case for many African American families, was in how they impressed the importance and seriousness of school as a social system that has enormous influence on how we think about ourselves and other people, and how we move through the world. Academic achievement was important to them, as well as to my sister and me, but even more than that, my parents interrogated our school experiences, inside and outside of the classroom, and encouraged us to freely exercise our confidence and command inclusion with self-awareness about our blackness.

Another way they responded to racial tensions was in how they introduced the significance of church experiences—specifically black church experiences—as part of a spiritual foundation for the political struggle for the liberation of black people around the world. While singing in the gospel choir during church services as a child at the First Baptist Church of Cumminsville and New Jerusalem Baptist Church, I noticed how my singing there was so different from my singing at school in concert choir at Cottonwood Elementary, Bethany School and The Seven Hills School, and my singing in city-wide select choirs at the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music (CCM) and the May Festival (both influenced by Cincinnati's rich German choral heritage). I found myself, as a child, shifting more than just singing styles, but also worlds, in ways that were divergent. As I grew, and as my scholarship developed, my relationship with Fisk faculty and students continued to evolve and I saw how much there is to explore, and how much there is to uncover about the relationships between higher education

environments, blackness, and vocality in the United States. This dissertation is a part of that exploration.

As an increasingly salient artifact of middle-class culture in the United States, a college degree has made implicit an examination of black middle-class culture in this ethnography about racialized vocality at Fisk. I explore how Fisk built its legacy by cultivating and promoting a specific kind of New World blackness through vocal expression, highlighting the indispensability of Fisk's historical legacy in the vivid current social life of the production and consumption of racialized vocality on campus. In the following pages, I describe how Fisk students distinguish "black" vocal acts from other vocal acts, and how students participate in sounding "black."

## Chapter 1

### **Diction and The Fisk Jubilee Singers' Performance Practice**

The subject of diction in black music has been a persistent theme in examinations of African American experience and identity for over one hundred and fifty years. Whether written on the page or vocalized in speech and song, the representation and performance of African Americans' language<sup>36</sup> has politicized debates about the humanity, cognitive ability, creative assertions and specificity of black artists, listeners, readers, writers, and critics alike. For example, concert spiritual arrangers such as H. T. Burleigh (1866-1949), Eva Jessye (1895-1992), William Dawson (1899-1990), and Margaret Bonds (1913-1972), often included dialect in their concert settings of spirituals, an orthographic quandary challenging singers' diction approaches and listeners' interpretations.

Authors such as Mark Twain (1835-1910), Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) and Langston Hughes (1902-1967) have incorporated dialects of American English in their work and presented aspects of American life by embracing the way that people talk in different parts of the United States. Over the course of the twentieth century, these composers and writers summoned discourse about how language represents and constructs class and race. In the canon of African American literature, writers' use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)<sup>37</sup> has incited

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<sup>36</sup> My use of the phrase "African Americans' language" here is not an essentialist assumption about a linguistic profile of black people in the United States. Rather, I consider how the juridical history of racist ideology, such as anti-literacy laws, shapes the language practices of African Americans in everyday, radical expressive culture.

<sup>37</sup> I discuss African American Vernacular English below.

debates about *denigrating* and prideful representations of black life, also presenting an orthographic quandary challenging writers and readers.

A category of American English, AAVE is sometimes also referred to as “Black English,” “African American” English, “black dialect” or “Ebonics.” Linguists use the term AAVE to classify the linguistic practices developed by enslaved Africans in the United States that emerged through a conglomerate of various West African languages converging with American and British English in the environment of federally sanctioned literacy restrictions on black people. Its many historical, contemporary, regional and class variants on “standard” English became associated with slaves’ speech, and ultimately coalesced into a dialect distinct to predominantly African American communities. Debates about the importance of AAVE use in the classroom, its viability as a language, and the politics of its reception as “uneducated” speech continue to circulate both in scholarship, the media and popular culture. From its presence in the field spiritual, forms of slave speech—or colloquial “dialect”—have remained the language style of many concert spirituals. Marcyliena Morgan defines AAVE as “...the language, discourse, and interactional styles and usage of those socialized in the speech community” (Morgan 2002: 65). Other seminal work about AAVE’s history, structure and politics of use include: Labov 1983; Baugh 1999; Lanehart 2001; McWhorter 2003; Green 2002; Rickford 2012; Samy and Smitherman 2012.

It is imperative to remember that dialect in concert spirituals was incorporated into scores at the same time that writers were experimenting with the orthography of AAVE in literature. Situating the incorporation of dialect in concert spirituals alongside the incorporation of dialect in literature destabilizes the concept that dialect usage in

concert spirituals is a product of the “natural” singing of black Americans. The dialect in concert spirituals is a product of composers’ concerted and deliberate efforts to represent dialect in the score. Burleigh, the first composer to set spirituals into solo voice-piano arrangements, was in conversation with other artists making concerted efforts to incorporate dialect into their work, including Dunbar, Hughes, and black blackface minstrel entertainer Bert Williams (Chude-Sokei 2006: 25).

The need to negotiate racial constructions informs the diction choices that the Fisk Jubilee Singers make in performance. Drawing on an imagination of the experiences of enslaved Africans in the US, while demonstrating mastery of Western choral sonic ideals, the Fisk Jubilee Singers address a fraught history through their diction choices. Making use of a serious, non-violent demeanor and virtuosic vocalism, of which diction is a part, the Fisk Jubilee Singers show how the history of concert spiritual performance overdetermines contemporary performance practice.

Non-violence figures here as an extension of Reconstruction Era and Jim Crow imperatives for the behavior of black people in public as well as Civil Rights Movement philosophies for peaceful demonstrations of dissent against institutional racism. Additionally, non-violence marks the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ performance of a Western classical singing principle through which “healthy” vocal technique keeps singers from “hurting” their voices by avoiding perceptions and practices of vocal excess and fatigue through the stridence, loudness, rasp, uneven registers characterizing the singing many popular music singers (Miller 1997). Western vocal pedagogy, racism, and debates about the vocal qualities classified as “classical” and “non-classical” (popular music genres, for example) fortify a problematic perceptual practice that racializes vocality (Eidsheim

2008). The Fisk Jubilee Singers' style of operatic spiritual singing and their status as college-educated singers equips them with a cultural capital that complicates essentialist frames of black people as producers of "black" sounds. Before the Singers is the task of not "hurting" their voices and avoiding being hurt in acts of racial violence, as I discuss below through an overview of vocal pedagogy at Fisk.

Concert spirituals comprise an art song genre distinct from the large body of songs emerging from the experiences of enslaved Africans in the U.S. Sometimes uncritically referred to as "slave songs," "Negro spirituals," "sorrow songs," "plantation songs," "jubilees," or "gospels," concert spirituals are sung in an operatic style (Southern 1997; Floyd 1995). The texts cover a wide range of themes including critical humor about interpersonal relationships, but center on Protestant beliefs through Christian devotion and extend to coded communications describing strategies to gain freedom. They are arranged in both solo and choral settings with or without instrumental accompaniment.<sup>38</sup>

Historical resistance to the concert spiritual category, whose performance practice is distinct from folk spirituals, is exemplified by Zora Neale Hurston's essay "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," which criticizes the Jubilee Singers' concert spiritual repertoire as inauthentic to "real" spiritual singing:

There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere. What is being sung by the concert artists and glee clubs are the works of Negro composers or adaptors *based* on the spirituals. Under this head come the works of Harry T. Burleigh, Rosamond Johnson, Lawrence Brown, Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson and Work. All good work and beautiful, but *not* the spirituals. These neo-spirituals are the outgrowth of the glee clubs. Fisk University boasts perhaps the oldest and certainly the most famous of these. They have spread their

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<sup>38</sup> For more about concert spiritual development and popularity, see Sandra Graham, *The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginning of an American Tradition*. Ph.D. Dissertation (2001, New York University).

interpretation over America and Europe. Hampton and Tuskegee have not been unheard. But with all the glee clubs and soloists, there has not been one genuine spiritual presented. *Negro songs to be heard truly must be sung by a group, and a group bent on expression of feelings and not on sound effects.* Glee clubs and concert singers put on their tuxedos, bow prettily to the audience, get the pitch and burst into magnificent song -- but not *Negro* song. The real Negro singer cares nothing about pitch (Hurston 1934: 80).

The fact that The Fisk Jubilee Singers sings *to* an audience, with concern for their “sound effects,” ruptures what Hurston defines as the performance practice of “real” spirituals’ participatory, communal style. “The real spirituals are not really just songs,” she writes, “They are unceasing variations around a theme” (1934: 79).

While I am not invested in claiming the (in)authenticity of spiritual singing styles, Hurston’s definition of “real” spirituals as “unceasing” opens analytical approaches to the repertoire. Always rehearsing from notated arrangements of spirituals, the Jubilee Singers concert spiritual tradition participates in the Western fixed concept of the “work,” where the musical object begins and ends through vocalizing the notation in a written score. Even so, the arrangements themselves, and composers’ continued exploration, “unceasingly” produce variations on enslaved Africans’ singing.

In the contemporary moment, concert spirituals may still summon racist fantasies about the peculiarity of a black bodied performing subject, the contemporary moment in the story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ singing reveals the social stakes confronted by these college singers, within a broader climate of contemporary racial politics. According to Lisa Minnick, “Attempts at representing African American dialectal speech are linguistically and artistically compelling, and, I believe, inextricably intertwined with racial attitudes and issues that help to define the American experience” (2004: xvii). My



research at Fisk, reported here, supports Minnick’s observations at the level of vocal and musical practice.

In this chapter, I describe how an entire ideology of black experience and identity, and a particular, related history of performing blackness, are embedded in the seemingly narrow area of vocality, and the even more precise domain of vocal diction.<sup>39</sup> Focused on levels of intelligibility and the diction of language as a vocal action,<sup>40</sup> I examine consonants and connect the history of the ensemble’s singing practices with contemporary performances.<sup>41</sup> My attention to the Jubilee Singers’ sung and spoken articulation of consonants considers the ways that they manage their repertoire’s inheritance of 19<sup>th</sup> century blackface minstrel vocal performance practices as well as current expectations of speech by people who identify as “black.” By focusing on diction in the Singers’ contemporary performances, I reveal the fraught politics of AAVE speech. Before detailing an example of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ diction as heard in my fieldwork, I overview the historical development of the ensemble, the political context of their emergence, the politics of AAVE in concert spiritual performances, the customs of vocal pedagogy at Fisk, and the debates about concert spirituals as “art” and/or “black”

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<sup>39</sup> In one of my master’s theses, *Concert Spirituals’ Minstrel Inheritance* (2007), I discussed the relationship between race and repertoire in the experience of contemporary concert spiritual singers as they make decisions about the diction of dialect in concert spirituals.

<sup>40</sup> This follows Nina Eidsheim’s recent call for a consideration of “voice as action” in the “dynamic construction of racialized voice,” whereby vocal analysis incorporates multi-sensory dimensions to uncover the vocal acts that produce singing. “Singing is not sound,” she writes, “but action” (2012: 18). I intend to invoke a materiality of the singing voice, as well as the political climate through which the Singers perform, with this focus on diction.

<sup>41</sup> In 1872, a reviewer for the *New York Evangelist* featured language as an evaluative aspect of the original ensemble’s performances, saying: “While their extensive repertoire included ballads, operas, choruses and hymns, the plantation and spiritual songs brought them the most fame and captivated the general public.... ‘every thing becomes new under the charm of their un-English voices’” (Winstead 2013: 238).

music.

### The Fisk Jubilee Singers

The Fisk Jubilee Singers are one of Fisk University's choral ensembles. This select group, comprised of sixteen Fisk students, sings entire programs of concert spirituals, always a cappella and from memory. They have been internationally celebrated for over one hundred and forty years for their leadership in introducing the world to concert spirituals, and black music writ large, during their 1871 international tour. The university seal is a silhouette of the original ensemble, seen sitting leisurely, representing the tremendous role of the Singers in grounding the school's financial stability, campus culture, and global reputation. Attention to their global service to Christianity, the Civil Rights Movement, and choral singing has largely remained focused on the group's 19<sup>th</sup> century origins, but the Jubilee Singers continue to perform entire programs of concert spirituals around the world today.

At the time of its opening in 1866, Fisk's student enrollment consisted of recently emancipated slaves from throughout the US, and of free black people seeking higher education. Students ranged in age from seven to seventy years old, and in some cases, entire families attended Fisk together. The primary focus of the young university's curriculum centered on reading skills, as the anti-literacy laws upheld through slavery forbade enslaved Africans in the US from learning to read. Learning how to read, write, and master speech that was considered to be "standard" English (or what linguists would later call General English), was a shared priority among students.

The university's first music director was George L. White, who was also a trustee

(Anderson 2010). Challenged to find a solution to bring the university out of debt, and to raise money to sustain the institution into the future, White turned to his students' singing for a financial solution. In the course of his duties directing the choral ensembles, White overheard students privately singing spirituals after a rehearsal, songs that were unknown to him. He was so impressed that he recommended they be incorporated into the choir's repertoire. White worked with the students, especially keyboardist Ella Shepherd, to transfer their memory of spirituals into Western music notation, and the ensemble began to sing the songs from the scores with a *bel canto*<sup>42</sup> vocal aesthetic. It was through this process that the Fisk Jubilee Singers concertized spirituals, bridging folksong and art song repertoires and performances practices. White proposed to take the singers on a tour, singing their renditions of the spirituals they concertized, in order to fundraise for the university. The students were hesitant to sing spirituals in public, concerned about

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<sup>42</sup> *Bel canto*, Italian for "beautiful singing," is both a singing method and an elite Western vocal aesthetic ideal. It requires a singer to maintain a homogenous timbre by way of an even airflow through the glottis in an attempt to keep timbre uniform in all vocal registers. Consistent vibrato and ease of agility through melismatic passages characterize *bel canto* singing. Colloquially, *bel canto* singing labels the technique and aesthetic employed by Western classical singers, a style historicized by some opera scholars and voice pedagogues as "beautiful," and "healthy," connecting Eurocentric supremacist ideals to both the approach and the sound of the singing style. The late nineteenth century Western classical vocal culture through which the original Fisk Jubilee Singers constructed concert singing performance practice is the moment of *bel canto* singing style's emergence. Musicologist James Stark explains that: "The term *bel canto* did not come into general use until the late nineteenth century, when it arose from the 'sulfur of pro- and anti- Wagner incentive.' Philip Duey, in his book on *bel canto*, made the point that it was the reaction to Wagner's declamatory style that caused the Italians to rally round their banner of *bel canto*, 'and this was the struggle that made the term famous.' ....Owen Jander... agrees that the first references to *bel canto* appeared around the mid-nineteenth century 'when weightier vocal tone came to be prized and less emphasis was placed on light, florid delivery.' This heavier tone quality, which supposedly displaced *bel canto*, was also linked to larger orchestras, larger halls, and the 'darkly romantic subject matter' of some operas." (Stark 2003: xviii). The world's obsession with color, race and nationality heard in late romantic era musical trends no doubt shaped the rhetoric and aesthetics of *bel canto* singing. This study points towards the dialectic between Fisk students' North American and European singing and their audience's listening as they each participated in the vocal culture of the moment.

confrontation with racist perceptions and imaginations about the lives of formerly enslaved Africans. Sheppard wrote that students were “softly, learning from each other the songs of our fathers. We did not dream of ever using them in public” (Ward 2000: 110). With caution, they agreed to tour, with a mission to save their university.

In his detailed history of Fisk’s early years, Andrew Ward explains the events leading to the Jubilee Singers’ early tours, writing that, “The idea of taking a choice of his best singers on the road began to seem the only hope for Fisk, and the natural consequence of White’s immersion in both music and the school’s all but empty treasury” (2000: 116). Fisk’s principal, Adam K. Spence wrote to other trustees about White’s plan, as Ward recounts:

‘We are considering now the question of using a company of our own singers in the North under the direction of Mr. White to get up an interest in our school.’.... But White persuaded Spence that the money was not the point. [White said] ‘The influence was the main thing. A fine concert given entirely by colored people is a new thing. It encourages the colored people themselves and tends to lift them into respect with others. Examinations in Greek, Latin and the like cannot be appreciated. A concert can (2000: 117-118).

White’s agenda to raise money for Fisk through a presentation of the dignity of black people, both for black and non-black audiences, resonated with what Jon Cruz calls the “ethnosympathy” of abolitionist audiences desire to “salvag[e] black cultural authenticity” through sympathetic hearings of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers’ singing (1999: 22).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Eidsheim extends Cruz’s assertion about ethnosympathy in contemporary performances of concert spirituals writing: “Possibly ethnosympathy underlies the prevailing preference, among audiences, for spirituals paired with classical repertoire, as well a discourse that attributed the emotional capital present in interpretations of classical music to a natural aptitude for spirituals”

As the ensemble left Nashville on their first tour during the night of October 5, 1871, Ella Shepherd remembered that “White started, in God’s strength, ... with his little band of singers to sing the money out of the hearts and pockets of the people” (Ward 2000: 126). Another singer of the original ensemble, Maggie Porter, remembers, “We were nothing but a bunch of kids. All we wanted was for Fisk to stand” (ibid). Daphne Brooks’ discussion about the Singers’ ethnosympathetic reception highlights the complicated task of managing racial representation and vocal virtuosity in their performances and brings to fore the role of diction in achieving their goal to perform educability and status. “Instead, it is the spectators who, historically, were made to feel both close and far away from slavery,” Brooks writes, “stricken by the horror of its looming brutality, yet cleansed by the sanctimoniously moral passage to a higher ground which the Singers’ labor enables” (Brooks 2006: 300).

Commentary on their diction was also a part of the early European reception. After the opening piece “Steal Away,” a *Tonic Sol-Fa* Reporter reviewer wrote: “All thoughts of the grotesqueness of the language used were banished from our minds by the simple and intense serenity of the singers” (Ward 2000: 210). The poise of the singers, in this reviewer’s opinion, overrode his distaste for their diction. The Fisk Jubilee Singers worked hard to portray this tempered deportment. When the singers were sailing to Europe, White “read to the troupe from a manual on shipboard decorum: ‘how to dress, and how not to over-eat’” (ibid: 207). In order for audiences to hear their singing, rather than only seeing their skin, the singers had to be hyperconscious of their demeanor so that

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(2011: 647).

it remained even-tempered. After a London concert, one audience member recalls that they were “not as black as we expected nor dressed in the gay colours which are falsely supposed to distinguish the negro taste. They are simply eleven young Christian ladies and gentleman” (Ward 2000: 209). The Fisk Jubilee Singers ruptured this audience member’s stereotypical idea of what a black person should be and represented blacks as (Christian) human beings.

Still, for many listeners, the Singers’ diction served as a reminder of the Singers’ subordinate social status, while the concert spiritual tradition itself confirmed essentialist ideology about black people and black expressive culture. Roland Hayes (1887-1976), a Fisk Jubilee Singer who became the first black tenor to have an international classical singing career, wrote: “My people have been very shy about singing their crude little songs before white folks. They thought they would be laughed at—and they were! And they came to despise their own heritage” (Spearman/Floyd 1990: 48).

Nevertheless, it was and is commonly assumed that black classical singers should perform concert spirituals. The perception that black people have a “natural” ability to perform spirituals in a unique way reinforced the borders of race. Roslyn Story, in her book on black female opera singers, wrote that a recital by a black classical vocalist without the inclusion of at least one spiritual, either in the body of the program or as an encore, is rare. Some artists find the omission of the spiritual unthinkable. Said Leontyne Price (1927- ): “I have to spend all of this time as an artist exposing my faculties towards perfecting the music of a folklore that I don’t know, because I’m not born into it, and I am not going to include the folklore that I am born into? It doesn’t make sense”

(Story 1990: 174). Though Price is enthusiastic about programming concert spirituals, not all singers are. Shirley Verrett (1931-2010), another internationally acclaimed black opera singer, “recalled recitals in Europe in which she had omitted them [concert spirituals] for her written program and then was obligated to sing them anyway after vociferous requests for the ‘Spiri-chu-elles’ resounded from the back of the auditorium” (Story 1990: 181). For some black singers, singing spirituals may be the only opportunity for performance, and thus a welcome repertoire. Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was the first singer to program a recital consisting only of concert spirituals. He said, “I want to sing—to show the people the beauty of Negro folk songs and work songs. I will not go into opera, of course, where I would probably become one of hundreds of mediocre singers, but I will concentrate on Negro music, which has never been properly handled” (ibid: 178). Like Robeson, many singers have personal commitments to keep the concert spirituals from being under-programmed.

Some singers find singing dialect in concert spirituals offensive and evocative of racist ideology. Betty Allen (1930- ), founder of Harlem School of the Arts and favorite mezzo-soprano of composers Leonard Bernstein and Virgil Thompson, said “I have tried to not make what I call a terrible, terrible dialect [when singing spirituals]. When I teach singers, I tell them, ‘Don’t sing “I’s e gwine to ride up,” just say “I’m gon’ ride up,” because that is what people say.’ I tell them just to use sloppy English. Nobody these days [uses hard dialect]—it’s so stereotypical, it makes your flesh crawl” (ibid: 134, 180). Soprano Martina Arroyo, who opened the Metropolitan Opera for three seasons said, “I heard a young lady who was studying Mozart, and it sounded gorgeous, but then she sang, ‘Pre-shus Lord, take mah haan’ ... I told her, ‘If you ever do that again I’ll kill you’”

(ibid: 180). In a 2006 interview, tenor Gregory Hopkins, the artistic director for Harlem Opera Theater, a not-for-profit organization committed to showcasing African American opera singers, told me that he embraces concert spirituals without feeling he has compromised his world-class musicianship. He says, "...so [the programming of concert spirituals] has grown from obligation, to appreciation, to a necessity. I can do an entire program of spirituals now and feel no contradiction about who I am as a musician and offer an entire program of spirituals. So, it's growth. Growth to a musical acceptance of who you are. And that's what the journey is about" (Hopkins 2006). I argue that through diction, a vocal sound of the "moral passage" Brooks speaks of, the original Singers' established a concert spiritual performance practice with their vocal labors, a practice that endures in contemporary performances of the repertoire and in the everyday lives of current Fisk students.

The first American choir to tour Europe, the original ensemble delivered entire programs of a cappella concert spirituals from memory, performing for audiences that included Mark Twain, Johann Strauss, and Queen Victoria.<sup>44</sup> Their early tours were significant on two fronts: the student singers' concert profits kept Fisk from closing due to its perilous financial condition, and they pioneered the presentation of black performers on stage without elements of blackface minstrelsy (Forbes 2010; Rodiger 2007; Epstein 2003; Radano 2003, Radano and Bohlman 2001; Lott 1993).

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<sup>44</sup> Brooks further explains that "Raising more than \$150,000 for Fisk University on its first three tours, the world's first African American celebrity vocal group garnered high-profile endorsements from leading ministers such as Henry Ward Beecher, performed before President Ulysses S. Grant, Queen Victoria, and a wide array of dignitaries, royalty and decorated military figures" (2006: 295-295).



## Blackface Minstrelsy and Concert Spirituals

A genre of American theater, blackface minstrelsy, where actor-singers blackened their skin with burnt cork and performed stereotypical and denigrating caricatures of black people in comic skits, was widely popular by the 1820s and reached great popularity in the 1870s (Southern 1990: 89). In its early development, only white people performed in blackface minstrel shows. However, once blackface minstrelsy gained prevalence, black actor-singers also participated in the performances. Several entertainers like Bert Williams (of West Indian heritage) enjoyed international fame as a blackface minstrel performer (Chude-Sokei 2006: 1). In the years around 1840, scholar P. F. Gura argues that there was a shift from “a performative culture of the ear” to “a mediated culture of the eye” in America (1999: 608). Blackface performance became “...the site at which people and behavior are constructed as ‘spectacles of primitivism’ to justify the colonial and racist gaze” (Johnson 2003:7). This racist gaze dominated white people’s reception of early concert spiritual performances. Components of minstrelsy, as outlined in scholar William Mahar’s text *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, ironically match the development of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, highlighting the challenges they faced to differentiate themselves from blackface minstrelsy. The original Jubilee Singers:

1. borrowed from a variety of English, French and Italian musical, dramatic, and literary sources imported into the United States as part of a concerted effort to establish some sense of cultural parity with European society;
2. appropriated elements from African American and Anglo-European musical and cultural practices;
3. toured extensively on three main circuits (South, Mid-west/West, North);
4. contributed to the sometimes contradictory American beliefs and attitudes about race, gender and class;

5. demonstrated the possibilities for developing a popular, accessible, and profitable commercial product from the fusion of what often appear to be mutually exclusive stylistic ingredients (Johnson 2003: 7).

The Jubilee Singers' reappropriation of popular black representation secured concert spirituals as a site of artistic resistance, or as David Krasner writes, "... a liminal space of resistance, parody, and double-consciousness" (Krasner 1997: 2). For white people, minstrelsy upheld a racist imaginary, while for black people, minstrelsy helped to maintain a distance from a hostile outsider. Blackface minstrel features of concert spiritual performance "... suggest that both sides of the social dialectic could occupy the same space and be intimate with each other. Both could share and play and struggle with each other's absent bodies within the shared space of racist fantasy" (Chude-Sokei 2006: 39). Though the concert spiritual tradition was informed by the blackface minstrel tradition, this influence does not diminish the power of the concert spiritual's ability to inspire racial progress. As Houston Baker once observed, "to be a Negro one must meld with minstrelsy's contours" (Baker/Krasner 1997: 28) and perhaps, then, to be American, one must meld with those contours. The idea that to be "Negro" one must follow the form of minstrelsy marks race as a fundamentally performative paradigm.

The majority of black people performing on 19<sup>th</sup> century stages were blackface minstrels participating in the stylized performance of black people as lazy, comical, poor, and uneducated. Touring during the height of blackface minstrelsy's popularity elicited a climate of massive audience confusion: the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang sacred songs and did not perform comedy sketches, and they were not in blackface but dressed in traditional Victorian attire, and yet, the words of their songs had a similar sound to the words vocalized in blackface minstrel shows, which frequently represented people with

black stylized “dialects.”<sup>45</sup> Processing this linguistic resemblance, a resemblance made through the performativity of imagined slave language, challenged singers and audiences then, and it still does today. The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ performances disrupted this racist, normative performance of black-bodied musicians and attracted a middle-class, abolitionist audience. The early Singers’ tour successes, as Andrew Ward describes, “taught the nation and the world an enduring lesson about the dignity and educability of black Americans,” and shaped the ensemble’s goals in subsequent performances that have occurred every academic year since their first tour (2000: 3).

### African American Vernacular English and Concert Spirituals

These successes were achieved while performing spirituals utilizing African American Vernacular English, a speech style that linguist Marcyliena Morgan defines as “...the language, discourse, and interactional styles and usage of those socialized in the speech community” that developed from “general American English varieties, other languages and varieties in the African Diaspora, African languages, and a combination of the three” (Morgan 2002: 65, 64). The concert spiritual, both in the scores and in vocal practice, combines General American (or “standard”) English (GE) and AAVE. Demonstrating fluency in both AAVE and GE remains a model of the sophistication endemic to concert spiritual singing. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, in their

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<sup>45</sup> In his introduction to *Love and Theft*, Lott writes, “Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return” (Lott 1993: 5). Later in the book, Lott articulates how both black people and white people participate in this unconscious return of minstrelsy. For a critique of Lott, see Brenda Dixon Gottchild’s article “Past Imperfect: Performance, Power, and Politics on the Minstrel Stage” in her book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (pp. 88-94, Greenwood 1996).

early tours, struggled to govern the use of AAVE in their performances. Andrew Ward reports “White’s troupe ‘didn’t sing in the Negro dialect; always in good English’” (2000: 115). Another account from an 1872 concert states, “As to the words which accompany their songs, they are even more broken and irregular than is the music” (Oneida 1872: 126). Though the use of dialect in Fisk Jubilee Singers concerts was inconsistent, composers still found it important to incorporate dialect into their arrangements. Additionally, “Since dialect variety and cognitive ability are inextricably linked in this case,” Morgan further reminds us, “it was unheard of that any educated person would freely admit that he or she spoke and respected both” (2002: 18). The Fisk Jubilee Singers, however, do just this: as college educated singers—from the 1870s until today—they convincingly perform multiple speech styles in the singing of a single concert spiritual.<sup>46</sup>

### Vocal Pedagogy and the Practice of “Technique” at Fisk

Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff title their study about turn-of-the-twentieth-century black vocal music instruction with an assertion about the training required to sing gospel quartets: “‘To do this, you must know how’”(2013: 3). This sentiment mirrors that of the Fisk students’ understanding of concert spiritual performances. The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ diction approach is not only rehearsed with the ensemble, but also individually in private voice lessons with Professor Valija Bumbulis, the voice performance faculty member at Fisk. Her pedagogy is traditional to classical vocal technique, rooted in *bel canto*

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<sup>46</sup> The original Fisk Jubilee Singers were seen as “convincing proof of what higher education could do for freedmen” (Canning 2005: 84).

ideology.<sup>47</sup> She instructs diction classes, and is also passionate about the concert spiritual, helping to guide students' spiritual performances with both vocal and historical information. We shared many conversations about vocal pedagogy, her goals for students' vocal development, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers. She had not heard the ensemble sing before visiting the university, and after her first hearing, she has never felt that their singing is anything but "absolutely marvelous" (Bumbulis 2011). Her feelings about Fisk University Choir, which I discuss in chapter two, are less enthusiastic. She believes that the performance practice of the ensemble is "unhealthy," expressing that she is concerned with how she hears the singers "force" their voices with an uneven balance between upper and lower registers.<sup>48</sup> "It's established fact from the 1400s," she told me, "that the voice changes at an F," and that employing the same singing approach in lower and upper registers could make one "...bound to hurt yourself" (ibid). Students are aware of her preference for the singing of the Jubilee Singers over the University Choir, and many proceed to participate in both ensembles. "She doesn't mind," one student tells me, "she knows we all sing gospel."

Each Jubilee Singer has lessons with Ms. Bumbulis, regardless of whether or not they are voice performance majors. A member of the faculty for forty years,, her pedagogy significantly influences the individual vocal approaches of the members of the ensemble. In her cozy studio at the front of the Harris Music Building, students enjoy

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<sup>47</sup> Within American institutions of higher education, voice performance pedagogy grew from nineteenth century European ideals of disciplining and classifying voices into national schools and modes of pathology (Olwage 2005; Miller 1997; Foucault 1977). This stratification of approaches and sounds participated in a long colonial history of linking voice, body and labor, rendering certain vocal sounds to be "unhealthy," "untrained," "untamed," "raw," and "primitive" (Bauman and Briggs 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Sometimes referred to by vocal pedagogues and singers as "head voice" and "chest voice."

hearing their voices ring in a room with tall ceilings and long windows, accompanied by Ms. Bumbulis at a grand piano. A large area rug covers the wood floor, pictures of former students and the original Fisk Jubilee Singers decorate the wall, and a rocking chair and a dish full of candy sit in the corner, ready to comfort students at any moment. Of the many implicit and explicit circulations about vocal knowledge at Fisk, students frequently spoke to me about the importance of being able to identify and perform the “good” vocal “technique” Ms. Bumbulis teaches.

MarQo, a recent graduate from Columbus, Ohio who majored in education said: “Ms. B. is everything and will be everything to my technique! I’m just blessed to have even studied under her for the year and a half that I did” (Patton 2011). Voice majors and Jubilee Singers De’Andre and Eric, students about whom I will say more in chapter four, speak more objectively with me about their studies with Ms. Bumbulis. De’Andre says that his vocal “...technique is just a way in which you can preserve your voice. Technique is not a sound” (Jones 2011). Eric, who transferred to Belmont University after beginning his college career at Fisk, and then returned to Fisk to study with Ms. Bumbulis, explained:

You should have vibrato, period, in any genre that you sing. It’s healthy to have that, from my understanding. But, in jazz, or soul music, or stuff in pop, it’s more straight tone. Straight singing. Where as in classical, or in Jubilee, it’s more round, it’s pure—it’s vibrato—its sustained, it’s easy. Ms B. would always say that straight singing is “hard” singing. Which it is, I admit that. It doesn’t hurt me, but, you know, it’s not the best thing to do if you really want to get down to it technically, about how to sing, from her understanding. And I trust her understanding (Copland 2011).

Eric’s position encompasses the attitudes about “classical” and non-classical singing that contribute to a complicated and conflicting conflation of vocal “health,” genre

categorization, and cultivated vs. vernacular singing that racializes vocality. Neither Ms. Bumbulis nor Eric assert a position that differs from the vocal standards exercised by college music programs throughout the country. In the context of the Fisk environment, however, a historically black college invested in an immortalization of the Jubilee Singers as black classical singers, this traditional vocal pedagogy takes on a new form, as a point of reference, not only for voice majors, but for the entire student body.

I find Sherry Ortner's chapter "Updating Practice Theory" (2006) useful in thinking through Fisk students' vocal practices and understandings about vocal technique. Practice theory, when employed with contributions to what Ortner chronicles as the power shift (inequality and domination), the historic turn (social change occurring over time) and "schemes through which people feel about themselves and the world" (Ortner 2006: 18), provides a way to examine the processes of shaping oneself and shaping the world. I concur with Ortner's claim that "...the production of social subjects through practice in the world and the production of the world itself through practice" are done through ordinary people's everyday acts (Ortner 2006: 16). Vocal practice engages more than knowledge about and production of certain vocal sounds, as vocal practices can (re)construct bodies and subjectivities through the work of agentive vocal acts. Indeed, I found that current Fisk students' vocal practices are rich with self- and world-making potential.

Demonstrating one's mastery of Ms. Bumbulis' teachings is another example of the performance of respectability at Fisk. Students strive to challenge denigrating stereotypes of black people, to denaturalize black people as musical, and to give credit to the vocal labor of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' sound as a product of vocal practice. Fisk

students' discussion about vocal technique presents to the world, and each other, their intellectual, agentive, and trained vocality. As James Stark reminds us. "The long history of virtuoso singing demonstrates the fact that scientific understanding of the voice has never been a prerequisite for becoming a good singer," and I argue that along with performing a *bel canto* vocal aesthetic, it is the students' talk about their singing technique that performs a denaturalization of the vocal "talent" of black singers and points towards their black middle class sensibility (2003: xxiii).

### "Art Music" and Concert Spirituals

The president of the HBCU Alcorn State University, Christopher M. Brown II, reports that "HBCUs have historically assumed a greater responsibility for educating African American students and granting a disproportionate number of college degrees to African Americans in the country (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Garibaldi, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2004), although the nation's 103 historically Black colleges represent just three percent of the country's institutions of higher learning, they collectively graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees. In Roebuck and Murty's book, *Historically Black Colleges Universities*, Vernon Jordan stated that the historically Black college is the undergraduate home of "75 percent of all Black Ph.Ds., 75 percent of all black army officers, 80 percent of all black federal judges, and 85 percent of all black doctors" (1993: 13). A close review of the data reveal that historically Black colleges also produce more than one-third of all African American baccalaureate degrees in mathematics, more than two-fifths of African American degrees



in the natural science, produce more than 50 percent of all African American public educators, 70 percent of the nation's African American dentists, and nearly 50 percent of all African Americans who pursue graduate or professional education" (Brown 2013: 8). Marybeth Gasman's profile of HBCU graduates tells us, "Currently, black colleges make up 3 percent of all institutions of higher education and enroll 14 percent of African American undergraduate students. However, they graduate 28 percent of all African American undergraduate students who earn a degree" (Gasman et. al. 2007: 76).

Despite this close relationship with the emerging US black middle class, these institutions still have a troubled relationship with "black music." This troubled relationship followed 19<sup>th</sup> century debates about "American" (classical) music and the racist exclusion of African American musicians' contributions from "art" music. Over the course of the twentieth century, high school and college music programs have increasingly incorporated jazz into their art music curriculum. However, in comparison to predominantly white institutions, jazz studies has not been as integrated into HBCU music degree programs.<sup>49</sup> Historically similar to many other American institutions of higher education, most non-art music making at Fisk falls outside of curricular studies. In non-curricular spaces at Fisk, and certainly through students' activities off campus, performances of black popular music thrive. This is true at other HBCUs as well. Still, students have long been frustrated with the lack of black music studies in the curriculum. AACM composer and trumpeter Lester Bowie (1941- ), born in Maryland, took courses at Lincoln University, an HBCU, and, according to George E. Lewis,

found himself largely at odds with what he saw as the provincial and contradictory (if far from atypical) attitudes of a black institution regarding black

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<sup>49</sup> The Fisk Jazz Ensemble, however, was established in 1970 and is led by Fisk Music Department faculty member Dr. Gary Nash.

music. Bowie said, “The head of the music department called me in one day about me playing with this Blues band. He says to me that as a student of Lincoln University’s Music Department, he didn’t feel that it was appropriate for me to be playing in a Blues band. I told him to kiss my motherfucking ass. I told him to get the fuck out of my face cause I make a living playing this damn horn” (Lewis 2008: 137).

Lewis goes on to note, “Bowie felt strongly that major black postsecondary institutions had completely missed the cultural boat: ‘These fucking black colleges should be meccas for art. I mean all the arts, photography, painting. People would be coming from all over the fucking world to study at a Fisk or a Tuskegee if they had the bad mutherfuckers teaching the fucking music and shit. That’s our contribution to society, our art’” (ibid: 549).

This distancing from black vernacular music put the Fisk Jubilee Singers in a precarious position among the public. At Fisk, they have always been, and continue to be, regarded as full participants in the Western classical singing tradition.<sup>50</sup> Their early audiences, however, as well as the contemporary commercial music industry, disregarded the *bel canto* aesthetic of their singing, heard the text of their repertoire with ethnosympathetic ears, confused their black bodies with essentialist ideas of black music, and categorized them as a “gospel” choir.<sup>51</sup> Du Bois, writing about the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1903, described spirituals as “misunderstood,” saying “...the Negro folk song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been

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<sup>50</sup> Additionally, predominantly black audiences, at churches, for example, tend to also regard the ensemble as “classical.”

<sup>51</sup> In chapter two, I discuss the ensemble’s 2009 and 2003 Grammy nominations in the “gospel” category (not “classical”).

persistently mistaken and misunderstood” (1970: 206). For example, in 2008, The Kennedy Center invited the Fisk Jubilee Singers to perform in a nine-day festival called “Joyful Sounds: Gospel Across America.” The emcee, when introducing them, nervously said, “but they are not a gospel ensemble. What they are instead is an ensemble that has profoundly shaped the tradition that we know of today as gospel.” Fisk Jubilee Singers director Dr. Paul Kwami followed the introduction, acknowledged his delight in a large audience, and said, “When he called me last year and asked if we wanted to be part of this festival for gospel music. I said, ‘Jubilee Singers and gospel music?’ He said ‘yes.’ But I wanted to be sure that we both understood the responsibility of the Jubilee Singers in this festival. And he did explain things to me, so, here we are to make a joyful noise” (2008, *The Kennedy Center*, videos). Both the host and Dr. Kwami designate the ensemble’s non-gospel status at this gospel festival, and Kwami presents the ensemble responsible for representing the diversity of black sacred singing for these listeners, a responsibility the ensemble has fulfilled since 1871.

In addition to the historically black university’s choral tours, the effect of Czech composer Antonin Dvorak’s (1841-1904) nationalistic agenda further thrust concert spirituals into the realm of art music. Dvorak arrived in New York in 1892 on a mission to develop an American “classical” musical style at the National Conservatory of Music (Beckerman 2003: 23, 125). After traveling through the southern and midwestern states, he was convinced that the musics of Native and African Americans were the heart of America’s national musical genius. Dvorak met African American composer Harry Burleigh (1866-1949)<sup>52</sup> while at the National Conservatory in New York City, and he

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<sup>52</sup> Burleigh was regarded as politically conservative in regard to social justice and the anti-racist agenda of many black communities. His contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston, critiqued his

encouraged Burleigh to make solo voice and piano arrangements of spirituals (Beckerman 2003: 127). Burleigh's voice-piano arrangement of "Deep River" was published in 1916, and it is now considered the first solo voice and piano concert spiritual arrangement intended for a classically trained singer. This publication solidified the concert spirituals' place in the art song genre. Later, in the first half of the twentieth century, concert spiritual performance gained intricacy as racial legislation changed. Jim Crow legislation resistance and the budding of the Civil Rights Movement changed interracial relations in the United States as the emergent black middle-class population (partially a result of at least three generations of college educated black people) changed intraracial relations within the African American population.

Concert spirituals provided a repertoire for educated and "churched" black people to participate in what they understood as authentic black performance, while avoiding association with "secular" musical developments, like jazz. The divide between "sacred" and "secular" music is not as important here as the ways that perceptions of degrees of "blackness" in jazz affected the black middle class. Some members of the black middle class were heavily invested in being accepted by white people by way of not being "too black" (Spearman/Floyd 1990:52). The concert spiritual served as a musical medium which was "black," but not "too black," since the timbre of the concert spiritual singing

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membership with the Episcopal church because she considered the denomination to be racist (Spencer 1997: 6). The debate as to whether "blacks should advance themselves through individual rather than through political action" is at the center of Burleigh's anti-racialist reputation (Spencer 1997: 6). There were many black people who were anti-racialists that refused to be considered anything but "American." This conundrum is the "racial mountain" that Hughes describes as an "urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (Hughes 1926: 692). Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson, the first black person to sing a lead role at the Metropolitan Opera, were also controversial figures because some black people felt that they were not vocal enough about anti-racist politics despite their pioneering achievements.

style was rooted in a European aesthetic. Jazz, however, was too risky a music to openly associate with and participate in for fear of being further disassociated from the mainstream. Guthrie Ramsey explains that:

Contemporary reviews of Hayes' ... [and] Anderson's concerts often hailed their unique talents but at the same time marveled at their lack of black musical idiosyncrasies. Jazz musicians, on the other hand, featured and even flaunted these idiosyncrasies as a fundamental aspect of their music and threatened the status quo on many levels: they asserted "racial" aspects of their performances as the strength of the whole enterprise (2003: 122).

Participating in mainstream white culture required, for many moneyed and/or educated black people, distancing themselves from popular understandings of blackness. The boundaries of what "black" was did not yet stretch to accept the possibility of a wealthy or educated black American. This intraracial othering by the black elite functioned both as a moment of surrender to a white gaze and as resistance to the conception of black people as "uncultured."

While concert spirituals offer access to the inner emotions of slavery and black life, they also established an American vocal tradition and made it normative for black classical singers to sing spirituals. Composer William Grant Still (1895-1978), the first black composer to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra<sup>53</sup> wrote:

To an extent, the Negro had always been influenced by the set standard of what the white man expects him to do. This, in music, has not been easy to evade. At the outset, it was expected that the Negro artist be a clown, and that he thus help to relieve the boredom of his audiences. Then the Fisk Jubilee Singers made it known that Spirituals were a dignified addition to the concert stage. Henceforward, all colored singers were supposed to sing Spirituals as a matter of course (Spencer 1997: 95).

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<sup>53</sup> The Rochester Philharmonic performed Still's "Afro-American Symphony," which included elements of the black American musical idiom in 1931, (Southern 1997: 432-433). Among these elements, the first movement is a blues theme in sonata form.

Black classical solo singers also gained prominence in the United States at this time.<sup>54</sup> Fisk-educated tenor Hayes toured as a solo recitalist in the United States beginning in 1916 (Southern 1997: 410). Contralto Marian Anderson followed in his footsteps, making her Town Hall debut in 1922 and her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1955 (Southern 1997: 412). Hayes, Anderson and their contemporaries, like bass Paul Robeson (1898-1976) and mezzo Dorothy Maynor (1910-1996), included concert spirituals on their recitals with pride. This programming crystallized the place and function of concert spirituals within the field of classical singing.

#### “Black Music” and Concert Spirituals

Concert spirituals’ inclusion in the repertoire of classical singers did not resolve its categorization as “art” music and/or “black” music. Scholars continue to debate the definition of “black” music and concert spirituals’ relationship with it, a portion of that discourse I review here (Ramsey 1996). W.E.B. Du Bois drew scholarly attention to black culture, especially black music, when he wrote “the Negro folk-song stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (1903: 251). The matter of how this music was “born” shaped the definition of both African American music and African American music scholarship through the twentieth century. Even with the rich body of musical practices among African Americans documented by collectors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the question remained: was it possible that the African American sounding body, historically situated as property, could produce cultural affect (Southern

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<sup>54</sup> There were African American classical singers who had operatic careers in the nineteenth century, but their careers were in Europe.

1997)? Lindon Barrett explains that it was the singing among enslaved Africans in the United States that was distinguished as “a primary means by which African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in the New World for a productive, recognized self” (Harris 1996; Barrett 1999: 58). Radano echoes this claim, writing: “It is in the body of the slave, as a possession, that we locate the basis for an emancipatory voice” (2002: 118). Still, the social status as “slave” located African American music making within a spectrum of the desire to assert a recognized humanity and the desire to garner ethnosympathy (Cruz 1999) as a means for political liberation (Ramsey 1996).

Social scientific approaches to the origin of African American music did not develop until the radical redefinition of “culture” and “race” led by Franz Boas in his establishment of American anthropology. His students Zora Neale Hurston and Melville Herskovits conducted ethnographic research in the African diaspora in order to uncover the cultural heritage of African Americans (Hurston 1935; Herskovits 1941). Hurston collected everyday expressions of African American people and critiqued the concert spiritual performance practice of the Jubilee Singers, what she calls “neo-spirituals,” for their lack of “negro expression,” characterized for her by qualities of angularity, asymmetry, and adornment, the definition of which she developed through ethnographic fieldwork (1934). Herskovits posited that African American expression entailed “Africanisms,” linking black people in the US with an African past. His insistence upon a “Negro past” was met with resistance from African American assimilationists, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier among them, who felt that an association with Africa would further differentiate African Americans from mainstream society and work against the efforts of the budding Civil Rights Movement to gain equal access to public spaces.

The assimilationist politics surrounding the reception of *The Negro Past* (Herskovits 1941) aligned with another approach to defining African American music, in which African American scholars and musicians performed their ability to participate within Eurocentric sound ideals while expressing African Americanness. Concertized spirituals, as well as the scholarship of Maude Cuney-Hare's *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (1935), Alain Locke's *The Negro and His Music* (1936), and John W. Work's *American Negro Songs: Folk Songs and Spirituals* (1940) represent these efforts to assert a respectable and distinct African American music. I argue that these moves for recognition inadvertently essentialized African American music alongside denigrating stereotypes. The framing of "black music" as a product of black people reinforced the music they discuss as belonging to African Americans as opposed to cultural products emerging from inter- and interracial experiences in the US. I am not suggesting that Cuney-Hare, Locke, Work and their contemporaries were intentionally essentializing themselves and African Americans. The racial politics of the era during which they researched, and especially Jim Crow legislation, gave due purpose for their important scholarship celebrating African American musical achievement. Guthrie Ramsey explains this as a historically specific scholarly practice stemming from the "cultural politics of ethnic or racial identity, the idea of what would best improve the collective social position of African Americans, the dynamic aesthetic conventions of black expressive culture, and the idea that these authors believed that music was central to understanding these ideas" (1996: 20). Following the Civil Rights Movement, this celebratory African American music scholarship continued in the work of Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* (1963), which argued for black music as intellectual property, Dominique-



Rene De Lerma's *Black Music in Our Culture* (1970), and Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans* (1971).

Eileen Southern, in her landmark text, carefully distinguishes *black musicians* from "black" music in her title. In the preface she states that black musicians have created "several genres and many styles of music which, taken together, define African-American music in the United States" (Southern 1997: xix). Southern further states that, "The enduring feature of black music is neither protest nor self expression; it is communication, and one cannot imagine a time when black musicians will have nothing to say, either to others or to God" (Southern 1997: 609). Southern's statement, problematic in that it predicates "black music" on the racial identification of the musicians, nonetheless opens the definition of "black" music to a mode of communication. What black music "communicates," then, becomes an important question (Feld 1984: 1). Even more, what does the concert spiritual, as a genre, communicate? It is my goal to explore these questions by contextualizing the concert spiritual performance practice of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in this dissertation.

"Race" did and still does represent an idiom for positive self-identification for many African Americans. Concert spiritual performance is a positive element in the racial identity of many black people, especially black classical singers. Roland Hayes recalls: "I had still to be taught that I, Roland Hayes, a Negro, had first to measure my racial inheritance and then put it to use. It remained for me to learn, humbly at first, and then with mounting confidence, that my way to artistry was a Negro way" (Spearman/Floyd 1990: 49). Hayes is not alone in uniting his racial and artistic identity in concert spirituals.

In the published correspondence between Floyd and Radano, they debate the object of study in black music research (Floyd and Radano 2009). Floyd argues that black music's African origin is central to research, and Radano argues that the examination of black music as a modern phenomenon of US racial beliefs is central—that black music reveals a “sameness of a shared interracial belief in the American racial myth” (Radano 2003: 22). They also critique the term “black music” as it does not accurately represent their respective objects of analysis; for Floyd, it falls short of distinguishing the formal sonic elements of music with which he is concerned, and for Radano it does not account for how racial ideology forms “black” music. Ramsey contends that, “‘Race’ is recognized in most academic circles as a ‘fiction’ and social construction...but the word at one time represented a kind of positive self-identification among African Americans.... I use the word race [referring to “race music” or “black music”] in these senses, not to embrace a naïve position of racial essentialism, but as an attempt to convey the worldviews of cultural actors from a specific historical moment” (Ramsey 2003: 4).

Olly Wilson, in his qualitative approach to describing the sonic properties of African American music, offers a refreshingly anti-essentialist examination of “black music.” Wilson’s “heterogeneous sound ideal” is comprised of the following characteristics:

- 1) The approach to the organization of rhythm is based on the principle of rhythmic and implied metrical contrast. There is a tendency to create musical structures in which rhythmic clash or disagreement of accents is the ideal; cross-rhythm and metrical ambiguity are the accepted and expected norm;
- 2) There is a tendency to approach singing or the playing of any instrument in a percussive manner; a manner in which qualitative stress accents are frequently used;
- 3) There is a tendency to create musical forms in which antiphonal or call-and-response musical structures abound. These antiphonal structures frequently exist

simultaneously on a number of different architectonic levels; 4) There is a tendency to create a high density of musical events within a relatively short musical time frame—a tendency to fill up all of the musical space; 5) There is a common approach to music making in which a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound (timbre) in both vocal and instrumental music is sought after. This explains the common usage of a broad continuum of vocal sounds from speech to song. I refer to this tendency as “the heterogeneous sound ideal tendency.”; 6) There is a tendency to incorporate physical body motion as an integral part of the music making process (Wilson 1983: 3).

Wilson’s outline of “black” aesthetics in music is broadly accurate. However, concert spirituals do not fit cleanly into his sound ideal. Concert spirituals’ embrace of European *bel canto* vocalism and musical notation complicates Wilson’s aesthetic definition. Nonetheless, the historical, social and political significance of the concert spirituals renders it a heterogeneous song genre. Concert spirituals are masked with “folk” and “art” musical aspects, with “white” and “black” categorization, and with “enslaving” and “liberating” implications, or what Lawrence Kramer would call a “continuation of race relations by other means” (Kramer 1996: 53). In one of the few works interrogating spirituals, Jon Cruz describes this politically heterogeneous aspect of the spiritual genre. He sees the spirituals as a political genre because they were a mode of public organizing for black people as oppressed peoples in the United States. Cruz writes:

What seems incontrovertible is the fact that black religious song making, as with other forms of music, served multiple functions under slavery....black music making remains part of an enormously important as well as a sprawling black cultural public sphere. It was in the context of slavery that black music emerged as a distinct analytical object (Cruz 1999: 20).

Through his description, Wilson alerts both scholars and musicians to a process of music making that incorporates African styles as a “way of doing something, not simply something that is done” (Wilson 1983: 3). Mark Anthony Neal explains how the first post-Civil Rights generation of African Americans uses the term “black music” as they

negotiate essentialist, contradictory and disconnected social encounters in their pioneering of a racially desegregated social climate (Neal 2002). Within an anti-nationalist, transatlantic frame, Paul Gilroy argues for a more broadly conceived African American cultural canon that highlights the transnational, African diasporic exchanges unifying black people across the Atlantic (Gilroy 1993). He uses the term “black music” as a way to illustrate a diasporic unification. Maureen Mahon describes how the popular music industry continues to influence the category of “black music” as essentialized to specific genres, in her account specifically excluding rock, regardless of the musician’s racial identification (Mahon 2004).

I find Stuart Hall’s explanation of the relevance and usefulness of the term “black music” especially insightful. Responding to globalization, Hall argues that scholars should attend to the global interest in “black” popular culture, while understanding “black music” as a contradictory phenomenon, perpetually changing through cross-cultural exchanges (Hall 1993; Johnson 2003). Hall, too, stresses the importance of African American music in an understanding of “black music” in the global imagination. He says, “when viewed from outside the United States, [heavily exported] American mainstream popular culture has always involved certain traditions that could only be attributed to black cultural vernacular traditions” (Hall 1993: 105).

But what about concert spiritual singing? My analysis of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ contemporary concert spiritual singing unpacks both the protracted and politically fraught misunderstanding and miscategorization of concert spirituals as either “art” music or “black” music, and the essentializing of the conflation of these two categories. I present this analysis of contemporary concert spiritual singing as an

interrogation of the specific essentialist conflation of “art” and “black” music, and an assertion about how this vocal practice *still* symbolizes the protracted and politically fraught misunderstanding and miscategorization of black singers and the black middle class. In the title of his book *Lying up a Nation*, Ronald Radano borrows from Zora Neale Hurston to encapsulate his interpretation of the category of “black music.” Radano sees the racial binaries of “black” and “white” as a myth that bleeds into categories of music. He defines the contestable category of “black music” as full of “complexities” and “contradictions” (Radano 2003: xiv). He writes, “This logical paradox is a core of black musical hermeneutics, for no one side of the tale can be accounted for without the other...In the ambiguity of truth and falsity, we locate a miraculous musical significance that is more meaningful, experientially grounded, and patently real” (2003: 44). I agree with Radano’s description of black musical hermeneutics, and concert spirituals yield to this perspective: they abound with conflicting musical and social ideals of “black” music and “black” people.

#### Diction in a Fisk Jubilee Singers’ Performance of “Great Day”<sup>55</sup>

I now turn to a 2010 performance by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the first performance of that academic year. In her introduction of the ensemble, the Honorable Hazel R. O’Leary, then president of Fisk, described the Singers as selfless, courageous, global, entrepreneurial teachers. She said:

I thought that especially for the freshman class ... we ought to remind ourselves who the [original] Jubilee Singers were. We know they had great voice, but I want

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<sup>55</sup> A portion of this analysis was published in the Fall 2010 *American Music Review*.

to remind you that ... the [original] Jubilee Singers are role models for the way we live our lives ... Fiskites, it's your legacy as well. These are your jobs to perform. I lift up the Jubilee Singers to you, I lift up their history, and their example.<sup>56</sup>

In yet another example of the administration's explicit vocal articulation standards for their students in relation to the Singers, President O'Leary asserted that emulating the character of the original Singers and their concert spiritual singing would allow students opportunity to achieve excellence at this historically black university. One of the Singers, De'Andre, a senior, upholds O'Leary's assertion. I asked:

MKN: what would you say is the way that Jubilee Singers should represent themselves?

De'Andre: [without hesitation] Going to class in proper attire. In my opinion, ironed clothes. Clean. Well spoken. Very humble, but very confident. Have respect for yourself. Have respect for your colleagues and your administration and teachers and colleagues. Just have a pride about yourself—knowing that people are looking at you because you hold a torch. It comes with a responsibility. And the thing is, if you don't want to submit to that responsibility, then you shouldn't even be a part of the legacy. Because that's kind of what you're stepping into. Anybody knows it's such a great thing to be a part of a legacy, but it's such a big responsibility (Jones 2011).

The ensemble sang "Great Day," a concert spiritual arranged by John Hall. Two tenors began the piece singing the words "great day" in unison, with an over-articulation of the phoneme [t].<sup>57</sup> For singers performing in American General English, [t] and [d] are both alveolar consonants—differing only in that [t] is un-voiced and [d] is voiced. When singing a text that has adjacent alveolar consonants, like the phrase "great day," only one is usually articulated. Following this, the singing of these words would

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<sup>56</sup> MKN recording of Jubilee Day 10/6/2010.

<sup>57</sup> I use conventional International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) notation in this analysis to transcribe the sounds of the spiritual's lyrics. The system draws from the Latin alphabet and is used by linguists and singers alike. Joan Wall's *International Phonetic Alphabet for Singers: A Manual for English and Foreign Language Diction* (1989) informs my use.

sound as: [greI-deI] (“greh-day”) or [greI-teI] (“greh-tay”) as opposed to [greIt-deI] (“greht-day”). In the case of this Singers’ performance, the choir responds to the tenors in four part harmony, singing [greIt-deI], with an articulation of both the [t] and the [d]. It is clear from the uniformity of this diction that the Singers were guided to sing the words “great day” as [greIt-deI], but what is also at play is the Singers’ choice to value the accurate performance of General English. Articulations of both the [t] and the [d] are not necessary for a listener’s understanding of the text. The articulation of both [t] and [d] stylizes this performance by the Singers, and shows how their diction communicates, in addition to the text clarity, an effort for recognition as representatives of Fisk’s tradition of academic excellence.

The singers perform a “properness” representing the model of “Fisk ladies” and “Fisk men” as discussed in the introduction. Still, in the beginning of the refrain, through their diction on the words “great day,” we find an example of the ensemble’s varying adherence to AAVE by the end of the refrain. The text of the final line reads: “God’s going to build up Zion’s walls.” The ensemble, throughout the soloists’ singing of the verses, repeats this same text. Consistent throughout the piece is their singing of “gonna” instead of “going to.” The singers articulate the final consonant [d] in “build” with less consistency. Some repetitions are sung “God’s gonna build up Zion’s walls” and some repetitions are sung “God’s gonna buil’ up Zion’s walls.” In this performance, the singer’s *bel canto* singing remains consistent and it is through the diction of consonants that listeners hear a racialization of the Singers’ voices. The consistency of the singers’ timbre supports the identification of a politics of singing AAVE for this group of black college students, and the processes of racialized language, as well as Eidsheim’s assertion

about the role of timbre in racializing vocality: “[W]hile much research exists on racialized language perception and casting, there is no thorough investigation of the oddly discerning listening practice that so readily identifies certain classical voices as ‘black,’ that specifically locates blackness in timbre—the characteristic sound of the voice” (2012:199).

Learning how to refute negative stereotypes about black people is part of a Fisk education and the work of the Jubilee Singers. Vocality is a part of this disciplined behavior, exemplified by classroom standards of speech, as well as that modeled by the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ use of GE and AAVE, as in the case of the “Great Day” performance. Through the Singers’ attention to AAVE and General English, they find possibilities to manage their individual vocal expressions among dominant U.S. ideologies of racial inequality and hegemonic realms of the university administration’s goals for students—goals predicated on Christian morals and formal self-presentation, as one’s life could be at stake otherwise. I found current Fisk students to be sensitive to the dangers of their presence as black young adults in public space, as I discussed in the introduction through the example of the freshman curfew. They are also sensitive to the politics of sounding “articulate while black,” as Geneva Smitherman and Samy Alim describe President Barack Obama’s speech (2012).

Fisk students’ careful attention to diction in the space of a historically black college brings to the fore the intraracial politics of representation. Scholarship conflating black culture, music, and language style as homogeneous expressions elide the role of class in constructing black culture in the US, and the diversity of its characteristics. As



sociologist Mary Patillo-McCoy writes: “The black middle class and their residual enclaves are nearly invisible to the nonblack public because of the intense (and mostly negative) attention given to poor urban ghettos. Post-civil rights optimism erased upwardly mobile African Americans from the slate of interesting groups to study” (Patillo-McCoy 2001: 1). In the context of this historically black university, the presence and awareness of a “black middle class” pre-dates the post-civil rights era. Like other historically black colleges in the United States, Fisk students participate in a classic Western liberal arts curriculum (and have done so since 1866). Fisk alumni continue to be part of a professional class of Americans. An awareness of racial inequality, which is at the bedrock of the university’s founding, continues to shape university life both inside and outside the classroom. As such, the modes through which students’ bodies and actions are racialized by each other and by the general public significantly shape speech and singing choices in what Omi and Winant call “racial formation” (1994). While the population of this study encompasses college students, this does not mean that it is only representative of the middle class. Both wealthy and economically impoverished students are enrolled at Fisk—no different from many other American universities. This study does not assume that a black college environment is characterized by poverty, crime, low academic achievement or any other factor framing it as worse off than a predominantly white university.

The current Fisk Jubilee Singers’ diction choices exemplify how the performance of concert spirituals is not a mystical or natural expression of black identity or experience, but rather a contemporary idiom rooted in the historical complexity of race and class in the U.S. Bridging the past and the present, concert spiritual singing vocalizes

the traditions of the U.S. black middle class. Examining the vocal deliberations about blackness, repertoire, and higher education expressed by the contemporary Fisk Jubilee Singers reveals how individuals use their singing voices to collectively challenge modern race constructions.

A Singer from the 2010-11 and 2011-12 ensembles told me in an interview that when she sings with the Jubilee Singers, she connects to singing spirituals by imagining that she was enslaved. Our conversation about her singing voice follows:

MKN: How would you describe your voice in Jubilee, as a Jubilee Singer?

Keondra: Now, don't get me wrong. My voice in Jubilee, I think, I connect [to] it as though if I'm a slave. It might sound crazy.

MKN: I understand what you mean.

Keondra: [laughs] I connect as if I'm a slave and I haven't been free. I'm just now getting somewhere and I'm learning how to read, learning how to write. But at the same time, I have a voice. And I just connect to each song like that--like I'm striving to reach glory, or reach heaven, or the other city that they talk about. That's my aim.

[When singing the spirituals] it is as though I'm trying to reach God. Or speaking, just speaking to God through each song, I'm speaking to God. It's an aim. It's an aiming point. And sometimes, it's soothing...and sometimes, it can be like a sad feeling. Or other times, it might be happy or joyous. That's one thing that I like about Negro spirituals, their emotions (Lewis 2011).

Exemplifying Samuel Floyd's assertion that "all black-music making is driven by and permeated with the memory of things from the cultural past," she also demonstrates what Brooks asserts about how the Jubilee Singers' performances both document history *and* pursue "...creating an emancipated future for African Americas" (Floyd 1995: 10; Brooks 2006: 302). While Keondra takes on an imagined character, the subject position of an enslaved black woman she imagines when singing spirituals (Tillet 2012), she also

strives for mobility in her aim for divine interaction. I take heed of her singing process as an example of how singing, *as acting*, denaturalizes the vocality of black students and highlights an agentive relationship slavery and the specific legacy of African American excellence HBCUs like Fisk perpetuate. Another Jubilee Singer, Sabrina, resists a reception of her singing as vocally virtuous. She told me:

Most people say they think I can sing, but I don't believe that lie. I feel like I'm a good performer that knows how to—I can captivate the audience. My eyes, they talk. Dr. Kwami tells me this all the time, 'You're talking with your eyes, be quiet'—but I don't even say anything. He just tells me to be quiet. Because I can get up there and I can trick you into thinking that I can sing because you're looking at my eyes. And you think something sounds nice. I'm trying to tell y'all, I'm not a poet, I'm not a singer...I'm a tricker, I do trickery. I'm a performer (Walker 2011).

The concert spiritual singing process Keondra and Sabrina describe denaturalizes concert spiritual repertoire as “natural” to black classical singers, and also illustrates how, through the very act of singing concert spirituals, students confirm and escape audience expectations and expand time, performing a “fugitive spirit” so prevalent in performances of blackness (Chaney 2008; Griffin quoting Nathaniel Mackey: 107). I argue that Keondra and Sabrina, in theorizing how they perform concert spirituals as Jubilee Singers, contribute to an answer for a question that Fred Moten poses in his discussion of the canonization of musical activity at *The Five Spot* between 1955-1965. A site of musical experimentation and expression for artists such as Billie Holiday, Thelonious Monk and Cecil Taylor, I understand musical activity at *The Five Spot* as another foundational place in time in the development of black music—similar to the development of concert spiritual performance practice at Fisk. In examining the significance of that moment, Moten asks:

To be interested in the arresting effect or arrest of affect that the music produced and produces in the light of whatever resource to authenticity, sentiment, or experience such recordings enact [both sonic and written recordings of *The Five Spot* musical activity] or parody is to ask what happens when the critical finger that points disapprovingly at an invocation of authenticity seems itself to devolve into an accusation of inauthenticity....What will blackness be when it enters and receives the radical biological indeterminism, the ineradicable historicity, the inveterate transformationality that blackness as it demands and makes possible?"(Moten 2003: 154).

The way that Keondra and Sabrina take on a character to perform concert spirituals as Jubilee Singers embodies a critique of the objectification of their singing as essentially "black" *while* performing blackness—the process of which I hear in their diction. This follows Ashon Crawley's elucidation of "black performance" as "...the transfer of resistance as the force for life, the transfer of resistance as energetic field, through the reiteration of motions, migrations, flights, fleeings, abscondings, escapes" (Crawley 2012: 39).

The Singers' style of operatic, a cappella spiritual singing and their status as college-educated singers equips them with a cultural capital that complicates essentialist frames of black people as producers of "black" sounds, and denaturalizes AAVE practice. I argue that the overarticulation incorporated into the current Singers' diction points towards an aspect of AAVE practice that represents bourgeois aspirations in the Singers' concert spiritual singing. Still, performing concert spirituals requires singers of any race to tap into their imagination of slavery in the United States. In this chapter I have discussed diction within the performance practice of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, to demonstrate my broadest point in this dissertation, which is to say that the process of racializing vocality is never disconnected from the historical politics of slavery, minstrelsy and racialized performativity. The process of the Fisk Jubilee Singers'

spiritual performances shows how spirituals are a living genre whose vocality is a contested, negotiated, and lived domain of African American identity and experience. I have approached this investigation here through a narrow, musicological question about the current Fisk Jubilee Singers diction of consonants. For the rest of the dissertation, I examine other examples of racializing voices as “black.”

## Chapter 2

### **Fisk University's Choral Ensembles and the Paradox of Collectively Representing Vocal Blackness**

*So the nature of conductors' communication conveys messages to singers, not just the beat patterns or the verbal instructions, but facial expressions, eye contact and numerous other-than-conscious forms of communication.*

-Colin Durrant (2003: 6)

At eight o'clock on Wednesday evening, October 5, 2011, I attended the regularly scheduled University Choir rehearsal at Fisk. In the hallway outside of the sprawling Appleton Room of Jubilee Hall, I heard students talking and laughing with each other. It was the eve of Jubilee Day, the annual university holiday in which the Fisk community commemorates the beginning of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers' 1871 international tour with a memorial service and pilgrimage to deceased Singers' gravesites throughout Nashville. No classes were held in the morning, and the energy of the students awaiting choir rehearsal testified to their delight in what would be a break from routine coursework come the morning.

Once inside the room, I saw the choir arranged in four sections around the grand piano at the front of the room. Female singers--sopranos and altos--sit facing the life-size 1873 Havel portrait of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers®, commissioned by Queen Victoria after the ensemble sang for her.<sup>58</sup> Male singers (tenors and basses) sit facing the women, with their backs to the portrait. The choir sat tightly around the piano and close to the portrait, as if they wanted to be in a good position for the original Fisk Jubilee Singers to observe their rehearsal from the portrait. A short time passed before Dr.

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<sup>58</sup> The Havel portrait is the only life-size portrait of African Americans from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Christopher Duke, Director of Campus Services and University Choir Director, entered the room with an unrushed, serious gait. The students proceeded with their talking and laughing while Duke arranged sheet music at the piano. He invited a singer in the choir to warm up the ensemble before they begin rehearsal. She led the group in stretching, humming and singing scales, after which Duke announced that the ensemble would begin rehearsal with “I’ll Stand,” described as a “twenty-first century spiritual” by its arranger Raymond Wise. The a cappella song’s lyric theme follows that of traditional concert spirituals in its ardent expression of Christian faith, and incorporates a late-twentieth century choral gospel style of up-tempo alternations between homophonic and polyphonic textures.

Duke played the bass section’s opening vocal line on the piano, to which the section responded by singing their part. Mistakes in some of their pitches prompted Duke to play their part on the piano again, to which they responded again, singing the corrected pitches. Duke proceeded to play vocal lines on the piano that the students sang back to him. While students waited to hear their vocal line, I noticed how close the students were with each other, evidenced in the smiles, affectionate jabs and quiet chatter shared within each section. As the rehearsal of “I’ll Stand” progressed and the choir became more familiar with the melodies, students began to move in their seats, with subtle dances that accented rhythmic patterns of the song. But just as this comfort with the song emerged, Duke interjected: “Alright! Altos, don’t cut the ‘stand’ off too fast.” Then he sang their line: “Anybody here gonna stand?,” emphasizing the duration of the [a] vowel and the articulation of the final [d] in “stand.”

The altos had yet to sing the full note value of “stand” in the rehearsal. He continued: “‘Cause you can hear a chop [of the word ‘stand’]. We don’t want that. ‘Anybody here gonna stand,’ *Culture!* Okay?” He sang the sustained, forward vowel [a] with emphasis. The altos attempted to perfect the singing of their line again and succeeded in satisfying Duke. In subsequent repetitions of the line, the altos went too far in singing the full note value, and held the note for too long. Duke helped them calibrate the duration of “stand,” stating that “...one of the purposes about the piece, the way the writer wrote it, is for the tempo. But if you slow it [the tempo], by the end it’s going to be like syrup going uphill.”

In rehearsal, Duke worked to expose students to singing techniques that, in many cases, were unfamiliar to them—like this example of vowel manipulation. His exclamation “*Culture!*” (and the students’ clear understanding of his meaning) index the tutelage he strives to impress upon the ensemble. I hear Duke’s use of “*Culture*” as implying a capital “C,” through the way that he raises the pitch of his voice when saying it, signifying on popular imaginations of “high culture” that, in music, are associated with the exaltation of Western classical music. In an interview, Duke explained:

[Students] laugh about it, you know, when we want them to say words a certain way when they are used to saying it the way they would normally do it. But, you know, I follow that up with being able to explain why. And I think our students are intelligent enough and discerning enough to be able to say, “ok, this is not just something they want us to sing ‘proper,’ but they want the audience who is sitting in the back of the building to be able to understand the words that are being said.” ...They want the performance to be good. That helps in terms of getting them to recognize some technical aspects of singing that we must do (Duke 2011).

This moment in University Choir rehearsal shows how Duke, careful not to imply that he regards “proper” diction as superior to any other kind, works with the ensemble to vocally mediate formal and informal singing styles.



Earlier on this same day, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were meeting in the Fisk Memorial Chapel during lunchtime for an extra rehearsal in preparation for the next day's highly anticipated Jubilee Day performance. It would be the first time for the new ensemble to perform in public, and the student body eagerly awaited the opportunity to assess the 2011-2012 ensemble's vocal prowess during the morning convocation. Outside of their usual rehearsal space in the Harris Music Building, the singers stood in the choir loft in silence and waited for director Dr. Paul T. Kwami to play the pitch of their first piece on the piano. He played the melody of the entire first line of the concert spiritual "Sinner Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass," arranged by John W. Work II. This a cappella, antiphonal selection is slow in tempo. As the soprano soloist began the piece, Kwami, without saying a word, began to snap his fingers in a faster tempo to speed her through the opening phrase. During her solo, the rest of the ensemble stood erect in silence, with full concentration on maximizing the opportunity to formally perform during this dress rehearsal.

The ensemble sang the entire piece, and then moved to the front of the pulpit to stand where they would perform the following morning. Kwami prompted the Singers to repeat the song in its entirety and gave the following comments: "On the last word 'pass,' don't close on [æ] until you finish the beat. 'Pass,' [pæs]" he sings, "I don't want to see 'pa-uh-s' [pæəs]. Keep it [the vowel] open until the very end," he informed them, demonstrating an undesirable diminuendo and diphthongal shift to a schwa vowel while sustaining the pitch of the word "pass." The students listened carefully to his instruction and remained respectfully speechless as they reviewed the logistics for the next day's performance.

This moment from a Fisk Jubilee Singers' rehearsal shows how similar Duke and Kwami are in their approaches to directing their ensembles. However, differences in repertoire—and in goals for audience reception—abound between the groups, and it is these differences that constitute the subject of this chapter. I describe how Kwami's valuing of "quietness" allows him to achieve his goal for audiences to recognize the Fisk Jubilee Singers as "excellent" musicians, and how Duke's programming of popular gospel repertoire that is familiar to University Choir audiences allows him to achieve his goal for the ensemble to connect with audiences identifying as "black." Comparing the two prominent choral ensembles at Fisk, I detail how these factors racialize the vocal work Fisk students do as participants in these ensembles through an analysis of each director's choral conducting approaches in rehearsal, repertoire choices, and goals for audience reception.<sup>59</sup>

Both Kwami and Duke work within the university's larger educational mission to prepare students for personal and professional success as citizens leading "respectable"<sup>60</sup> American lives. Dr. Reavis Mitchell, professor of history at Fisk, explains this aim:

Now, on the threshold of the twenty-first century, Fisk University remains committed to its historic mission to train its students for service to humanity. As in the past, *excellence remains the university's motivation and aspiration*, assuring that Fisk University is not measured against a standard of 'Negro education' but against the standard of American education at its best (2003; emphasis mine).

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<sup>59</sup> In the fall 2011 semester, music department faculty member, Dr. Anthony Williams, established the Fisk Chamber Choir to give students performance opportunities to sing Western classical choral repertoire. This development is an effort to complement the existing repertoire of University Choir and the Fisk Jubilee Singers. My omission of a discussion about Williams, and the ensemble's repertoire, is solely on account of its relative infancy on campus.

<sup>60</sup> My use of "respectable" here signifies American middle-class values of "success" such as professional employment, heteronormative families, and home ownership.

This process of singing in school choirs, including at the collegiate level, has mediated the disciplining of social bodies and collective expressive acts in the modern era (Olwage 2005). This Foucauldian process of embodied self-disciplining can be analytically located through a focus on rehearsal events as a liminal space (Foucault 1975). I agree with choral studies scholar Liz Garnett that “rehearsal is a private space, in which musicians necessarily find themselves in a state of some musical undress” (2009: 36), and yet conscious of their performative self-presentation, and this position informs the scope of my examination. While certainly the perspectives of the students singing in University Choir and the Fisk Jubilee Singers factor into shaping the ensembles (60% of the 2011-2012 Fisk Jubilee Singers are also singers in University Choir), along with the perspectives of other members of the Fisk community (students, faculty, administrators, and alumni), I explore these elements further in other chapters, and focus here only on the ensemble’s directors and repertoire during the 2011-2012 academic year. Following the historical background of Fisk and the role of diction in racialized vocality discussed in chapter one, in this chapter I describe aspects of the institutionalized vocality that Fisk students encounter, their individual responses to these are addressed in chapter three. Before discussing the two ensembles, I offer a brief overview of the history and importance of choirs at HBCUs.

### HBCU Choirs

While the choirs at Fisk are distinct, they are not unique in the context of collegiate choral culture in the US (Winstead 2013). My research is in dialogue with recent attention to HBCU choirs, most notably the development of the National HBCU

Choir in 2008. Founder Renata “Toni” Roy, with support from the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, The National Endowment for the Humanities, and The Kennedy Center, sought to organize a choir comprised of one student from each of the one hundred and five HBCUs. When Roy uses the term “HBCU choirs,” she is not simply referring to choirs that happen to be at HBCUs. Rather, this category invokes the concert spiritual singing tradition led by the nineteenth-century Fisk Jubilee Singers, and that other HBCUs have since also incorporated into their campus life. Since the late nineteenth century, Fisk has been internationally recognized for the vocal labors of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who have long been a subject of study for scholars across several humanities disciplines. However, Dr. Vada Butcher, former dean of the College of Fine Arts at Howard University, a prominent HBCU located in Washington, DC, argues that:

...the Fisk tours had their greatest impact upon the nations’ HBCUs, particularly in terms of the relationship between the institutions and their choral organizations. Even in the institutions where there was no curriculum leading to a degree in music, the collegiate choir became one of the most important student organizations on campus. Besides performing at Sunday services, collegiate choral ensembles provided dignity and decorum at institutional convocations;...they acted as fund raisers, publicists, and recruitment personnel for their institution (Butcher 2008: 6).

While I recognize the wide-ranging influence of the Fisk Jubilee Singers beyond the scope of HBCU campuses, this chapter attests to their enduring role in shaping black college campus life in the United States, and certainly on their own campus. *Repertoire* is at the heart of this influence at Fisk, and as Butcher further explains, on other campuses as well. Butcher classifies the repertoires of contemporary HBCU choirs into three groups: 1) “Compositions from the Anglo American Academy” (often designated as “classical”); 2) “Compositions from the African American Academy” (which include

compositions by HBCU choral conductors like R. Nathaniel Dett, William Dawson and John W. Work III); and 3) “Twentieth Century Revivals,” which include gospel songs from the mid-twentieth century (ibid: 3). Her groupings marginalize music composed and/or arranged by African Americans, an unfortunate distinction that, I argue, close attention to the cultures of Fisk’s choirs can complicate. The choir that sings the full range of this repertoire, University Choir, is not the premier vocal ensemble; rather, that honor belongs to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who only sing concert spirituals—the vast majority of which have been arranged by black people.

### Fisk Jubilee Singers Rehearsal

During a rehearsal with the Fisk Jubilee Singers on April 17, 2012, director Dr. Paul Kwami shared correspondence between himself and a woman who had attended their recent concert in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He told the ensemble:

She said [there was] one thing she couldn’t figure out--because she has a Master’s degree in music, has directed many choirs, has sang in many, many choirs--but wanted to know. [She wanted to know] how we came together, how we started our songs—which is a question we always get, right? She said she knew it was not the pitch pipe, the “pitch pipe guy” [a Fisk Jubilee Singer, in strategic position, who sounds the tonic pitch of the music just before its performance]. It could have been [the pitch pipe guy]. But then she said, ‘Did you have someone sitting in the front row conducting?’ [The Fisk Jubilee Singers chuckle]. So I wrote back to her and told her that that night I was very ill and sat backstage instead of being onstage with you. And if anyone would have sat in front conducting, that would have been me, but I wasn’t there. I wrote back to her saying that we work very hard in rehearsals preparing for concerts so that you are able to sing without me conducting.<sup>61</sup>

This audience member observed a key characteristic of performances by the Fisk Jubilee Singers—the absence of a conductor. In fact, Kwami, who has served as director since

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<sup>61</sup> Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 4/17/2012.

1994, is rarely seen conducting the ensemble in performance.<sup>62</sup> I offer here a critical examination of how Kwami's choral conducting garners reception from audiences as evidence that the Fisk Jubilee Singers are "excellent" musicians. This exemplifies a mode through which the Fisk Jubilee Singers currently challenge audience expectations for how an ensemble comprised of black college students singing spirituals "ought to" present an entire concert. Learning how to refute negative racial stereotypes about people identifying as black is part of a Fisk education, including the work of the Jubilee Singers. This process entails making use of a serious, specifically non-violent demeanor, often accomplished through a quiet presence that acts as a confirmation that Fisk students know how to conduct themselves.

#### The Fisk Jubilee Singers and Dr. Paul Kwami

As noted earlier, The Fisk Jubilee Singers are renowned for their historic leadership in concertizing spirituals and for performing them publicly.<sup>63</sup> The original ensemble toured the US and Europe, singing the repertoire with a *bel canto* vocal aesthetic for Queen Victoria during their first international tour in 1871. Concert spirituals, "[i]nscribed as an evanescent difference of formidable power," as Ronald Radano describes, "...would subsequently acquire international significance, becoming aural signifiers of late-nineteenth century Western conceptions of race" (1996: 517), and, I argue, twentieth and twenty-first century conceptions of race as well. Radano goes on

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<sup>62</sup> It is common for other collegiate concert spiritual ensembles to have a conductor in performances, unlike vocal ensembles specializing in Baroque era music, for example.

<sup>63</sup> Unlike student-run collegiate a cappella vocal ensembles popular on American college campuses, the Fisk Jubilee Singers are an ensemble within the curriculum of Fisk's Music Department.

to describe early concert spiritual singing as “[i]nfused with fantastical properties of the mythic other, the slave songs, as a matter of course, inspired a mad gold rush of appropriative desire that continued well into the twentieth century” (Radano 1996: 519). The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ convincing presentation of a nineteenth century tradition in a twenty-first century context attests to how this “appropriative desire” endures today, affirmed by the university’s mission for student “excellence.” Their early tours are significant on two additional fronts. First, the student singers’ concert profits kept Fisk from closing due to its parlous financial condition, and second, they pioneered performances by black vocalists that departed from blackface minstrelsy. The early Singers’ tour successes, which “taught the nation and the world an enduring lesson about the dignity and educability of black Americans,” shaped the ensemble’s goals in subsequent performances. These tours, which have occurred every academic year since their first tour, inspired other colleges and universities to establish concert spiritual ensembles (Ward 2000: 3).

Under Dr. Kwami’s leadership, the ensemble has been rewarded bountifully. They have performed in such prestigious venues as The Kennedy Center and Elmina Castle, and have been awarded a 2008 National Medal of the Arts and 2009 and 2003 Grammy nominations for “Best Gospel Performance.”<sup>64</sup> The Singers tour cities around the nation under a management contract with Curb Records, a country and contemporary Christian music label in Nashville. Kwami himself was a Jubilee Singer while a student

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<sup>64</sup> The Fisk Jubilee Singers are not a gospel choir; they are a choir that sings Western art music. Their placement in the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences’ “Best Gospel Performance” category exemplifies how the limits of racialized genre construction within the commercial recording industry leads to inaccurate categorization of nominated artists. The Singers’ social position as black sacred music singers overdetermines NARAS’ categorization of their recording, eclipsing their squarely classical vocal sound and repertoire.

at Fisk, and is a keyboardist and composer of choral and solo voice concert spiritual arrangements. After graduation from the National Academy of Music in Winneba, Ghana, Kwami matriculated at Fisk University, graduating in 1985, and subsequently earned M.M. and D.M.A. degrees in conducting from Western Michigan University and the American Conservatory of Music respectively. Kwami's conventional training in and mastery of Western choral conducting methods are exercised extensively during rehearsals with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, but rarely employed in formal performances.

As students attending a historically black university and singing repertoire of the Christian faith tradition, the Fisk Jubilee Singers are inevitably subjected to a politics of US racial inequality that represents as inferior both people identifying as "black" and cultural products identified as "black." Post-Civil Rights era public imaginations of racial inequality persist in contemporary debates about the relationship between nature and culture, and the arenas of music and the singing voice are no exception (Eidsheim 2012; Briggs 2005; Mahon 2004; Johnson 2003; Bohlman and Radano 2001; Hall 1997; Harris 1996; Keil and Feld 1994). The Fisk Jubilee Singers are historically situated as foundational to the global circulation of African American music, as well as to the development of African American art music, and this historical significance informs how Fisk students construct a habitus of obligatory racial representation of a bourgeois African American identity (Yong and Tsemo 2011; Patillo 2001; Browser 2007; Baraka 1971; Frazier 1957).

Along with these responsibilities, the Fisk Jubilee Singers are also accountable to the expectation that they will be exemplary Fisk students. Administration members, faculty, upperclassmen and alumni encourage the student body to emulate the Fisk



Jubilee Singers and demonstrate the the merit iconicized by the Singers. This standard refutes popular media stereotypes of African American young adults as ineducable, undisciplined and irresponsible. Mindful of these expectations and the risks that he and the Singers could be perceived as inferior musicians relative to dominant models of choral excellence, Kwami prepares the ensemble to manage audience expectations and to educate Fisk students about how to manage negative stereotypes of reception in their own lives as individuals. This work places an enormous value on racial representation and, I argue, fortifies the way that “quietness” operates between Kwami and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, as well as between the Jubilee Singers and their public. As Kwami explains, “...if we can do musical things, it always makes us different from..., well, it blows people’s socks off when they hear us. It’s simply that. Because, you know, people always think ‘Oh, they’re black and so: [Kwami starts clapping loudly, snapping his fingers and stomping his feet].”<sup>65</sup> The pursuit of musical excellence and vocal virtuosity within the aesthetic realm of Western choral singing guides the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ vocal style. Kwami makes this quality of singing a criterion for participation the Singers in no uncertain terms, and the role of quietness lies at the center of this principled effort.

#### Kwami’s Quietness in Rehearsal with the Fisk Jubilee Singers

At the beginning of each academic year, Kwami selects Fisk students through an audition process to form the year’s ensemble; even the prior year’s Singers must reaudition for the current year. Once the Singers are selected, the ensemble rehearses twice a week for an hour and forty minutes. At one of the first rehearsals held for the

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<sup>65</sup> Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 3/3/2012.

2011-2012 ensemble, Kwami entered the room exactly at the traditional 6:00pm rehearsal time. Singers were seated in four rows; the first two rows were filled with female Singers and the back two rows were filled with male Singers. Kwami walked to the piano in the front of the room and proceeded to arrange a collection of sheet music he carried with him. The students waited in silence for an indication from Kwami about what to do. A full *two minutes and thirty seconds* passed before Kwami looked at or spoke a word to the students. One of the male Singers, a junior Music major at Fisk and seasoned Jubilee Singer, nervously attempted to release the increasing tension in the room, asking: “Is everyone alright?” No one responded. More time passed and he whispered to me (and the recording video camera): “This is the intimidating part.”<sup>66</sup>

The Singer’s disclaimer marks Kwami’s quietness in this rehearsal as routine and “intimidating.” Kwami’s tendency to have the Singers endure his protracted non-vocal presence at the beginning of rehearsal diminishes as the academic year progresses. However, with a new ensemble, this practice establishes an important facet of Kwami’s direction by utilizing a “quiet presence” during rehearsal, and this Singer’s reaction emphasized a crucial aspect of what the Singers learn from this presentation of quietness. Over the course of an academic year, Kwami spends hours with the Singers in rehearsal without speaking or singing, where the only audible sounds are ambient. Arguably the most privileged act in Fisk Jubilee Singer rehearsals is not vocalizing, but the embrace of quietness.

A tradition of singing quietly has been part of the Jubilee Singers’ performance practice from the beginning and continues today. Doug Seroff writes that, “Legend has it

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<sup>66</sup> Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 9/22/2011.

that George L. White, director of the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers, used to tell the singers to put into the tone the intensity that they would give to the most forcible one that they could sing, and yet to make it as soft as they possibly could. ‘If a tiger should step behind you, you would not hear the fall of this foot, yet all the strength of the tiger should be in that tread’” (Abbott and Seroff 2013: 12). Additionally, Andrew Ward notes that the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers sang quietly “Even their champions’ praise usually neglected to acknowledge the discipline and craft that went into the Jubilee performances, as if exquisite four-part harmonies and *double pianissimi* that carried to the back rows of enormous halls were merely the natural attributes of a ‘musical’ people” (emphasis mine, Ward 2000: 185).

Kwami’s extended moments of quiet presence develop the Singers’ “intradirection,” a way of conducting that provides the Singers with principal elements of Western choral conducting, such as maintaining a desired tempo, balance among vocal parts, and cohesive beginnings and endings of pieces. In addition to memorizing music from scores, stating the musical standards, and shaping vocal quality, the way Kwami conducts the rehearsal builds trust and also equips the ensemble to conduct themselves in performance without his being in front of them. A bit further into this same rehearsal, Kwami invited the Singer who shared his feelings about Kwami’s quietness as “intimidating” to lead the ensemble in vocal exercises to warm-up their instruments. Kwami said, “. . .keep everything gentle. . . a lot of times you go to choral rehearsals and the warm ups are very hard on the voice. . . its always best to start very very softly, so that you can really, really warm up the voice instead of just pushing the voice from the

beginning. OK?”<sup>67</sup> Quietness not only commands Kwami’s presence with the singers, but also a deliberateness, introspection, and self-control through his musical direction.

Quashie’s *The Sovereignty of Quiet* and Kwami’s Value of Quietness

Kevin Quashie’s discussion in *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* is helpful for understanding how Kwami’s mode of quiet presence among the Fisk Jubilee Singers establishes a technique of performing prestige while delivering a spiritual message. Quashie articulates what I have observed to be Kwami’s value of quietness in directing the Fisk Jubilee Singers to performance success. He argues that attending to expressions of quietness can lead to “...a shift in how we commonly understand the [performance of] blackness, which is often described as expressive, dramatic, or loud...These assumptions are noticeable in the ways that blackness serves as an emblem of social ailment and progress” (2012: 3). Kwami believes that through quiet performances of seriousness, learnedness and skill, the Fisk Jubilee Singers can both counter stereotypes of choirs comprised of black people singing Christian music, and accomplish their mission of proclaiming a message of Christian faith in a way that is different from urban contemporary gospel singers that often perform in a mode of “loudness.” Above all, his investment in leading this ensemble emerges from the opportunity to minister to people. In a 2006 interview, he shares:

I never thought much about the Negro spiritual when I was in Ghana. I just knew that they were related to the time of slavery. It was when I got to Fisk and became a Jubilee Singer that I started to understand more about the impact of Negro spirituals on the world. In terms of it being, first of all, music that the Jubilee Singers sang in order to raise money for Fisk University. But in singing this music, they also helped the world know about this form of music.

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<sup>67</sup> Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 9/22/2011.

Now, I am looking at the Negro spiritual from another angle. It is a very historic, very traditional, a very strong part of the American culture. But I also see it now as a music that can be used to minister to people. The Jubilee Singers and I have had many experiences where, after concerts, people would come and tell us about how they were blessed by the songs (Kwami 2006).

He also conveys this spiritual purpose with the students, saying:

Personally, I have a very strong belief that this ensemble, Jubilee Singers, is one of the very important aspects of Fisk University's life, spiritually....and therefore whatever we do, must be done dilligently and for His [God's] glory...for us to bring out His beauty through singing, it becomes very important for us to give all that we have.<sup>68</sup>

During a rehearsal, Kwami delights in simply relating how listeners are impressed with the Singers' sound and impacted by the meaning of the text of the spirituals. For example, at one rehearsal he said to the Singers: "People always ask me how I get that tone out of you. It is because we understand what we are singing. We don't care about the tone. We care about the message, and then it takes care of tone."<sup>69</sup> With a quiet presence, Kwami intends to establish a performance style through which the Fisk Jubilee Singers affect listeners with their vocal sound and the communication of a Christian faith message.

My use of "quiet presence" to describe Kwami refers both to his persona—a soft spoken man of few words—and the ways he encourages the Fisk Jubilee Singers to emulate his stillness, conviction, and hushed vocal temperament by following his example in rehearsals. He fosters the Singers' commitment to communicating a spiritual message, and builds an awareness of how the image and sound of blackness competes with their commitment, making dignified self-presentation and representation emerge as

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<sup>68</sup> Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 9/22/2012.

<sup>69</sup> Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 3/3/2012.

foremost in their performances. Kwami has found the disposition of a quiet presence to be effective in challenging audience expectations and in making audible their Christian declamation. As Quashie further explains:

The quiet subject is a subject who surrenders, a subject whose consciousness is not only shaped by struggle but also by revelry, possibility and the wildness of the inner life. Quiet is not a performance or a withholding; instead, it is an expressiveness that is not necessarily legible, at least not in a world that privileges public excessiveness. Neither is quiet about resistance. It is surrender, a giving into, a falling into self. The outer world cannot be avoided or ignored, but one does not only have to yield to its vagaries. One can be quiet (Quashie 2013: 45).

Kwami's use of quietness in directing the Fisk Jubilee Singers exemplifies how a consideration of selfhood and of the "outside world" makes room both for resistance and for the Singers to be recognized as musicians embodying vocal and spiritual excellence. Recalling how the ensemble is perceived while traveling on tour, Kwami reminded the Singers about the importance of how they represent themselves:

Imagine the driver [of a bus the Singers rented for travel to a concert]: I intentionally told her to try and get into the hall and listen to you [the Singers], because I know the effect it has, our performances, have had on many drivers. They pick us up from here [Fisk's campus] just thinking 'well, another group of college students, and they're from a black school, so, 'it's [the experience of driving them and their performance] going to be this-and-that.' But then they get to hear us, and something in them changes, their attitudes toward us change. And the same thing happened with this lady. She was just blown away.<sup>70</sup>

In her ethnographic study of "loud black girls" and "quiet Asian boys," Joy K. Lei reminds us of Judith Butler's foundational performativity framework, in which "...interactions between the subject, the body and identity...provide useful theoretical guidance, because it not only takes into account the regulative power that discursive and representational systems have in the production of its subjects, it also emphasizes the necessity for repeated stylization of the body to materialize the normative ideal" (Lei

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<sup>70</sup> Newland recording of FJS rehearsal 4/17/2012.

2003: 160). Through Kwami's employment of what Lei describes as "repeated stylization"<sup>71</sup> in rehearsals, students in the ensemble associate Kwami's quiet presence with their participation in the ensemble. Rehearsals offer a space to repeat stylization, and a style of quiet presence performed by Kwami constructing a norm that the Fisk Jubilee Singers perform on stage. His model of physical gesturing in front of them during rehearsals, a model that includes minimal speech at a low volume, extended moments of quietness, unrushed movement, and insistence upon patience, implicitly instructs the students about how to behave as Fisk Jubilee Singers. Kwami's attention to representation, musical virtuosity, and Christian witness imbues the performance with a value of quiet presence. Enacting a quiet presence characterizes Fisk Jubilee Singers performances and differentiates them from normative contemporary gospel performances in which physical movement, vernacular vocal style, and loud delivery are prized.<sup>72</sup> Yet even among audience members who are familiar with concert spiritual singing—like the audience member quoted earlier—the Fisk Jubilee Singers perform in an exceptional style: with the quiet presence of their often invisible conductor.

In the correspondence between the audience member and Dr. Kwami quoted at the opening of this section, the audience member's expression of expertise in music, especially choral conducting and performance, suggests that her question emerges from a perspective of someone who is versed in the traditions of Western choral practices, a set of practices from which she feels the Fisk Jubilee Singers deviate by not having Kwami conduct during the concert. Her desire to know "how [the Fisk Jubilee Singers] came

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<sup>72</sup> Even with this effort to distinguish themselves from other choirs of the African American sacred music tradition, Country and Christian Contemporary vocalists recording in Nashville often seek the Fisk Jubilee Singers to provide background vocal tracts, an inclination inspired by gospel choir interludes during the bridge and climax of pop songs.

together” indicates that the Singers effectively assembled and performed within the choral conventions with which she was familiar, save the role of a choral conductor in performance.

This audience member is not alone in crediting the conductor’s physical gestures for a choir’s performance. Garnett recalls the axiom among Western choral pedagogues, writing that “the [choral] director should look like he or she wants the choir to sound” (Garnett 2009: 1). Common among both instrumental and choral conductors is the expectation for musicians to mirror their emotive expressions while they manage sonic onsets and decays, control tempo, and shape dynamics and phrasing (Durrant 2003). Kwami may not be seen conducting the ensemble during performances, but he is involved in every detail of the Singers’ presentation, including repertoire, attire, program order, ensemble members, stage blocking, travel arrangements, and certainly, musical execution. He guides the singers in performing his intended choral product in a way that is at once sensitive to politics of racial representation, steadfast in vocal virtuosity, and expressive of Christian spirituality.

Still, Kwami asserts his commitment to *not* conducting concerts, an achievement acquired through concentrated work with the Singers in rehearsal.<sup>73</sup> When I asked individual Jubilee Singers about their impressions of the ensemble when they first heard it, several mentioned that they were impressed with the absence of a conductor. Sabrina

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<sup>73</sup> The phenotypically white musical director of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, George L. White, did not stand in front of the ensemble and conduct, as this juxtaposition was too suggestive of an overseer among enslaved Africans. However, some Fisk Jubilee Singer directors preceding Kwami chose to stand in front of the ensemble and conduct performances. Accounts of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers can be found in Andrew Ward’s *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America* (2000. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux) and Toni Anderson’s “*Tell Them We are Singing for Jesus: The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers* (2010).



remembered that she thought, “Look at that! They are singing without a conductor! And they are singing at the same time. And they sound so good.” Keondra said, “...the group got up and Dr. Kwami introduced the group, and it’s as though he disappeared. Cause once he was off the stage, he was off the stage. We didn’t see him, it’s like he was gone.” MarQo, who had not sung concert spirituals in a choral ensemble before coming to Fisk remembered that he found it was important to carry out “blend and vocal quality, diction is important, and feeling each other’s vibe without a conductor.”

That the Singers found the audience member’s observation humorous indicates both their awareness of such a reception and their satisfaction in having delivered a concert without a conductor in front of them effectively enough to make an audience member wonder how it was possible. I contend that Kwami *does* conduct the Fisk Jubilee Singers through their performances even though he is not gesturing in front of them. His off-stage presence, speaking no words, and making no visible arm movements or facial expressions, and the Singers awareness of his being there, epitomizes a quietness that undergirds the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ distinct performance style.

#### Fisk University Choir Rehearsal

“We are musically responsible as black people to move the audience.”<sup>74</sup>  
-Dr. Christopher Duke

During their annual October tour to Chicago, the University Choir always performs at Proviso West High School,<sup>75</sup> and the 2011 tour was no exception. Duke

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<sup>74</sup> Newland recording of UC Rehearsal on 9/21/2011.

shared his excitement about the relationship that has grown between Fisk and Proviso West students through University Choir performances. With his eyes lit, he positioned himself in his desk chair with broad, prideful shoulders and told me:

In 2010, they gave me a Proviso West shirt, and so this year [2011], I put the shirt on and I put a jacket on over it. And it had their logo on it. So when they introduced us, I got up and talked to them, and I said: ‘It’s kind of warm in here. Let me take my jacket off.’ And I took it off so deliberately, that they could see it and, you know, they just went wild over it! So, they didn’t see us as *outsiders* (Duke 2011).

Fisk University Choir proceeded to perform pieces with the Proviso West high school choir. “Their director conducted some, I conducted some,” Duke explained. “It gave us a sense of camaraderie. We weren’t just a school *visiting* there, we actually became a part of them, they became a part of us” (ibid). The following discussion of the Fisk University Choir provides an overview of the ensemble’s emergence, and analyzes how its goals of recruiting new students and fulfilling Fisk students’ musical needs are met through repertoire choices that allow for cultural cohesion in “black” choir singing.

#### The Fisk University Choir and Dr. Christopher Duke

The University Choir at Fisk was founded by Adam K. Spence, Fisk’s first academic dean,<sup>76</sup> in 1879 and was originally known as the “Mozart Society.” According to the ensemble’s 2011 brochure, “The purpose of the ensemble was to assist the Jubilee Singers during their heavy touring season.” All Fisk students are eligible to sing in the choir, which rehearses on Monday and Wednesday evenings for two hours in the

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<sup>75</sup> Located in a middle and working class neighborhood in the Western suburbs of Chicago, West Proviso is a high school of approximately 2,500 students, the majority of whom identify as black or Latino.

<sup>76</sup> Spence is commemorated with a building in his name on campus.

Appleton Room of Jubilee Hall.<sup>77</sup> Currently under the direction of Dr. Christopher Duke, the choir performs during campus events such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. convocation, university commencement and the spring arts festival. They also embark on at least two concert tours every academic year, which include performances in Chicago, Illinois and Atlanta, Georgia—locations that have large populations of Fisk alumni. University Choir funds its own tours through student fees, ticket sales, and student-run fundraisers. In addition to Nashville, Chicago and Atlanta, the University Choir performed in Orlando and West Palm Beach during the 2011-2012 academic year.

A Fisk alumnus, Duke earned a B.S. degree in Music Education (1991) from Fisk, a M.S. degree in Music Education, and an Ed.D. degree in School Supervision and Administration of Higher Education, both from Tennessee State University. An adjunct professor in the Music Department, along with being the director of University Choir for over ten years, he is the director of campus services at Fisk, managing housing and residential life, dining services, the campus health clinic, and the counseling center. Students warmly regard Duke's broad effects on their personal and academic lives. While he was a student at Fisk himself, Duke led "Black Mass," a student run gospel choir that "addressed students' musical needs," and assisted with directing University Choir. When Fisk's enrollment began to decrease at the turn of the twenty-first century, Duke merged the two ensembles by adding gospel repertoire to University Choir programs, a move that has cohered into the current ensemble's repertoire of classical anthems, concert spirituals, and gospel songs.

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<sup>77</sup> University Choir and the Fisk Jubilee Singers rehearse on alternate evenings, Mondays and Wednesdays, and Tuesdays and Thursdays respectively. This allows students to participate in both ensembles without a schedule conflict.

Their repertoire allows them to demonstrate collegiate musical skill. The pieces performed during the 2011-2012 academic year included concert spirituals, including “Run Lil Chillun!!!” by Hall Johnson, “Oh Glory” by Joseph Joubert, “Give me Jesus,” arranged by John W. Work III, and “Ride the Chariot,” arranged by William Henry Smith; gospel songs such as “The Prayer of Restoration,” a student arrangement, “If I Can Help Somebody” by Lucy Campbell, “Oh Give Thanks” by Hezekiah Walker, “Set the Atmosphere” by Curt Carr, “Trust in the Lord” by Gale Jones Murphy, “I Will Bless the Lord” by Byron Cage, “God Restores” by Dr. Wayne Buckner, “Done Made my Vow to the Lord” by Nolan Williams Jr., “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand” by James Hall, “Sing unto the Lord” by Bishop Paul Morton; and finally, the classical anthem “The Majesty and Glory of Your Name” by Tom Fettkes.

“We are able to show with our anthems, our spirituals and our classical music,” Duke explained to me, “that *we are an academic group* [emphasis his]. However, at the same time, we’re able to address another avenue of the *blackness* [emphasis his] [of our group] in terms of gospel music or anthems and spirituals, especially the Negro spiritual that we’re able to do” (Duke 2011).

#### Fisk University Choir’s Recruitment Goals

The importance of connecting with an audience is vital to the objectives of University Choir. Fisk’s now scarce enrollment, which has seen a dramatic decrease over the last five years, has been the subject of financial concerns, as the university’s operating budget depends on tuition funds. Low enrollment has threatened Fisk’s accreditation status with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the university has

endured an accreditation warning or probation for the past two academic years. Active in the campaign to save Fisk from losing accreditation or closing due to insurmountable financial strife, the University Choir makes a strong effort to attract as many students to Fisk as possible. Both Duke and the students explicitly acknowledge a duty in recruiting new students to Fisk through their performance.

This is not a new mode of overcoming financial challenge for Fisk. Indeed, it was profits from the performing tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers that kept Fisk from closing due to finances in the 1870s. However, the differences in the mode of fund raising speak to the current climate of financial strain around higher education in the US, especially for HBCUs and working- and middle-class families. As with the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, the current circulation and significance of black vocal music influences how the University Choir goes about bringing attention to Fisk. The commercial recording industry's popularization of "black" music determines the cultural currency with which University Choir can connect with their audiences, which are comprised, in majority, by people identifying as black. Singing gospel music, an emblem of black choir repertoire, allows them to be recognized as familiar by these audiences who also identify as black and listen to the choir's repertoire at church and/or on the radio. At the same time, University Choir also works to distinguish itself from the Fisk Jubilee Singers, as it is occasionally confused *with being* the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Duke's assertion that University Choir and West Proviso high school choir "became a part of each other," during the tour performance—unlike a choir who "visits"—points to the importance of being culturally cohesive with audiences (unlike the Jubilee Singers, as he insinuates) in order to meet recruitment goals. Guthrie Ramsey speaks to this conundrum of

participating in racialized norms of expression as a black person, explaining that:

‘Race’ is recognized in most academic circles as a ‘fiction’ and social construction and has become almost reviled in today’s cultural criticism. But the word at one time represented a kind of positive self-identification among African Americans....I use the word race [referring to “Race music” or “Black music”] in these senses, not to embrace a naïve position of racial essentialism, but as an attempt to convey the worldviews of cultural actors from a specific historical moment (2004: 3).

University Choir singers and their audiences resonate with Ramsey’s position in the ways they take pride in identifying as black, as indeed does Dr. Duke. As Duke further explains “...we do some gospel music, we do some popular music, and that is not always viewed in the highest realm of musical study. But what it allows us to do in recruitment is to be able to function with the students that were actively trying to recruit” (Duke 2011). “Functioning with students” can be pivotal to whether prospective students in University Choir audiences and their parents engage with the members of Fisk’s admissions department at concerts. To facilitate assistance with the college application process, members of Fisk’s admissions department travel with the University Choir. During their Chicago tour Duke explains that:

We—in advance—requested that [prospective] students have SAT scores, high school transcripts that we could look at [after concerts], and they [Fisk admissions officers] were able to make some on-site admissions to the university. As a result of that, we came back with about eighty names of [prospective] students that we contacted over a three-day period....every opportunity to show Fisk and to recruit is certainly of the utmost importance to us all (ibid).

Connecting with audiences through gospel music making is a priority for the University Choir, as is the importance in connecting with the Fisk student body.

## Fisk University Choir Fulfilling Students' "Musical Needs"

University Choir's familiar repertoire not only contributes to recruitment endeavors, but also, as Duke argues, works to meet current Fisk students' "musical needs...as black students need a platform to be able to address their own culture, at an HBCU." The University Choir, he says, allows them to do this in a distinct way (Duke 2011). As with the process of achieving recruitment goals, fulfilling students' "musical needs" incorporates the contours of popular music industry racial constructions—the trajectory of which has been a source of contestation between Fisk music department faculty—as well as larger intra-racial arenas like schools and churches. Duke strategically essentializes the necessity for popular music (gospel included) participation in order to achieve "black" identity among University Choir Singers. Radano explains the effect of participating in "black" music: "Difference thus becomes key to figurations of black music, assigning a status of exception that gives to African Americans a source of racialized power. It is through the idea of difference that black America would finally hear its cultural past, discerning the echoes of an ancestral world saturated with textually invented 'Negro sound'" (1996: 544). Duke's repertoire choices harness the music that Fisk students and audiences are accustomed to as a resource for vibrant student life—a move overdetermined by his agenda as an educator. He further elucidates how gospel music, and the commercial construction of "black music" writ large, remain sites of contestation in intra-racial encounters, especially in schools and churches, adding:

If you look at what we call the "father of gospel music," Thomas Dorsey, [he] started music in Georgia, in the blues venue. Then went to Indiana and started another venue. He didn't actually start doing gospel music until he got to Chicago, and met a wonderful lady there that changed his life and got him saved, and he started doing gospel music. But he took with him the influences that he had in those other musical venues, to produce what we have now... Sometimes

the “higher-level” (his quotes) black churches have a problem with the rhythms, with the idioms [in the University Choir’s gospel music repertoire], but what they are failing to realize is, that’s the jazz and the blues influences that have led to the development of the gospel song as we know it today as a contemporary gospel piece (Duke 2011).

Duke understands gospel music as a popular music genre developed with the influences of other racialized secular genres like blues and jazz—a radical concept for some, and obvious to others. (I consider this tension, rooted in the intersection of race and social class performances, in chapter three).

While students enjoy singing gospel music they are familiar with in University Choir, Duke affords them the opportunity to develop professional skills that he feels are important for black musicians to have. This stance supplements the music curriculum offered at Fisk, centered in the history, theory and performance of the Western art music canon, as with many music departments around the United States. Duke remains unconvinced that such an education equips Fisk students for the realities of professional musical life as a black person. While less than 25% of the singers in University Choir are music majors, all of its members have serious musical interests, and about one-third of the singers aspire to be professional musicians. Thus, Duke explains that:

The field of classical music is still tight in terms of opportunities for blacks. And I think that we are living in a time, as a multicultural society, and not just that, but as a global entity—we [black people] have to be able to do a number of things in order to be able to pay the mortgage, to keep the children in nice schools, to live in good neighborhoods, drive a nice car, to be able to dress fairly well. And I think that the more skills that we have in music is just the more opportunities for advancement and stability with a paycheck. That’s my view on it. That’s important (Duke 2011).

Duke sees University Choir as a “launching pad for a singing career at Fisk.” Many of the students in University Choir have not had extensive experiences making music in an ensemble. Singing in University Choir prepares them for the possibility of



winning an audition to be members of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. He allows students who are interested to conduct the choir and play instruments as accompaniment (piano, drums, bass, woodwinds and brass). His insistence upon an unchanging repertoire throughout the course of an academic year incrementally builds performance confidence in the students through repeated performances, so that with each performance “they know what’s involved in performing [each song]” (ibid).

Providing students with a realm for collectively vocalizing familiar repertoire, an opportunity to serve their university through recruitment assistance, and an opportunity for professional music development, Duke’s direction of University Choir educates students about the utility of their collective “black” voices and how to navigate dominant expectations for black singers to “move an audience,” for the pleasure and benefit of themselves and others. The ramifications of his instruction suggest significant goals and possibilities for a life in music, and beyond music, as a black-bodied person in the US.

#### Fisk’s Choirs, Citizenship, and the W.E.B. Du Bois-Booker T. Washington Education Debate

The different choral conducting approaches taken by Duke and Kwami mirror a historically important, indeed foundational, educational debate between W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) and Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), and in fact can, in part, be tied directly back to this debate and its influence on HBCUs. Between 1899 and 1903, when Du Bois and Washington were gaining national acclaim as intellectual leaders, they each proposed plans for massive “racial uplift”<sup>78</sup> for African Americans in the United States.

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“Up” and “lift” were both central in Reconstruction and Progressive Era rhetoric, especially among black elite people. Subsequent studies about writing from this period historicized these principles articulated by Washington, Du Bois, and others, as “racial uplift” ideology (Gaines 1996).

A 1903 collection of essays, *The Negro Problem*, includes Du Bois’ essay “The Talented Tenth.” Proclaiming the imperative role of higher education for the advancement of black Americans, he closes it with the following:

Men of America, the problem is plain before you. Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to uplift people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach to work—it must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional people (Du Bois in Boxil 2003: 74-75).

After more than a century, the Fisk community embraces Du Bois as “a son, ever on the altar,”<sup>79</sup> and some even specifically espouse Du Bois’ “Talented Tenth” philosophy, whereby the future of peoples of African descent in America would be led by a new educated class of African Americans, and that this class has a duty to “uplift” the entire black race. The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ example of “respectable,” pious performances influenced Du Bois’ political vantage point, as seen in their prominence in *Souls of Black Folk*. Fisk students’ celebration of Du Bois and his educational ideals is found not only in their embrace of the university’s classical liberal arts curriculum, but also in the rich constellation of Fisk rituals that contribute to Fisk’s politics of respectability.

For example, I witnessed Pulitzer Prize winning W.E.B. Du Bois biographer

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<sup>79</sup> I discuss this Fisk motto, “sons and daughters ever on the altar,” in chapter four.

David Levering Lewis (Fisk class of 1956) deliver the 2001 commencement address at Fisk University. It was at the very end of my semester at Fisk as an exchange student, and as a member of the audience that day, I was among the families of graduates, alumni and friends of Fisk, while reflecting on what had been an impactful spring. From the podium, Lewis proudly began his speech, with what I heard as a booming, robust, high baritone voice, saying: “I am a talented tenth.” I initially chuckled to myself, thinking that he could not be serious in his declamation. I was as familiar with Du Bois’ “Talented Tenth” proposition as I was with its critiques, which were vigorously examined in my African American studies courses (James 1996; Giddings 1984; Cruse 1967). The audience that day applauded his opening, and I realized that he was, in fact, serious. I also realized that I had better listen carefully to what he was going to share that day as he spoke to an audience of self-identifying members of the Talented Tenth.

Washington’s 1901 autobiography, detailing his journey from being enslaved to establishing Tuskegee University, is titled *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography of Booker T. Washington*. In his 1903 essay “Industrial Education for the Negro,” Booker T. Washington, deeply concerned with African Americans’ self-sufficiency throughout the rural, agricultural south, asserted that:

There were young men educated in foreign tongues, but few in carpentry or in mechanical or architectural drawing. Many were trained in Latin, but few as engineers and blacksmiths. Too many were taken from the farm and educated, but educated in everything but farming. For this reason they had no interest in farming and do not return to it. And yet eighty-five percent of the Negro population of the Southern states lives, and for a considerable time will continue to live, in the country districts (2003: 13).

Washington believed that institutions of higher education educating black people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century had a responsibility to combine both the classical Western liberal arts

education model and a vocational education model in order to enable this marginalized population to build—literally—a world for themselves and be mobile participants in mainstream society. To be able to build homes, roads, and machinery and to farm, were keys to self-sufficiency in the rural south at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of which Washington was aware.

Those criticizing Washington's position, including Du Bois, questioned whether it was "assimilationist" or "accommodationist." Some saw Washington's hopes for increasing the population of college educated black people, even through trade education, as complicit with the racist ideals of the dominant population. Washington's position can be interpreted to support a segregationist model, one that does not encourage black people to invest their resources in the mainstream, but instead in environments in which black people are in the racial majority, by building black neighborhoods. This suggests that Washington supported black people living their lives in all-black environments *only*. He wanted, however, for the black population to be able both to work through the realities of racial injustice (including Jim Crow legal segregation of public spaces) and to participate in classical Western intellectual life.

The same year, Du Bois published a famous critique of Washington's position in his seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He stated that Washington's educational ideals for racial uplift did not focus enough on gaining rights to full citizenship. Du Bois argued that citizenship for black Americans would be secured through a classical Western education so that black people in the US could push to: 1) be "productive property owners" by having legal rights to their property; 2) have dignity by being fully integrated into mainstream society; and 3) perpetuate industrial education by way of having a

population of teachers trained to teach, by means of having a class of people who would have higher education degrees (Moore 2003: 72).

My consideration of Washington's and Du Bois' early higher education ideals is not an effort to pit them against each other. While the two men differed with regard to focus on the industrial north or the agricultural south, their debate was also largely about educational ideals, and in this regard, in fact, their ideals do not conflict. I argue, rather, that the substance of their debate encapsulates the stakes of Fisk's educational goals and the challenges facing students who are in the racial majority at Fisk, but in the racial minority in mainstream American society. Both Washington and Du Bois interrogate how a black university can prepare its students to realize full citizenship and build a world inclusive of themselves and respectful of their history (Harris-Perry 2011).

Moreover, I argue that the Washington-Du Bois debate, while largely personal and about method, as opposed to a conflict about goals for African American citizenship, continues to be evocative of the differences between Kwami's and Duke's ways of leading their choirs.<sup>80</sup> Both are invested in their students learning musicianship skills that will be useful in their professional lives. How they go about doing that, however, is very different.

Kwami espouses a mastery of classical Western vocal performance with the Jubilee Singers, participating in the educational model Du Bois promoted. Conversely, Washington's attention to industry is at the heart of what I hear Duke express about his hopes for students in University Choir—that they be able to participate in Western music-making norms, and that they be able to make a musical life for themselves when challenged

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<sup>80</sup> The tension between Washington and Du Bois largely lies in the fact that this debate was public, and thus potentially divisive of black intellectual leadership at a time when the black population was considered to be a political monolith, with room for only one leader.

by anti-black people or institutions. Duke believes that the Western classical music industry's anti-black tendencies—the “tight” space that he references—will not afford his students opportunities to contribute, whereas he argues that the black sacred music industry, including both worship and commercial gospel music styles, will provide such opportunities. His goal in the course is to prepare students to be successful in this black sacred music industry, specifically. He does this through the way he leads rehearsals, the repertoire he selects, and in the way he allows students to participate in many aspects of University Choir performance.

Duke invites students to play accompanying instruments, arrange, conduct, sing in different sections of the choir, and assist in the fiscal and administrative management of tours. This pedagogical approach is one that is “job oriented,” by which I mean oriented towards preparing students to contribute financially to their households, or even make a living making music. This kind of higher education classroom does not assume that students' college investments are limited to self-development and is not geared toward social and economic mobility. Consonant with Washington's ideal, Duke guides students towards working through the dominant racist ideologies in both ideological and concrete ways. Duke is aware that most students who sing in University Choir or the Fisk Jubilee Singers will continue to sing in choirs that perform repertoire of the black sacred music tradition, and that some of them will pursue a career as musicians. He instructs students both to master Western musical practices *and* to gain skills for musical self-sufficiency through gospel music making. Gospel, the primary genre of repertoire Duke assigns in University Choir, is a genre that is part of many Christian worship services and a genre in which many black musicians are offered opportunities to be both musically expressive as

composers, arrangers, managers, instrumentalists and singers *and* earn money, often a living wage, for their work.

This position differs from the Fisk Music Department’s curriculum, which prioritizes Western classical music and jazz performance, similar to many other music departments in the US. The “tight spaces” Duke refers to in his interview, are specifically within the arena of Western classical music. To guide students towards careers as Western classical musicians—careers upon which a typical Fisk student would depend for sustainable income—would be to steer them towards a “tight space,” a space lacking both musical and economic opportunity. In addition to working from a marginal subject position as racial minorities in the US, African Americans historically and currently confront limited possibilities—possibilities limited by the injustices of structural racism (Trepangier 2010; Marable 2002), daily microaggressions (Watkins 2012; Sue 2010; Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso 2000), and overt acts perpetuating racial inequality (Loury 2002; Anderson 2000). These current confrontations are not limited to the prison industrial complex, environmental racism, or the health care system, for example. These confrontations are also found in higher education classrooms.

The “citizenship” struggle and debate among black people in the United States was central in the post-Civil War reconstruction debates.<sup>81</sup> A part of the mission of

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<sup>81</sup> At the point of emancipation in the United States the most pressing question among the country’s federal leaders was: How do we incorporate recently emancipated Africans into mainstream American society? This question, still to be completely answered, served as the basis for Reconstruction legislation and ignited an experiment where the capability of black people to fully participate in American society would be tested. Girding this experiment is the legislation that has served as the cornerstone of civil rights for black people in the United States: the Civil Rights Act of 1866 (citizenship for black people in the US), the Thirteenth Amendment (abolishment of slavery), the Fourteenth Amendment (ratifies the Civil Rights Act of 1866) and the Fifteenth Amendment (making voter discrimination illegal). The United States saw its first set of legislation to secure citizenship for black people in the United States in the Civil Rights Act

HBCUs, through the administrative and financial leadership of the American Missionary Association, was to “civilize” the formerly enslaved Africans of the United States by “cultivating” a class of black people who perform citizenship worthiness. The citizenship question remained a point of contestation throughout the twentieth century, even through the writing of this dissertation during the early moments of the twenty-first century.

In her work detailing the processes through which “racism” becomes “race,” in the naturalization of racial inequality, Barbara Fields reminds us of Du Bois’ reformed, mid-twentieth century definition of a “black” man. She writes: “The black man is not someone of a specified ancestry or culture, he decided, and certainly not someone who so identifies himself. A black man ‘is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia’” (Fields and Fields 2012: 158). She goes on to say that in the face of racism, “the victim’s tangible race, rather than the perpetrator’s tangible racism, becomes the center of attention” (ibid). Thus, the need to “ride Jim Crow” does not ease with the Civil Rights Movement or the election of President Barack Obama. From both Kwami and Duke, students learn how to use their singing voices to “ride Jim Crow,” navigating racist hostility while asserting, assuredly, themselves.

Perpetual juridical reformation continues to strip black Americans of citizenship rights, an oppressive power now most conspicuously exercised through police brutality,

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1866 which declared that all people born in the United States are citizens, without regard to race. It reads: “...*all persons born in the United States and not subject to any foreign power, excluding Indians not taxes, are hereby declared to be citizens of the United States; and such citizens, of every race or color, with/out regard to any pervious condition of slavery or involuntary servitude....*” The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was ratified by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1868, which states that: “*All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law*” (Green 2000: 117).



the prison industrial complex, and laws such as “stand-your-ground” (Alexander 2012).<sup>82</sup> Sociologist Randolph Hohle recalls that “the Voting Rights Act passed only because the idea of the good black citizen was the dominant representation attached to that act. It also argued that the rights project idea of good black citizenship excluded blacks who did not or could not conform to this idealized image” (Hohle 2008: 310). He adds that “The rights project used discourse of good citizenship to produce a deracialized good black citizen that reflected universal claims of good citizenship” (ibid: 312). The performance of a non-violent demeanor that Kwami models with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, as well as Duke’s encouragement for students to stay on campus in his role as the Director of Campus Services, respond to social injustice and the lack of citizenship rights with which African Americans continue to struggle.

As the social life of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Fisk University Choir demonstrate, the Fisk community is sensitive to a politics of racial inequality predicated on the institutional and capricious subjugation of blackness, as well as the intraracial politics of cultural cohesion. This exemplifies a paradox of essentialist and constructivist modes of processing racialized vocality, a tricky divide that points towards Du Boisian “double-consciousness.” Kwami, Duke and singers in their choral ensembles all embrace their singing as “black,” as products and expressions specifically emerging from black experience; they also selectively and differently construct the materiality of their vocal blackness. Expressing themselves thorough intraracial, unified musical exchange while

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<sup>82</sup> Heavily criticized by Attorney General Eric Holder, the “stand-your-ground” law permits the use of force (including deadly weapons) as self-defense in the wake of perceived “danger.” The legislation, brought to the attention of the world through the trial of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, disproportionately allows acts of racial violence against black people and privileges non-black offenders with acquittal.

carefully, and differently, representing themselves to a public Other, Fisk students utilize their singing voices, sounding what Du Bois described as “...simply wish[ing] to make it possible for a [person] to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (1903: 3). This “ideology of voice” among the Jubilee Singers and the University Choir “...emphasize[s] that practices of voice, while creative, are also modes of discipline—embodied and performed—through which subjects are produced (Weidman 2006: 14). Yet, in conceiving of a reconciliation of these politics, Grant Olwage reminds us that:

It is not, I think, especially helpful to wish away ‘the black voice’ as a textual misrepresentation that one can chalk down to a ruling epistemological framework of racial difference, to the colonialist invention of Africanisms. Rather, the black voice is something very real that has a history; this much we can hear from 70 years of recordings of black choirs (2004: 208).

Duke and Kwami guide students’ vocal expressions through this paradox, enabling them to mediate their college’s institutional apparatus with a collective representation of vocal blackness. Historically situated as foundational to the global circulation of African American music as well as the development of African American “art” music, Fisk students continue to mediate a dominating history of racial representation as African American bourgeoisie, as well as participating in US popular imaginations of black expressive culture, inclusive of gospel music making.

### Chapter 3

#### ***Fisk Idol and Non-Curricular Vocality***

*So after a while, freedom came. Therefore High John de Conquer has not walked the winds of America for seventy-five years now. His people had their freedom, their laugh and their song. They have traded it to the other Americans for things they could use like education and property, and acceptance. High John knew that that was the way it would be, so he could retire with his secret smile into the soil of the South and wait.*

*The thousands upon thousands of humble people who still believe in him, that is, in the power of love and laughter to win by their subtle power, do John reverence by getting the root of the plant in which he has taken up his secret dwelling, and "dressing" it with perfume, and keeping it on their person, or in their houses in a secret place. It is there to help them overcome things they feel that they could not beat otherwise, and to bring them the laugh of the day. John will never forsake the weak and the helpless, nor fail to bring hope to the hopeless. That is what they believe, and so they do not worry. They go on and laugh and sing. Things are bound to come out right tomorrow. That is the secret of black song and laughter.*

-Zora Neale Hurston ("High John De Conquer," *Characteristics of Negro Expression*, 1981: 79)

Hurston's description of African American folk hero High John de Conquer presents his vision for the future. Vocalized privately through the horrors of enslavement, he sings and laughs, understanding that it would be important for people of African descent in the United States—even after "freedom came"—to vocalize in private, away from the hegemonic ear of those representing dominant ideologies. One can interpret that High John de Conquer's concern for slave descendants was that they would trade laughter and singing for education, property and acceptance, or as I read it, would trade the freedom of private vocal expression for total adherence to normative vocal ideals. What a college education purports to offer, then, could limit the vocal acts of Fisk students to normative Middle-Atlantic broadcast speech style, or the *bel canto* singing aesthetic of the Jubilee Singers. In contrast, I found that space for self-expression and

exploration abounds for Fisk students in non-curricular moments both within and off of the campus. Students momentarily shift the work of constructing a college-educated personhood from an adherence to Fisk ideals to an experimentation with pre- and extra-Fisk expressive culture. In these spaces and moments, the complexity of students' relationships to the commercial recording industry, their Fisk experiences, and their personal and professional aspirations are audible. Students' vocal acts set forth the boundaries of this non-curricular vocality, not in a "root of a plant" as Hurston suggests, but through their ever changing singing.

In this chapter, I address non-curricular vocal activities along the contours of what students describe as both "fun" *and* "serious" non-classroom vocal endeavors. This examination is not about a space of passive pleasure or leisure, but an investigation into a thoughtfully constructed space of vocal expression outside of the curricular vocal ideals discussed in chapters one and two (Bennett 2005; Washburne and Derno 2004; Frith 1981). Their categorization of extra-curricular activity aligns with imaginations of student life in the US college experience, in which both frivolous activities and professional and personal development comprise aspects of self-exploration during the college years. Here, popular music emerges as important in Fisk students' vocal choices, especially in the context of student-run singing competitions.

The Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia fraternity annually sponsors the "Fisk Idol" competition, a heightened moment of students' public engagement with popular music on campus. Students sing selections from a popular music genre constructed as "black music," called "neo soul." The event recalls the *American Idol* television series

associated with producer Simon Cowell—with student produced video publicity, student judges, and online voting. At “Fisk Idol,” students’ palpable excitement in vocally expressing themselves outside of University Choir and Jubilee Singer vocal norms brings into relief the urgency of their participation in popular “black” speaking and singing as a form of self-expression and exploration. While curricular vocal norms present themselves in classroom standards, the university also supports students’ experimentation with non-curricular vocal activity without having to leave the Fisk environment. These non-curricular events demonstrate the importance of staying on-campus, in a culture of confinement built up at Fisk that has its roots in the dangers of Jim Crow era racial segregation of public spaces and extends into the current threats of police brutality and vigilante gun violence that daily concern students, parents and the faculty.

The Yard: “We party hard, we stay up late, but most of all, we graduate.”

As discussed in chapter one, the “yard” at Fisk not only figures as the geographical center of the campus it is also the center of students’ social interactions. “Because the yard is the center of campus,” Sabrina tells me, “You have to go through the yard to get anywhere...you have to go through the yard. It’s where everybody comes together. It’s where everybody congregates. And where Fiskites congregate, there will always be music. So, the yard is probably one of the most integral parts of the Fisk experience as far as music is concerned” (Walker 2011). Encountering each other on the way to class, the cafeteria, their cars, other dorms, or to enter or exit the campus, for Fisk students the yard facilitates face-to-face interaction outside of the classroom and dorm. When I was an exchange student at Fisk, it was not immediately apparent to me

how sociability on the yard worked. Two examples of this immediately come to mind. On the first day of class, that spring semester of 2001, I walked down the yard from Shane Hall to the Park-Johnson Hall and, without thought, attempted to speak to each student I passed on the way. Accustomed to the tradition of acknowledging other black people in public, either verbally, with eye contact or a nod, I realized, about half-way to class, that it would be impossible to speak to each person, as everyone I encountered was a black person. The reality of being in the racial majority in this educational environment crystalized for me, not in the dorm, or in class, but in the yard.

After class, I returned to my dorm room with the intention to relax, listen to music and talk with my roommate. As I entered the room, she was gathering her bag to leave. “You should come chill in the yard,” she told me. Completely misunderstanding what she meant, I responded, “Chill? We all have reading to do. Maybe on the weekend.”

“No,” she insisted. “You will learn on the yard, every day.” I decided to join her and quickly understood that the yard was a space of leisure, but that in that leisure, an incredible kind of work happens.

“The yard is fun *and* intellectual,” MarQo, a recent graduate and former Jubilee Singer, tells me. Consistently, students convey that what characterizes the yard is the singing and talking that sounds in that space. Students regularly debate about literature, philosophy, each other, and current events. Singing with each other on the yard in a spirit of vocal camaraderie, however, comprises a distinct aspect of Fisk’s campus life. Jubilee Singers LeTroy, from Athens, Georgia, and Sabrina, from Chicago, explain:

It was one morning. It was a Friday actually and I came out of class, and there

was a group of freshmen sitting there singing. And I just decided to join them and sing, and so we started taking songs from the nineties, and next thing you know, two girls walk past and they heard. And they turned back around and started singing with us. And I remember Sabrina walking down the yard, and she started singing as well. It's just like one big musical. Somebody comes up and says 'Aw! That's my jam! And da-da-da-da-da-da-da!' and next thing you know, they are like, 'Oh, I have class, I'll see y'all later, bye' the next person just comes in as people leave (Billups 2011).

These people have "High School Musical"<sup>83</sup> on the yard! Let me tell you, if you go on YouTube, you will find a video of this man [pointing to her friend, a Fisk student] singing by what we call The Tree of Knowledge, and Tawj [another Fisk student] playing the guitar. When I came freshman year, I thought I was in a movie, cause I would walk outside, and people would just be in groups, on the yard, singing. Free-styling (Walker 2011).

College students often congregate in open, outdoor areas of their campus and interact with each other. Fisk students' daily singing flow in the yard is a memorable part of their college experience, evidenced in how the director of the alumni association reminded the graduating class at the December 2011 commencement to stop by the Office of Alumni Affairs in the Richardson House, on the northern edge of campus, and not just "go to the yard" when visiting Fisk. "In my earlier years at Fisk," a graduating senior tells me, "you did most of everything on campus and in the yard. It was good because you made a lot of memories" (Jones 2011).

### Staying on Campus

For students, staying on campus outside of class time shapes the social life of the yard in memorable ways. For the administration, especially the student affairs faculty and staff, and for some parents, it is important for the students to stay on campus so that the university has close watch over the safety of the student body. As Dr. Christopher Duke shared with me, distrust of the Nashville police, based in centuries of racial tension,

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<sup>83</sup> Referring to the 2006 Disney-ABC television musical trilogy.

informs the administration's encouragement of students staying on campus in non-curricular moments.

Creating desirable and frequently occurring leisure activity is a priority of the university, which hires its own private security staff for special events. If a student runs into trouble with the law and the Nashville police come to campus, Duke, as well as other administrators and parents, fear for the limitations of their futures, and even threats to their lives. Citing the rampant injustices perpetrated against black youths, especially that experienced by black young men, perpetuated by the justice system and the prison industrial complex as well as through the increased vigilante gun violence that has characterized the Obama Era,<sup>84</sup> he says, "We do our best to handle students' events and parties because Lord knows what kind of trouble these kids will run into if the police get involved" (Duke 2011). Duke's position reminds me of Koritha Mitchell's recent reinvestigation of lynching plays written around the turn of the century, highlighting African Americans' understanding of racially motivated violence. She reports: "It's our success that beckons the mob" (2013: 35). During that heightened period, when many African Americans were motivated by a drive to be seen as "worthy" of citizenship, Mitchell argues, it was black excellence and the family unit<sup>85</sup>—*not* criminality—that "beckoned the mob." The black excellence that Du Bois and Washington called for, and the black excellence and family unit that Fisk strives for, is exactly what Duke

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<sup>84</sup> The tragic murder of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, reterrorized the world with race-based violence and further challenged the safety of black youth presence in public, especially throughout the southern United States.

<sup>85</sup> In chapter four, I discuss the Fisk community as a family, detailing how, as Ty-Ron M.O. Douglas argues "...the HBCU is so much more than a schoolhouse; the HBCU is an extension of the Black family that has 'been at the center of the Black struggle for equality and dignity'" (Allen et al. 2007: 263 quoted in Douglas 2012: 384).



anticipates, just as Mitchell explains: "...black success attracts the mob" (2012: 3).

A part of the process of keeping students safe includes imposing a curfew each night of the week for all freshmen, as discussed in the introduction, which relaxes later for students who reside in the dorms. Most students are initially furious about this regulation. Some grow to enjoy the time spent on campus, in dorms or on the yard, and some move off campus at their first opportunity in order to avoid this rule. Historically, Fisk, and many other historically black colleges, required students to abide by a curfew and, at times, remain on campus unless accompanied by a faculty member or in a group. During Reconstruction, and through the Jim Crow Era, the possibility of encountering racist violence was understood to endanger Fisk students' lives. For students at Fisk who were not accustomed to the social codes of southern black-white relations, this posed particular danger. In the current moment, while the stakes have changed, Fisk continues to prioritize the protection of its student body, and its students' bodies.

#### Greater-Fisk Nashville: The Live Music Scene

Even with the importance of staying on campus, many Fisk students are attracted to the university because of its location in Nashville. At the freshman orientation, when asked by upperclassmen why they attended Fisk, an overwhelming number of students expressed that they chose the university for its strength in the sciences and for the chance to network with music producers in Nashville in pursuit of a career in the commercial music industry. Celebrated as a headquarters for country music and Christian contemporary music recording, Nashville also boasts an active live music scene, curated by the Chamber of Commerce, which has placed signs outside performance venues

throughout the city reading “Nashville Live Music Venue.”<sup>86</sup> Opportunities to perform at open mics, jam sessions, and talent competitions are available twenty-four hours a day in Nashville, and Fisk students often participate. These live music events enable Fisk students to musically collaborate with other college students, primarily those from Tennessee State University, Vanderbilt University, Belmont University, and Middle Tennessee State University.

Black college students participating in Nashville’s live music scene, whether they are Fisk students or enrolled at another university, encounter commercial music industry expectations for their musicianship to remain fixed to racialized genre norms. As a 2008 bassist and music industry graduate of Middle Tennessee State University, who identifies as an African American male, told me:

I started off [playing the bass] in classical music, in high school had to do jazz, then did hip-hop production, and R&B, in college to make money. I really didn’t get a chance to be like, ‘Ok, I’m pigeonholed here.’ This is what I do...I’ve always been forced to do everything that’s around me just to keep it going. It kind of showed up in my production. It helps my ear in production, because I have so much to draw from. Bass work is great, it keeps the lights on. But production work is what I really love to do (Johnson 2012).

In an interaction with a current Fisk student, he continues to explain:

Even though I grew up in Nashville, [and] it’s [known for] country music, and nobody expects me to know anything outside of hip-hop or outside of R&B, or outside of, you know, black genres, or whatever. So when I would do projects, they would be expecting that to come—that’s what they were going to get out of me. And I come in with a jazz standard, or I come in with a country song, and I’d be on the same par as them. So it’s kinda shocking for them to hear somebody

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<sup>86</sup> One of the most popular off-campus performance venues for Fisk students is *Café Coco*, located less than two miles from the campus. Open twenty-four hours, it encourages customers to perform at their tables, or on one of the stages of the multiple, sectioned-off the bars. Rock, reggae, country, folk and jazz are genres regularly heard at *Café Coco*. *Jazz and Jokes*, a dinner and comedy theater that is no longer open, was regularly patronized by Fisk students during my fieldwork both as performers and audience members.

that doesn't look like them. They don't expect anything like that from—to bring that in, and be on the same level. So I got a lot of respect out of that. So, actually, it was an upper hand to be able to do that on the same level as them. Because that's the music that they grew up on. I didn't grow up on it, but I understand it. So, I welcomed it. I liked it. That I'm different, you know, and I can do the same stuff you do. I like the fact you don't expect me to do it. Cause when I do it, that makes it that much better (ibid).

The live music scene is a foremost arena for other Nashville based college students to interact with Fisk students. Another Middle Tennessee State University student, an African American male music education major from Detroit, says, “I haven't had a lot of experiences with Fisk. We've done stuff with other schools in the area, like Belmont and Vanderbilt, but it's not too often that my professors reference a black school” (Brooks 2012). It was through his personal efforts at playing music together at open mics and jam sessions that he built a relationship with Fisk students.

Jubilee Singer Eric explains his off-campus singing activity by telling me:

Outside Fisk, I perform in Nashville. At Legacy, Curb Café at Belmont, The Garden down the street on Jefferson.<sup>87</sup> I performed for the Nashville Independent Music Awards. I was in this band called *Black Diamond*. I still am, actually. We performed at BB Kings. I sang some of my originals. And it felt good out break out and feel comfortable. I needed to get out there and learn humility, learn to be comfortable and not care what people think, just be bold in what you really want to do. I do some covers and popular songs that people like. I lace my original stuff in it, so people get a chance to hear me, Eric, not just as a cover artist (Copeland 2011).

Eric's desire to be heard as “Eric,” to gain comfort with performing and to understand his competition as a singer points to what he is working to expand in relation to his performance experiences at Fisk. Achieving and maintaining a standard of classical vocal technique demonstrated by Ms. Bumbulis, along with representing the vocal ideals of the

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<sup>87</sup> Jefferson Avenue borders the Fisk campus and is the main thoroughfare of commerce through the predominantly black section of Nashville.

Jubilee Singers as President O’Leary and Dr. Kwami instruct, occupy his curricular singing activity. In non-curricular performances, Eric expands his singing style, as compared to his curricular singing, and he is not alone.

#### Non-Curricular Singing on Campus: *Fisk Idol*

I now turn to a more formal example of non-curricular singing on Fisk’s campus: the annual *Fisk Idol* singing competition sponsored by the (Fisk) Zeta Rho chapter Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia fraternity. This event exemplifies a student organized, self-selected form of vocal activity through which students destabilize Fisk’s curricular vocal ideals, through which the commercial recording industry’s problematic relationship to blackness and genre come to fore, and through which Fisk students create a space for their vocal pleasure, of “song and laughter,” as High John de Conquer might say.

#### Preparing for *Fisk Idol*

On a mild, clear, January day in Nashville, Marquis, a junior voice performance major and Fisk Jubilee Singer from St. Louis, Missouri, needed a ride to the mall (The Mall at Green Hills, specifically) in order to get a new shirt for the *Fisk Idol* competition happening the following day. During our interview in December, Marquis had told me about the work he did as the organizer of this highly anticipated event. Now in its second year, Marquis, along with his fellow members of the Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia music fraternity, was preparing to produce a vocal competition on campus to provide a performance opportunity for popular music singing on campus. Proceeds from the funds collected at the concert went to a scholarship foundation that the fraternity established. In addition to a trophy and bragging rights, the winner also records a single at a recent Fisk

graduate's studio, called One Stop, located near campus. During the *Fisk Idol* event, held in the Fisk Memorial Chapel, six finalists—current students at Fisk—showcased their popular music singing, accompanied by a live band comprised of students and recent graduates from Middle Tennessee State University. Anticipation for the performance was high. Publicity through flyers, a Facebook page, and word of mouth heavily circulated widely among the student body over this first week of classes of the spring 2012 semester.

I met Marquis at 3:30pm in front of the Harris Music Building on Thursday, January 13. Before getting into the car, he insisted that I see the trophies that the three competition winners would receive. We walked to the Chapel's side door and he showed me where they were stored. Immediately impressed by their large size, I noticed that G-clef, quarter note and music staff icons decorated the trophy columns, a microphone was atop the first place winner trophy, and the plaque read "GRAND PRIZE WINNER of the 2012 FISK IDOL Competition hosted by the Zeta Rho Chapter of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia." He picked up the three trophies to put them on the chapel's altar for display. We both paused and shared a moment of hesitation, after which he said, "Hmm. You know, they would be better displayed sitting at the foot of the stage." Relieved to hear that we shared concern for placing the trophies, or anything, on the altar, I smiled and he put the trophies in the exact downstage center portion of the pulpit.

We drove to The Mall at Green Hills and parked near Macy's, which he told me was the closest entrance to The Gap, the store from which he planned to purchase a new shirt. Not wanting to crowd his shopping experience, I told him to text me when he was ready to leave and I browsed through the mall. After about an hour, Marquis sent me a

text and I came to the Gap to meet him. “I got this shirt on sale. Fifteen dollars down from fifty!” “You got a good deal!” I responded. Beaming, and almost skipping with excitement, Marquis walked towards our mall exit. I asked him if we should get food before returning to campus. He looked at me, still smiling, and said, “Yeah, I am kind of hungry. I also need to go by my producer’s house and get the track for my song.” I was a bit confused as to what he was referring to, but agreed to help in whatever plans he had.

Once in the car, he directed me to an area of Nashville that I am slightly familiar with, as a friend from Fisk, as well as a former faculty member, own homes nearby. We turned the corner on a residential street lined with modest, one story houses. The sun was starting to set. Other than two children riding their bikes on the sidewalk, the street was quiet. I drove slowly, out of my effort to observe, and understanding that we could reach our destination at any moment. “Right here! This is his house,” Marquis said. I pulled to the curb and parked. “No, wait. It’s down a little further...No. This is it.”

“Have you been here before?” I asked him.

“Oh, yes. Just haven’t driven here and sometimes I mix up his house with another. But we are here. Lets go. I need to get back [to Fisk’s campus] soon.”

I grabbed my recorder and followed Marquis to the house’s empty porch. No lights could be seen through the window, and I wondered if his producer was home. Before a minute passed, the door swung open and a tall, sandy-blond-haired white man with glasses opened the door. He wore khaki pants, a white button-down dress shirt, and a brown argyle vest. “Hey, Marquis,” he said, turning to go back to his living room before even noticing that I was there. “I have a friend here with me. She’s doing a

project, can she come in?” Marquis asked. His producer turned back, surprised, saw me and said, “Oh, yeah! I’m sorry. Sure. Come in.” As we walked inside, the front room was dark, with only the faint sunlight from the windows illuminated the dark wood floor, old green love seat, walls lined with guitars, a Hammond B3 organ, and three Fender amplifiers. We walked in to the adjacent room, in direct line of the front door, and I noticed that we were in what was likely designed to be the dining room. An iMac, a MacBook Pro, a small keyboard, an eight-input sound board, and studio monitor speakers were arranged on a large table facing the wall. A ceiling lamp was on, providing dim light to the room. More guitars and Fender amplifiers lined the walls of this room. A small couch was in the corner.

“I’m just finishing now,” the producer said as he sat at the table and began burning a CD of background vocals for Marquis. It was clear to me that this house was a studio, and not a primary residence. When I asked if he lived in the house, he replied, “No. We, my business partners and I, friends from MTSU, bought this place as a studio. The houses are cheap here.” I wondered if Marquis, and other Fisk students, felt the same about the neighborhood. Questions about how this producer thinks about class and race immediately came to my mind, but I did not ask him any more questions, so as to not disrupt the conversation about new recording projects that he and Marquis were in the midst of sharing.

#### Café Coco and Marquis’ Non-Curricular Producer

Marquis met this producer two years ago, during his freshman year, at Café Coco. Café Coco is advertised by the Nashville Chamber of Commerce as a “Live Music

Venue,” its designation marked as such with a sign in front of the entrance. I had visited the restaurant when I was an exchange student at Fisk, and was surprised to learn that it remains an attraction for musically oriented area college students. Nestled almost exactly between the Fisk and Vanderbilt campuses, Café Coco serves American cuisine in its indoor and patio-dining area, has an indoor bar in the back of the restaurant that features live rock bands nightly, and welcomes musicians to play music together throughout the restaurant. I remember it being a place filled with people, at almost any hour of the day, and just as filled with the sounds of various popular music genres. In addition to students from Fisk and Vanderbilt, students from Middle Tennessee State University, Tennessee State, and Belmont also frequent Café Coco. On its website, the restaurant says, “This fun and eclectic meeting place blurs the distinction between coffee house, music venue and restaurant/caterer...Tucked within Elliston Place, Music City’s ‘Rock Block,’ the tables spill out onto the covered patio, side veranda and Back Stage Bar stretching the boundaries of this old house” (<http://cafecoco.com> accessed 30 January 2012). The venue remains a twenty-four hour operation, and it is an arena of exchange among musicians who specialize in popular music. For Marquis and his producer, Café Coco is perhaps the only place where they could have met and developed a relationship to work on music projects together.

At the restaurant’s open mic, musicians perform covers and original compositions of popular pop, folk, country, reggae, R&B, and hip-hop songs. Those working in Nashville’s commercial recording industry, as well as students (many music majors) from area colleges, regularly perform at the Café’s open mic nights. Some aspire to have their ensemble booked for a two-set performance. Marquis sang at an open mic during his first



year at Fisk and this producer, along with a sound engineer, had approached him after his performance. They introduced themselves as graduates of Middle Tennessee State University's Department of Recording Industry, looking to find artists to sing "real" R&B and soul, as they were only able to work with rock and folk artists during their studies at MTSU. Marquis welcomed the opportunity to work with them. It took two years before their schedules aligned, allowing them to finally record a demo together. Marquis' desire to work with this producer, he told me, stems from the fact that "everything is acoustic with them, even the beats. Sometimes I miss synthesized beats when I work with them, but only when I am doing a hip-hop track." Conversely, his producer reinforces that he enjoys working with Marquis, someone he feels is a "real" R&B singer. Interested in hearing more singers from Fisk, he told Marquis and me that he would attend *Fisk Idol* that evening, to Marquis' delight.

After a few more minutes at the computer, while Marquis paced, the producer said, "Ok. It's all set. Want to hear it?" "YES!" Marquis exclaimed. After the click of his mouse, I heard Marquis' voice singing "Love You a Long Time," the R&B/Soul record released and made popular by Jazmine Sullivan in 2010. Both the producer and Marquis began to move their heads to the beat of the track, Marquis with his eyes closed. I interrupted their listening to ask if Marquis had sung all of the vocal parts on the recording. "Yes," he told me with pride. "I laid all of the vocals." I noticed that the ensemble included background vocals, with three vocal lines, the solo vocal part, and a snare drum and keyboard. After the track ended, the producer looked at Marquis and asked, "Well?!" Marquis smiled, but not with the full smile he had when showing me the competition trophies. "It's cool," he responded. "I wish I had more time to re-sing the

bottom line, but this will work.” The producer continued to burn CDs of the recording, as they caught each other up on recent musical events they have seen in the area.

### The *Idol* Competition

Marquis and I headed back to Fisk, stopping for fast food on the way to campus. When we pulled up to the chapel, a grey Chevrolet Trailblazer was parked on the grass near the side entrance. “They are here already!” Marquis yelled, and got out of the car before I was completely stopped. “Wait!” I yelled back, “Hold on! At least take your food and eat, you haven’t eaten in hours!” Marquis waved at me and went into the chapel. I gathered our food, his newly purchased shirt and my camera and went into the chapel as well. Inside, I saw that the set-up for the event had begun. The Trailblazer belonged to a recent Fisk graduate, also a member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, who had opened a small business, “One Stop,” just a few blocks from campus. The services he provided at *Idol* are the heart of his business, as I learned through the promotional flyers he handed out to each attendee. He was the sound engineer for the evening, and had also constructed a background trellis, upon which he hung a hand painted “Fisk Idol” sign. While also moving speakers, wires, microphones, a snake, and the soundboard from his SUV to the chapel pulpit, he and Marquis had several short exchanges, each expressing frustration about the limited time, resources and communication that made the event set-up stressful.

As they continued to set up the stage, I went to the chapel’s balcony and arranged the camera and audio recorder, and began to take notes. After two minutes, students come to say hello and we began a conversation about what it is like to go to graduate school in New York. One student, from Jacksonville, Florida, was applying to

New York University Law School, and had concerns about balancing city life and his studies. I noted that these students were not as interested in helping with the set-up of the event as they were in preparing for their academic futures. We exchanged contact information and I promised to speak with them more.

Refocusing my attention on the set-up, I saw that the musicians comprising the live band, “Easy Money,” had arrived. A drummer, keyboardist, guitarist, and bass player arranged themselves and their instruments on stage. All of the band members were black musicians from Middle Tennessee State University, except for the guitarist, a white man. Just as had been arranged the night before during the dress rehearsal, the six finalists, selected after multiple round of auditions in November and December, had a sound check with the band and Marquis reminded them about what he coached them through during rehearsal. More than anything, he assured them that they would hear themselves better in the performance than in rehearsal (there were no monitors in rehearsal). The three judges arrived—Jubilee Singer and voice major De’Andre, the University Choir president, and a recent Fisk graduate and (former Jubilee Singer and Phi Mu Alpha member). They sat in the front, middle row of the chapel behind a table.

Dr. Philip Autry, the Chairman of the Music Department and advisor for the Zeta Rho chapter of the fraternity, joined me in the chapel balcony. We talked about the work that Marquis had put into the event, as well as the cold temperature of the chapel. He left to adjust the thermostat when the main chapel lights were turned down and only the stage was left lit. Marquis welcomed the crowd of about one hundred students and introduced the first act, freshman Robyn Waggoner, from Tennessee, who sang “Rolling in the Deep,” pop singer Adele’s hit, released in 2010. Marquis selected the song that each

finalist performed, with the vocal strengths of each participant in mind. Along with the live band, Fisk Jubilee Singers Eric Copeland, a tenor, and Audrey Tillis, a soprano, served as background singers with Marquis. They came to the stage and took a microphone from Mike, the One Stop engineer. I noticed that none of the musicians had scores or notes. Everyone was performing by ear, after only one rehearsal, which required a familiarity with all of the repertoire and a comfort performing with new collaborators.

As Robyn began her performance, the audience was fairly quiet. When she sang the lyrics of the refrain, "*We could have had it all,*" however, the audience, and her fans in particular, screamed with adoration, and the cheering remained high throughout the remainder of her performance. Judge De'Andre gave positive feedback after she sang, saying "[whispering to Marquis] 'What's her name again?' Robyn. Girl, you *sang* that song." Applause and more cheering erupted from the audience, so much so that I could not hear the rest of De'Andre's comments through the speaker system. Marquis introduced the next singer, sophomore Kiera Allen, from Atlanta. She sang "Next Lifetime," popularized by Erykah Badu's 1997 recording, followed by junior Charles Graham, who performed "Shaft," representing his hometown artist Isaac Hayes, from Memphis. Junior, and Jubilee Singer, Miracle Ham sang "Collard Greens and Cornbread," popularized through the 2010 Fantasia recording; sophomore Willie Butler sang Seal's 1994 record "Kiss From a Rose;" and junior Kristen Wardlow sang Rihanna's 2007 release "Umbrella." In the middle of the program, Marquis, joined by two of his fraternity brothers, performed to the recorded track we just picked up, "Love You a Long Time," garnering the attention of the instrumentalists, who watched as he

sang without their accompaniment.

At the conclusion of the competition, Marquis reminded the audience that they must go to the One Stop YouTube page in order to see instructions about how to vote for their favorite singer. Mike used my video footage to edit excerpts of each finalist's performance, and post them on the One Stop YouTube page. The winner of the competition would be announced during lunch in the Adam K. Spence Hall cafeteria the following week, he told the students. Carefully watching the Vizu poll Mike (the sound engineer for the event and owner of One Stop) had created, I saw that votes were cast from people in a range of states including Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Tennessee and Washington. This voting process, which occurred over the course of one week, was largely based on an edited video recording of the live performance, differing from Simon Cowell's version of *Idol*, but is similar in the way it allows viewers from across the country to participate in the voting. The *Fisk Idol* winner was not chosen by the Fisk student body alone, but by a larger, national audience. With a total of one hundred and seventy-one votes, Miracle Ham ("Collard Greens and Cornbread") won with 47.4% of the votes, Robyn Waggoner ("Rolling in the Deep") won second place with 38% of the votes, and the two male contestants, Willie Butler ("Kiss from a Rose") and Charles Graham ("Shaft") tied for third place, each accruing 5.8% of the votes.

At the end of the competition, the audience did not immediately disperse from the chapel. Marquis, who emceed the entire event, asked "Easy Money" for background music as he called all of the contestants to the stage. The band immediately played the 1981 anthem by Maze (featuring Frankie Beverly) "Before I Let Go." Eric, who had been

singing background vocals for the competition, started to sing the lead of the song, after its opening “[*You make me happy*, not sung], *this you can bet. You stood right beside me, and I won’t forget.*” The audience started to cheer. He resisted coming to the center of the stage, though the *Idol* contestants waved their hands, encouraging him to be front and center. He refused to keep singing lead when a chorus of attendees began to sing the melody together in unison—audience members, the contestants, musicians in the band, picking up the melody where Eric left off—“*I really love you, you should know, I wanna make sure I’m right, girl...*”

“Give it up for Kristina--Kristen!” Marquis said into the microphone.

“*Before I let go,*” the audience continued to sing.

“Give it up for Kiera Allen!” Marquis continued.

At this point, the audience conceded to Marquis and stopped singing the melody, applauding each contestant as he called his or her name. The contestants started to dance on the stage, Charles doing the two-step with Kiera and Kristen. Marquis welcomed the audience to stay and listen to the music, thanked them for attending, encouraged everyone in attendance to vote, and congratulated Delta Sigma Theta Sorority on their Founder’s Day. As he was still speaking, and as the band began to play the refrain of the song, the audience members started to sing the melody in unison again: “*Before I let you go! Oh! I would never, never, never, never, never, never...before I let go.*” Members of Delta Sigma Theta sorority sounded their call—“Oo-oop!”— increasing the density of the vocal sounds filling the chapel.

I heard the talking among audience members increase, and they stopped singing the melody. Eric continued to hold the microphone, and Marquis suggested that he continue to sing the melody: “Git it, Eric!” he said into his microphone. Eric shook his head and looked to the rhythm section, where the guitarist started to play the melody. Eric walked across the stage to the rhythm section and spoke with them. It seemed that he was looking for someone else to sing the melody of the piece. Following the keyboardist’s gesture, which pointed towards the guitarist, he announced, “Okay, here’s a little treat for you guys. Introducing—James!” and passed the microphone to him.

“You want me to sing this,” James, the only white instrumentalist, said, “so here we go.”

“Yeah!” audience members exclaimed.

Singing a melismatic “hey” to shrieks among students, he continued with the opening line: “*You make me happy.*”

Students yelled “whoo,” “yeah,” “ahhh,” while dancing, snapping their fingers, and expressing their enjoyment with shouts of approval. The members of the hosting fraternity began to stroll through the west aisle of the chapel, in the tradition of African American fraternities and sororities in which members dance in a counter-clockwise procession making the same dance gesture. After James sang a few more lines of the melody, students jumped from their seats and came to the edge of the chapel pulpit, as if it was a stage, waving their arms, and continuing to dance. James sang the entire song, and following the applause at the end, the band stopped playing and began to pack up their instruments and amps. After thirty-seconds, a male voice yelled “All hail!” and

other male voices, fraternity members, responded in unison with the fraternity call.

The band continued to wrap cables and pack their instruments and gear, while students talked and laughed with each other. No one left the chapel. Two minutes passed and members of the fraternity formed a circle, with arms interlocking on each other's shoulders, in the middle of the stage/chapel pulpit. The circle was composed of Fisk students, other fraternity members who attended the competition, and Dr. Austry. Only fifteen seconds passed before the audience members said, "shhh!" and the chapel fell quiet. Rocking together in a moderate tempo, those in the circle started to sing the fraternity song, with lyric vocalism and four-part harmony. The drummer and bass player, also on the chapel stage, situated behind the circle, continued to pack their instruments. When the singing concluded, students began to talk with each other again and I packed up my camera to meet Marquis on the lower level of the chapel.

Once downstairs, I saw that some of the Fisk Jubilee Singers were gathered casually in the back (east) corner of the chapel singing the spiritual, "In Bright Mansions."<sup>88</sup> When I walk over to them, they stopped singing and talked about who planned to go to Mount Zion, a predominantly black, full-gospel denomination

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<sup>88</sup> William, the keyboardist and music education major at MTSU, was struck by hearing the Jubilee Singers sing together casually after the event. He said, "They are very talented. I was impressed with the skill level, and the technique. Honestly, it sounds really bad, but, it's just, it's impressing to hear that from a black university because sometimes they are just so underrated. So to hear something like that, from a historically black college, it's amazing to me. You know, it makes me really proud. It's not just, you know, some people singing soulful music—it was technique, you know, it was, a lot of things that we're taught, you know, fundamentals. It's not just people getting together and just throwing something together. It was very well executed. And it was just, like, second nature to them. [Referring to Jubilee Singer Marquis, the *Idol* host] This man was walking around, packing up speakers and walking with nails and hammers and just singing perfectly in tune, in pitch, you know, perfect vibrato. It sounded beautiful. He wasn't even thinking about it, you know, and he's moving podiums and Bibles and all types of stuff [Marquis re-set the chapel pulpit in regular formation]" (Brooks 2012).



“megachurch” in Nashville, to see the Stellar Awards<sup>89</sup> events. Award-winning gospel artists Marvin Sapp and Fred Hammond were scheduled to be in attendance, according to one of the Singers. Marquis, who was among the group, looked at me with interest, knowing that we had planned to go to Chili’s restaurant with some of the band members and talk about the competition. We decided to join the other Singers at Mt. Zion after we ate.

Unfortunately, when we arrived at the church, the parking lot was full, and cars were even parked on the grass. Marquis and I saw De’Andre walking towards the entrance and drove towards him. As Marquis rolled down the car window to catch De’Andre’s attention, De’Andre turned, waved hello, and told Marquis that he was disappointed with the quality of the *Idol* event. “It was disorganized, Marquis.” Marquis, offended, replied, “No way. I think that you were too harsh in your comments [as a judge].” They continued to argue until De’Andre expressed that he came to the event for solace. When he arrived home after *Idol*, he had to console his neighbor, whose apartment was broken into at gunpoint. We both listened to De’Andre explain the difficult details, after which the heat of their exchange cooled, and they rode back to campus together in De’Andre’s car.

Of the many remarkable aspects of *Fisk Idol*, here I will address students’ demonstration of release from curricular vocal standards and their use of the *Idol* competition format. Additionally, I will discuss their repertoire choices as these relate to

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<sup>89</sup> The Stellar Awards are an annual awards event for the commercial gospel music industry. Held in a different city each year, Nashville hosted the 2012 ceremony. As described on their website, “It has been 27 years since the first awards show was taped at the Arie Crown Theater in Chicago, and the Stellar Awards has now become the premier Gospel event that recognizes and honors African American artists” ([www.stellarawards.com](http://www.stellarawards.com)).

genre and “black music” within the commercial recording industry.

### Non-Curricular Singing: Vocal Judgment and the *Idol* Format

Marquis told me about his non-curricular singing and participation in Nashville’s live music scene. He “loves working with musicians outside of Fisk.” When I asked him to describe his curricular and non-curricular singing he said,

It’s the default [his curricular singing]. It teaches what to follow, like technique. If I need musicians that are on Fisk’s campus, nine times out of ten, we are all learning the same thing...There’s only one musician on campus, talking instrumentally—not vocally—[with whom] we could put something together [a song] and go to a jazz club, or something like that. Musicians that I meet outside of Fisk—I just connect musically with them a lot more. Because, maybe it’s just mentally, [I think] ‘Okay, I’m outside of Fisk, so this has nothing to do with, you know, learning technique and, you know, staying technical.’ I think I can be more open, and more free and more--what’s completely true to me, with nobody judging me for it. These musicians, [pointing to non-Fisk college student musicians with us] won’t judge me for trying to be as me as I can (Brooks, Johnson and Murphy 2012).

The pressure to perform “technique,” as discussed in chapter one, strongly influences how Marquis approaches his curricular singing and his singing with other Fisk students, whether on campus or not. He said further, “In the Fisk realm, it’s like, they [students and faculty] know me, they’ve worked with me, they’re in classes with me, so I try to keep the ‘Fisk me’ [in his singing]” (Murphy 2011). Marquis, however, did not perform the “Fisk singing” he spoke of during *Fisk Idol*. Marquis’ background singing, solo singing, and emceeding speech style, he told me, were new ways of vocalizing on campus. He felt a confidence expanding his campus vocal presentation in this non-curricular space, and away from the gaze and ears of his voice teacher, Ms. Bumbulis. He told me that he felt “free” at the *Idol* event. Our exchange was as follows:

MKN: Did you feel free even with Dr. Autry there?

Marquis: Yeah! Because Dr. Autry isn't--see, It's not really Dr. Autry that I--now, if *Ms. B* was there—[Marquis chuckles]. I'm not gonna lie. I probably would have been really nervous. And I don't think it would've went the same. Especially hosting. And when I sang the Jazmine Sullivan song, I don't know, I can't say for sure, but I just know that would've been all like: [imitating an operatic soprano's range and vibrato] “*met this girl, and she loves me a lot, and ain't nobody ever gon--*”

MKN: “Really?!” [Other students with us burst into laughter.]

Marquis: But, I definitely would have been a lot more—I wouldn't have been, I wouldn't have felt free. I would have felt like I needed to—like, the principal's watching.

Other students expressed to me that in Fisk's environment where “everyone can sing,” expectations for vocal virtuosity are high, not only in curricular moments but in students' everyday non-curricular interactions. A social currency and mechanism to establish trust, singing at Fisk is the method through which students evaluate each other, measured against the vocal ideal of the Jubilee Singers.<sup>90</sup> Ms. Bumbulis' presence certainly marks this standard, and students, like Marquis, are often nervous to perform in front of her. A majority of college music majors, no doubt, experience performance anxiety when performing in front of their primary teacher. What distinguishes the feelings of Fisk students, however, is the pressure they feel through an awareness of their peers' vocal standards.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers, past and present, embody the “Fisk me” vocal ideal, ubiquitous in students' curricular and non-curricular vocal activity. In Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia's choice to host a popular music singing competition in the form of *American Idol*, the desire for vocal play, more adjudication of each other, exploration in non-bel

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<sup>90</sup> This practice of vocal judgment extends beyond student-to-student interactions. During my fieldwork, it was crucial that I sing classical repertoire for students. Upon hearing that I was a “good” singer, students introduced themselves to me and asked me to sing for them. Approving my performances, they embraced the project and welcomed me into their worlds.

canto singing and interaction with non-Fisk musicians coalesce. As Katherine Meizel discusses, the *Idol* format provokes references to karaoke singing. Singing covers of popular music songs, singers perform on the border between “amateur” and “professional” audience reception, and these cover performances contribute to an accumulation of a song’s status as iconic in this local performance context at Fisk (Meizel 2011: 61-62). Performers are adjudicated in *Idol* performances, similar to curricular performances at Fisk, against the standard of the popular recording of a given song. A singer’s entire vocal approach, as well as the quality of the recording, informs how audience members receive an *Idol* participant’s performance. The repertoire Marquis selected for the *Fisk Idol* competitors was not typical of an *American Idol* television production. Selecting from a specific part of an enormous body of commercial popular songs, Marquis specifically chose to feature the “neo soul” genre at *Fisk Idol*.

#### *Fisk Idol* Repertoire and Black Popular Music

*Fisk Idol* participants’ singing met, and in some cases exceeded, the standard of pop singing virtuosity as performed on *American Idol*. Marking another iteration of Fisk students’ singing strengths, each singer demonstrated a unique, sincere and aesthetically pleasing vocal approach, affirmed by the audience members’ cheers and the judges’ positive comments for each singer. The particular detail of each singer’s vocal approach is of less interest to me here than his or her repertoire choices, and how this repertoire figures in the commercial recording industry. I argue that the widely circulated songs recorded by Adele, Erykah Badu, Isaac Hays, Fantasia, Seal, and Rihanna that Marquis programmed are not representative of the full range of commercial song styles. Further, commercial categorization of the songs recorded by these artists falls into the realm of

“black” popular music, a product of record companies’ century old practice of labeling artists and their music along racial lines, the racial segregation of radio and concert venues, and listeners’ (re)construction of racial identity through listening choices (Fellezs 2011; Holt 2007; Neal 1998). Genre categories, regardless of musical and sonic characteristics (such as blues, gospel, soul, funk, R&B, rap, hip-hop, and jazz) fall under the realm of black popular music, as does the commercial genre category neo soul.

Over the course of the twentieth century, scholars have critiqued the commercial recording industry’s troubled practice of racializing genre categories, especially with regard to popular music. David Brackett summarizes this discourse, with concise clarity, and connects the history US popular music genre categorization and racial identity. He writes:

The relationship between divisions in the musical field and social identities is most obvious in the large categories for popular music (initially labeled ‘race,’ ‘hillbilly,’ and ‘popular’) that have been used by the US music industry since the 1920s. Of these categories, ‘race music’—subsequently relabeled ‘rhythm and blues,’ ‘soul,’ ‘black,’ and more recently, ‘R&B’—has persistently been linked with African Americans. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this lineage has been straightforward or consistent....Yet it would also be a mistake to think of these categories as solely arbitrary machinations of the music industry or as mere ‘social constructions.’ The large musical categories of the US popular music industry...are part of a larger field of musical production in which musical genres participate in the circulation of social connotations that pass between musicians, fans, critics, music-industry magnates and employees. That these connotations, these ‘meanings,’ are accepted as ‘real’ speaks to the phantasmic nature of identity, that ever-shifting sense of self that finds confirmation and reinforcement in quotidian social practices and in a ring of discursive formations, both institutional and shadowy (Brackett 2005: 75).

The *Fisk Idol* repertoire did not include songs from commercial genres like country, folk, classical, and it did not include songs from the blues, gospel, funk, or rap genres. Even from within a narrowed range of black popular music styles, Fisk students sang primarily

songs from the neo soul genre.

While students are often critical of them, commercial genre names circulate widely in Fisk students' talk about popular music. Bakhtin argues that "genre" operates as a tool to interact with an intended audience, and that is not a template specifying formal characteristics (1986). Genre categorization renders an industry's, artist's, or consumer's approach recognizable for a particular, intended audience. In this discussion of intersubjective genre construction and circulation, Brackett draws from Bakhtin's writings about genre, saying, "...musical utterances form and are subsequently reformed within (or between or even among) genres, already anticipating how these utterances will be heard. Successful interactions with mediators (e.g., record company employees, music critics, etc.) situated within institutions that function at the interstices of power and public culture often depend on generic intelligibility (at least until a certain level of success has been achieved), but these gatekeepers are also not independent from the social construction of generic meaning" (Brackett 2005: 77). "Addressivity," Brackett recalls, invoking the work of Bakhtin and Simon Frith, "...provides one way of understanding how people in the United States (and much of the rest of the world) can speak of 'black popular music' with some sense that they know what they are talking about despite apparent inconsistencies" (ibid: 78). When it comes to non-curricular musical activity, whether as musicians or listeners, Fisk students—aware of the hegemonic gaze of the mainstream US, embracing a black racial heritage, and celebratory of their racial identity as black—are careful to distinguish their musical preferences *between* and *within* black popular music genres, through a discourse about singers' vocal acts and appearance.

## Neo Soul

As historicized by listeners, recording artists and commercial music industry executives, the genre classification of neo soul has a range of origin stories. Taking its name at face value, one would assume that the genre is a “new” version of the soul genre that emerged in the 1970s. As with many genre categories, neo soul is a commercial music industry term that consumers have both embraced and resisted in their performances of musical taste and identity construction. Primarily a vocal genre, neo soul serves the Fisk student population’s vocal orientation. Specific US regions, both of the urban north (especially the greater Philadelphia area), and of the suburban south (such as Dallas), were sites of early neo-soul performance venues. Urban radio stations remain inconsistent in programming neo-soul, and audiences treasure the live performance of the genre’s style.

Media studies scholar Phillip Lamarr Cunningham describes the commercial music industry’s narrative about neo-soul’s development, writing: “Kedar Massenburg, the executive producer credited with discovering D’Angelo and Erykah Badu,<sup>91</sup> often proudly boasts of his coining of the term *neo-soul*. In a *Billboard* article on the genre, Massenburg states, ‘I own the trademark neo-soul...The term ‘new soul’ originated when I came out with D’Angelo [before Massenburg joined Motown as CEO and producer], who was reminiscent of Marvin Gaye and Donny Hathaway’” (Cunningham 2010: 242).

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<sup>91</sup> Listeners often compare Erykah Badu’s singing voice with that of Billie Holiday. “With her unique vocals, which many would liken to Billie Holiday...Badu, like D’Angelo, gave critics of R&B/soul a glimmer of hope with her debut album *Baduizm* (1997)” (Cunningham 2010: 241). Invoking Holiday’s legacy in a discussion of Badu, a leader of commercial neo soul recordings, connects Badu with a community of popular, misunderstood and gifted black female singers that refuse racist and sexist treatment from the commercial music industry and its patrons (Griffin 2001).

Cunningham draws an arc further back, citing Nelson George as coining the concept of neo-soul. In 1988, “George advances the idea of ‘retronuevo,’ which he describes as ‘black music that appreciates its heritage,’ which, ‘emerged to bring back some of the soul and subtlety its audience deserves’” (ibid). “George touts R&B/soul band Maze featuring Frankie Beverly...as a shining example of retronuevo...because of the band’s ability to cover soulful ballads with the same passion as protest songs” (ibid).

In an interview published in *Vibe* magazine, Badu explains her understanding of neo soul as a commercial device, not a self-proclaimed or descriptive genre label:

Yeah, I was definitely pegged neo-soul. I disagreed with it as time went on and as the whole neo-soul brand got bigger. I started reading articles that would say, ‘neo-soul artist Faith Evans,’ or ‘Usher’—Faith and Usher are pop singers! My friend Res was labeled neo-soul and she’s alternative rock. So, I said, okay, this is the new nigger music! They found a way to just group us all together. Then I said, there’s no way to identify this thing and it’s strictly a marketing tool. Marketing is very important in the corporate world, but it still isn’t the basis for art. The truth is that I’m just a soul singer” (Cunningham 2010: 243).

At *Fisk Idol*, the “Easy Money” performance of the Frankie Beverly and Maze recording, “Before I Let Go,” brought the entire audience to their feet. As the concluding performance of the event, Fisk students punctuated an evening of neo-soul performances with reference to Maze, the musicians cited by Nelson George as leaders of the neo-soul genre.

Lyrics to neo-soul songs contrast with those of many mainstream hip-hop recordings in that, as a whole, they rarely center on themes of substance abuse and violence. Erotic, self-reflective, and socially “conscious” lyric themes pervade neo soul lyrics. As literary scholar Marlo David explains, “Neo-soul resists this dogmatic evocation of debased street credibility that permeates much of contemporary popular



R&B tracks. Instead, neo-soul singles typically reference ‘da hood’ through nostalgic visions of black love, familial unity and community” (David 2007: 699). African

American Studies scholar Reiland Rabaka contends that neo soul:

... is a hybrid musical form that re-centers the autobiographical and sociopolitical singer-songwriter style of classic soul and, consequently, many of its critics have stressed that it has a greater emphasis on lyrical content or ‘conscious lyrics’ when compared with the pedestrian character of most contemporary R&B. Also, neo-soul is known to be a concept album-oriented genre...directly draws from the more ‘organic’ and acoustic musical innovations and production techniques of classical soul music...In an age of computerized and commercialized music, neo-soul artists’ emphasis on an acoustic ‘band sound’ and message-oriented music offers a much-needed alternative, not only to contemporary R&B, but also to the blandness of commercial rap (Rabaka 2011: 170-171).

While I do not agree that commercial rap and contemporary R&B are “pedestrian” and “bland,” Rabaka’s description of neo soul’s lyrics and the style’s incorporation of an “acoustic band sound”<sup>92</sup> resonates with the attitudes of many neo soul consumers seeking an “organic” sound and “natural” recording artists, as Fisk students explain to me below. Marquis’ interest in working with the producer from Middle Tennessee State University, on account of the fact that “...everything is acoustic with them. Even the beats,” also resonates with Rabaka’s assertion.

In a conversation with students MarQo, Sabrina and LeTroy, they expounded upon their understanding of neo soul as *non-commercial*.

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<sup>92</sup> Alexander Weheliye complicates the idea of “organic” sound in R&B and black popular music in his analysis of the vocoder. “I am most interested in the status of the recorded voice in contemporary mainstream R&B, because this genre” he writes, “...does not so much absorb the ‘future shock’ of Afrofuturism as reconstruct the black voice in relation to information technologies. While singers remain central to the creation of black music, they do so only in the conjunction with the overall sonic architecture, especially in the turn away from the lead singer as the exclusive artists to the more producer-driven and collaborative musical productions” (Weheliye 2002: 30).

MarQo: R&B, to me, is wrapped up in what I consider a gimmick, an image. It's commercial. It's not about the artistry of the music, it's about—Ok: Do you have voice? And then do you have a look? And, then, what are you talking about? Does it conform to popular music? That's what drives R&B. The money. Rather than the true artistry, or situational experience of developing that passion of the music for what it is. What neo-soul represents to me is not driven by the dollar.... You have amazingly talented artists, Erykah Badu, Maxwell, D'Angelo, who aren't mainstream. They're not Nicki Minaj, they're not Keyshia Cole.

Sabrina: Or Usher

MarQo: But if you compare them tit-for-tat in terms of musicality, these R&B artists would pale in comparison....Neo-soul is like: "I don't care if I'm fat, ugly, I don't care if can't dress, I don't care if you look at me weird, but you are gonna listen to what I have to say."

LeTroy: To me, neo soul artists are like "I'm natural." Like Erykah Badu or India.Arie. "I'm natural, I'm me." R&B is more like: "Oh my God, I gotta stay in shape, I gotta keep my figure."

Sabrina: That's the difference between Diana Ross and Nina Simone.

LeTroy: Correct.

Sabrina: But what about Beyonce's "Love on Top," her modulations?

MarQo: I hear she takes from middle-eastern sounds. Middle eastern techniques...whatever the sharp 7<sup>th</sup> is on the minor scale [he sings the scale]. I think that Beyonce is the quintessential R&B singer.<sup>93</sup>

MarQo, Sabrina and LeTroy's insistence on neo soul artists' "natural" self-presentation and expression rejects the role of the commercial recording industry in shaping the image and sound of neo soul. Declaring that the talent of neo soul singers exceeds that of R&B singers, even with an evaluation of Beyonce's singing, I learn that their understanding of the genre is not bound to commercial artists, but that they themselves participate in composing neo soul music as well, and value the "natural" expression they feel the genre style offers. Despite their description of neo-soul artists as

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<sup>93</sup>Group conversation on December 4, 2011.

“natural” in their appearance, the commercial recording industry’s discussion of these artists affirms the commodification of their image and musical sound, and even the marketing of the artists as “natural.” Regardless of this difference between these Fisk students’ understanding of neo-soul and that of commercial producers, however, I am interested in how LeTroy, Sabrina and MarQo consume neo-soul as “natural.” In relation to what? Their description brings to mind classic debates about the divide between nature and culture, which, in turn, map onto hegemonic essentialized “racial” attributes, coupled with the role of popular music in the self-exploration and re-identifications of these college students.

The multiple and divergent definitions and origin stories of neo soul also present a common difficulty challenging musicians’ interface with the commercial recording industry, and African Americans’ music making remains especially fraught in this regard (Fellezs 2011; Lewis 2008; Story 1990). “That neo-soul is indiscriminately applied to numerous artists is only one of the genre’s many problems. What makes the term so problematic is the popular belief that it is a new form of R&B/soul rather than a continuance of it. However, as I contend here, neo-soul is just soul music that both reflects and advances the tradition” (Cunningham 2010: 241). The definition of the genre is less about what the music sounds like, or whether it is a “new” genre category. The utility of neo soul, like many other genre labels, is in how artists respond to it, and how consumers reify and resist it. The label allows for communication about the music, either in speech or in sonic expectations, in an interpretive, associational process that has been taken up as a critical focus by ethnomusicologists for thirty years (Feld 1984). The problem of race, genre and the commercial music industry is of less interest to me here,

however, than how Fisk students manage their singing in relation to this reality.

“What is a neo soul?”: Class, Ethnicity and Gender

Continuing this group conversation with Fisk students, MarQo explained his relationship to neo soul as a composer, with an emphasis on lyrics. He said,

I wrote what I call neo soul-gospel, where it combines influences of Musiq Soulchild, Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, you know, those neo soul artists, D’Angelo. And I think it just has a different, a different vibe to it, a different feel. The rhythm is just different, the chords are jazzy. That style, but with the message of gospel of Jesus Christ, is what I want to convey. Or a message of relationship.

You may hear my song and not know exactly that I’m talking about, but I’m ministering to you, unknowingly, and that’s what I want. I want to draw people in with the style, with my tone, with all of those things, and give you a message that causes you to be edified. And that’s really my whole purpose behind writing this type of music (Patton 2011).

LeTroy, responded saying,

I would like to give a lot of honor to MarQo on this one. Recently, I thought I was more of an R&B person, until MarQo was like ‘Well, you know—He kept saying ‘neo soul, neo soul,’ I was like ‘neo soul?’ *What is a ‘neo soul’?* [emphasis mine, we all chuckle]. I have Pandora, and I have a neo-soul section. So, I listen to neo-soul every day now. And I, literally, go to sleep on neo-soul. It plays while I’m sleeping...I’m a big Musiq Soulchild fan. That’s my favorite. You know, when I become a singer, I wanna sing the same type of stuff he’s singing. I’m thinking he’s singing R&B, until I hear it’s neo-soul. So I’m more of the neo-soul person as well [like MarQo]...I’m more of a poet person [as opposed to music composition]. I write a lot of poems. That’s why I shouldn’t say that cause she [Sabrina, the founder and organizer of the open mic event on campus] is going to try to throw me in an open mic, and I’m not really up for reciting my poems (Billups 2011).

LeTroy looks up to MarQo as a former Jubilee Singer, a recent graduate and young professional. It is important for LeTroy to listen to neo soul as a part of his college experience, because, as he says, he wants to “honor” MarQo for telling him about neo soul. This fashioning of musical taste exemplifies an aspect of the social life of genre in reconstructing identity and social position. To claim enjoyment of neo soul over R&B,

for LeTroy, performs his reformed musical preferences as a college student and, I argue, performs a black middle class sensibility with which he identifies as a Fisk student.

LeTroy demonstrates the intraracial, unfixed, unstable, and changing relationship between music genre, identity construction, and the performance of African American ethnicity. As Stuart Hall's seminal work shows, identity (re)formation and ethnicity (re)formation are always in dialogic relationship to the Other, but "The Other is not outside, but also inside the Self, the identity" (Hall 1989: 15-16).

In telling me about her relationship with R&B and neo soul, Sabrina genders black popular music genres as feminine. She said:

I feel like neo-soul is a direct little sister of jazz. It has so much lean and lax to it, sometimes you ain't even gotta say words, you can just make a whole lotta sounds...with R&B, it's more direct, it's like the unsaved sister of gospel (Walker 2011).

Sabrina pairs jazz with neo soul and R&B with gospel as "sisters." Both gendered female, I also notice that she imbues neo soul with the cultural capital of the jazz imagination and distances neo soul from R&B and gospel. Her organization of these black popular music genres points towards the classic "cultivated/vernacular", "art/popular", and "high/low culture" debates in music studies. As demonstrated by their choice of neo soul repertoire at *Fisk Idol*, Fisk students stratify their affiliation with popular music genres, stylizing their Fisk sensibility in moments of leisure and non-curricular vocal activity. "People underrate it [neo soul]," Sabrina continues to tell me, "I'm a neo-soul junkie. I live for Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, all of it, I just sit and I listen all day. If you listen to their music over time, and how they develop, you can definitely hear how they've developed their voices. How their technique has developed over time" (Walker 2011). Here again,

Sabrina demonstrates Fisk students' value for a performance of vocal "technique," regardless of the genre style.

### Black Radical Subjectivity Through Non-Curricular Vocality

"In large measure, popular R&B music still trades on the cultural capital of the thinking, desiring, speaking, and embodied black humanist subject" (David 2007: 696).

This chapter has explored the non-curricular vocal example of *Fisk Idol*, and I have described the ways through which Fisk students experiment with the construction of a black middle class sensibility through non-curricular, leisure vocal activity. Whether singing on campus or throughout Nashville, Fisk students thoughtfully make space for their vocal exploration, and strategically engage with the commercially recording industry. The example of *Fisk Idol* demonstrates how the Memorial Chapel serves not only as a sanctuary for worship and convocation on Fisk's campus, but also as shelter *for* leisure and *from* the threat of racial violence off campus. Students freely performed non-sacred music, and even experimented with the altar, within the protection of the campus, safely hidden from fraught interracial negotiations frequent at Café Coco. These moments of vocal fun and play are shared by Nashville's larger college student population, making for positive interaction. As William, the *Fisk Idol* keyboard player from Middle Tennessee State University, told me, "Just for the simple fact that I don't get up here much [to the Fisk campus]...it was a really awesome experience to see that many brothers in one spot. United, to do something positive. It's not often where you get the chance, where a group of young men get together and put together a show on their own, and to be in a positive atmosphere like that....They did a great job" (Brooks 2011).

Fisk students did not play instruments at the event. They featured as the lead and

background singers, performing songs categorized by the commercial music industry as neo soul, *not* R&B. This popular music genre represents a repertoire that expresses Fisk students' African American middle class value for thoughtful, virtuosic, and anti-essentialist secular, non-curricular vocality. As Reiland Rabaka summarizes:

Therefore, in neo-soul, in contradistinction to the blah of most contemporary R&B, love is conceptualized as something that extends well beyond intimate or sexual relationships. Neo-soul artists frequently sing about and celebrate black life, black love, black culture, and black community. Following the musical footsteps of classic soul artists, such as Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Smokey Robinson, Betty Davis, Bill Withers, Roberta Flack, Donnie Hathaway, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Minnie Riperton, Curtis Mayfield, Gladys Knight and Al Green, neo-soul artists do not privilege black sexuality over black spirituality (2013: 199-200).

In the range of individual Fisk students' singing styles—performing solos with the Jubilee Singers or singing a cover of a Jazmine Sullivan song, as in the case of Marquis—lies a dialectical relationship between curricular and non-curricular vocal activity. The Fisk Jubilee Singer vocal ideal and the vocal sounds enacted and heard in the yard inform each other and voice the multiplicity at play in a modern black American vocal experience. David suggests "... as Weheliye does, that these inscriptions of humanity in black culture provide particular performances of the human—singularities, if you will, that always incorporate their own multiplicities—as opposed to mere uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject. Neo-soul music is one such singularity, which has 'reframed the subjectivities' of black people and suggested identities both embodied and disembodied, human and post-human" (David 2007: 697).

Without refusing racial identity as a unitary subject position, Fisk students, like their predecessors in the New Negro movement, continue to sing through the shadow of stereotype, complicating what blackness sounds like (Locke 1925; David 2007: 697). In

an era when questions of “neo” and “*post-*” abound, and as the categories “neo soul,” “post-soul,” “post-black,” “post-genre,” pervade discourse about black popular music, Fisk students, empowered in their individuality and recognition as black college students, sing the “changing same” (Baraka 1968).

In an analysis of Robert Glasper’s award winning 2012 *Black Radio* album, Guthrie Ramsey proposes a post-genre moment “...that disrupts traditional ideas about music that have been preciously held in the industry since it emerged in the late-nineteenth century” (Ramsey 2013: 120). The questions becomes, he writes, in a post-genre moment, “where does blackness fit?” (ibid: 123). As anti-black racism and the hegemony of white supremacy perpetuates, Fisk students continue to sing in ways of their own choosing during moments of leisure. Their singing choices demonstrate how the commercial recording industry is not the only determining factor in shaping music genre ideology and exemplify how institutions of higher education also construct black (popular) music and racialized vocality. Mostly, though, I hear blackness in how Fisk students’ non-curricular vocality exercises that “...love and laughter win by their subtle power” (Hurstun 1981: 79).



## Chapter 4

### ***Her Sons are Steadfast, Her Daughters True: Singing Fisk's Alma Mater, Religiosity and Institutionalality***

*The warm and genial setting sun  
Lights up the hills with mellow hue,  
Where Fisk our Alma Mater stands,  
Majestic, dear, old Gold and Blue.*

*To North, to East, to South, to West,  
The loyal children make their way;  
To execute they fine behest,  
"Go turn the darkness into day."*

*To heav'n, to country, and to thee,  
Our hearts shall first and last be true,  
We e'en shall die with loyalty  
To heav'n, to country, Gold and Blue.*

*Then hurrah and hurrah for the Gold and the Blue.  
Her sons are steadfast, her daughters true.  
Where'er we be, we shall still love thee.  
Fisk! Our alma mater.*

-John W. Work I, 1944<sup>94</sup>

Two students with whom I worked closely, voice performance majors and Jubilee Singers junior Eric, from Kansas, and senior De'Andre, from Oklahoma, both perform throughout Nashville at dinner theaters, open mics, churches, and singing competitions. We discussed making a recording of repertoire they would like to circulate with their press kids and for auditions. I shared their desire with my husband Whitney Slaten, an ethnomusicologist and professional sound engineer, in hopes that he would be willing to offer Eric and De'Andre a recording session. Graciously willing to support Eric and De'Andre in this way, Whitney came to Nashville to record selections of their choice.

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<sup>94</sup> See Appendix, figure 2.

De'Andre reserved the Fisk Memorial Chapel for our use on March 14, 2011, in the afternoon. The four of us met at the chapel door, where I found the students relaxed and excited. Walking together through the unlocked chapel doors, I noticed that the space was calm and the room temperature cool. Eric carried with him a set of music scores. De'Andre was empty handed. The pulpit's wood floor glistened in the sunlight, which generously poured through the upper and lower level Gothic revival window planes. They were both casually dressed. De'Andre wore a purple and white striped polo and khakis. Black sunglasses rested on top of his head. Eric wore a blue, untucked t-shirt, relaxed, light blue jeans and tan slip-on canvas shoes. Walking down the western aisle to the pulpit, De'Andre and Eric immediately began to move the chapel's podium formation so that the grand piano was in the center of the space. Whitney immediately set up the microphone and tripod and checked the levels of the room through his laptop and headphones. Eric looked to Whitney for approval about where he stood in relation to the microphone.

“That’s fine. You are fine actually,” Whitney assured him.

I asked Eric “What are you going to record?”

“Some stuff I am working on with Ms. B [Ms. Bumbulis is a member of Fisk’s voice faculty]. And some other songs I sing around town.”

“Cool,” I replied, “And, De’Andre, what about you?”

“Well, after I accompany Eric, I’m not sure. Maybe some gospel songs to share with churches. You know I play a lot of church gigs.”

Once De'Andre was comfortably seated at the aged, slightly out-of-tune, Steinway D at the center of the chapel's pulpit, Whitney discussed the microphone position with Eric again. Eric stood behind De'Andre's right shoulder, with an Earthworks QTC50 omnidirectional condenser measurement microphone on a tripod between them. From where Eric was located, they were not able to make eye contact, and could only communicate through musical gestures. The piano's lid was closed.

"Whenever you're ready," Whitney said.

Whitney and I sat towards the back of the pulpit as De'Andre and Eric discussed what to record first.

"Well, I brought my *Twenty-Four Italian*," Eric told De'Andre, "lets do that first."

"Ok!" De'Andre replied.

Eric handed him a well-worn faded yellow book, the *Twenty-Four Italian Art Songs and Arias* (Schirmer 1986), one of the canonical collections of Western vocal pedagogy. De'Andre placed the score on the piano stand and flipped through its pages.

"How about 'O cessate di piagarmi'?" Eric asked.

"Fine with me," De'Andre replied nonchalantly.

He turned to page eighty-four of the famous collection and began playing the introduction.

“Wait,” Eric said nervously. “Lets start again.”

Returning to the beginning of the introduction, De’Andre played it again and Eric sang the piece from beginning to end.

Whitney and I said nothing as they recorded. When they finished the piece, Eric looked at Whitney and asked, “Could we do it again? I just didn’t like the middle section.”

“Sure,” Whitney replied.

De’Andre and Eric proceeded through another performance of the piece before recording “Ordinary People,” (2005) by R&B singer-songwriter John Legend. While playing this piece, De’Andre did not use a score to play, nor did he discuss the key with Eric before playing the introduction. He asked Eric, “What do you want to do next?” a question to which Eric responded by looking unsure. De’Andre began to play a memorable descending melodic passage from “Ordinary People,” and Eric smiled. De’Andre continued to play and Eric sang the piece in its entirety. In the same way, they also recorded gospel music composer Richard Smallwood’s “Jesus, You’re the Center of My Joy” (1987). De’Andre started playing an introduction and said to Eric, “Try that [key].” Eric sang the first line with a bit of hesitation, but thereafter regained confidence in the key and they proceeded through the end of the song. Eric reached for his water bottle and pointed to De’Andre for a break. De’Andre said, “Well, perhaps I’ll record ‘Total Praise.’ I could really use that with churches.” De’Andre serves as the keyboardist for worship services throughout Nashville and “Total Praise,” another Smallwood

composition (2006), is a staple selection for many Protestant denominations.

He lifted the lid of the piano, using the full stick, and began a long, almost two-minute introduction, showcasing both the piano's dynamic range and his improvisatory skills. His rendition reminded me of a stylized moment in a Baptist church service when the keyboardist plays a solo piece, from which he or she would repeat motives during an interlude, offering or prayer. His performance filled musical space, and filled time, it felt to me, in the way he extended what is traditionally a five-minute choral piece into a seven minute piano solo. After De'Andre's rousing finale, I asked if there was anything else they wanted to record. After all, it was a rare occasion to enjoy an empty chapel, a good microphone, and a bit of unoccupied time.

"Hmmm, I'm not sure," Eric said.

De'Andre continued to play chord progressions while Eric thought about the next piece to sing—when only after ten seconds, Eric recognized that De'Andre was playing "The Gold and the Blue," Fisk's alma mater.

"Oh!" Eric responded, "Let's do that!"

Suspecting that they would choose to record something else—maybe another current popular or gospel song—I was surprised by their choice.

"Hold on," Whitney said, and moved the microphone closer to Eric.

"Can you play it softer?" Eric asked De'Andre, who promptly played more

quietly, realizing that the full stick was still up on the piano.

Looking eastward, off into the distance towards the Harris Music Building, De'Andre improvised an introduction to "The Gold and The Blue." Lasting two bars, and playing in the original key (F Major) set by John Work, he harmonized the melodic line to "Fisk! Our alma mater," beginning with a trill in the piano's upper range, and making no other alteration to that part of the melody as it is written in the score. This is the same melodic material used by the university organist, Dr. Anthony Williams, when he plays the introduction to the alma mater during official campus events in the chapel. After a short arpeggiation in his left hand, outlining the tonic chord, De'Andre altered the alma mater's traditional diatonic harmony. He played ii-V-I harmonic progressions, after which I anticipated an unpredictable rendition. His balance between the harmonic line and his harmonization impressed me—and reminded me that he entered Fisk as a piano major before switching to voice.

Piano is his first instrument, and his playing is what connects him to Fisk through this childhood teacher, Fiskite Sarah Phillips. I heard how De'Andre's years of experience as a church pianist at his Father's church in Oklahoma, as well as his many church jobs in Nashville at black churches, inclusive of traditional Southern Baptist and full gospel denominations, enabled him to quickly provide a singer with information about a harmonic approach, tempo, dynamics and even style with little notice in this short introduction. The pretext of the alma mater is similar to the pretext of the hymns, anthems or gospel songs he plays during church services. De'Andre, like many keyboardists playing in Black Protestant worship traditions, is prepared and responsible for accompanying a singer, choir, and/or preacher, as well as providing interludes, or

shortening or extending a piece during worship service. These expectations are all guided by a collective understanding of a flexible order of service in the worship context (Maultsby 2001; Boyer 1995; Burnim 1988; Hurston 1934).

While De'Andre played the short intro, Eric watched his fingers closely at the piano. He also shook his arms to release tension in his shoulders, while swallowing a few times in an effort to clear his throat and briefly hydrate. Taking a long, full breath, over the course of the second bar of De'Andre's introduction, Eric sang, with a sensitive match to De'Andre's mezzo-piano dynamic choice: "*The warm and genial setting sun.*" With these initial words, similar to De'Andre, Eric set the framework for the approach to the melody he would take. Singing "*the warm and genial*" just as Work wrote it—a syllabic setting of the lyrics—he continued with "*setting sun,*" adding melisma on both words, singing ascending pitches on "*setting*" and descending ones on "*sun.*" He did not change the tempo. I noticed that he made tiny bodily gestures as he sounded each pitch of the melisma, either with his eyebrows, very small head movements, or with a slight shaking of his torso and arms. This comportment differs from his disposition when he sang Italian arias, R&B and gospel pieces earlier. I suspect that this embodiment is an expression of the pleasure he found in singing the alma mater this way.

As he continued, "*lights up the hills with mellow hue,*" he again sang the beginning words as Work set them, and added a trill on "*hue.*" It was at this point that De'Andre leaned towards the keyboard, pensively, thinking of his musical response to Eric's singing. It was now that a full, seamless creative collaboration transpired most freely. They each progressed through the song, making individualized melodic and harmonic gestures at different points, but never at the same time. These expressions

happened not only at the ends of phrases, but in the middle and beginning of phrases as well.

When Eric sang, “*then hurrah and hurrah for the gold and the blue,*” he smiled and shook his head with joy. Emphatically tilting his head to the right, he sang “*Her sons are steadfast, her daughters true.*” It was at “*steadfast*” and “*daughters*” that Eric foregrounded his chest voice singing. This move poeticized the easy, velvety mix of head and chest voice (something practiced by many tenors, regardless of genre or style) with which he had been singing the piece. At this vocal move, a sly, closed-lipped grin came across De’Andre’s face. “*Where ’er,*” Eric continued, with the most elaborate melisma he had sung yet. This required a change in tempo. De’Andre waited to hear what Eric would do next, playing only a single dominant pitch in the bass register of the piano, which allowed Eric complete freedom to elaborate as he wished on this word’s melody. After this rubato, they sped up with the original tempo: “*where ’er we be*” in the original setting—De’Andre’s arpeggiated chords followed by more ii-V-I harmonic progressions—and Eric sang the text traditionally with an added melismatic ornamentation on the last word of the phrase, “*be.*” Continuing, “*We shall still love thee,*” Eric added ascending ornamented pitches to “*love*” and “*thee,*” which he sang in his falsetto range. De’Andre followed this ascending pattern in his playing, inverting chords up the keyboard. Waiting for Eric’s improvised “*Oh*” of the “*oh, Fisk*” passage, De’Andre raised his shoulders and scrunched his eyebrows in admiration and agreement with Eric’s vocal choices and affectionate singing.

Then Eric looked at De’Andre—who still faced east, away from Eric—and smiled. “*Our alma ma—*” Eric sang as written. Then he slightly shook his left leg as he



inhaled a big breath and sang “*ter*,” with winding, melismatic turns and an ascending melodic contour. “*Our alma ma—*” here singing as written, with only one added neighboring pitch embellishment on the “*ma*” syllable before taking a breath. “*Our alma ma—*” repeating his the exact approach from earlier and taking another breath, “*a—*” breath, “*ter*.” De’Andre waited for Eric to take a breath each time, and complemented Eric’s melodic choices harmonically and rhythmically.

As they ended, De’Andre gently played the tonic pitch at the lower end of the piano, and Eric smiled, kicking his leg back with whimsy. De’Andre turned to him, the first time they made eye contact during the performance, and said “that was nice.” Eric reluctantly agreed, mumbling, “mmmhmm.” The sound of hip-hop music playing in the yard was immediately apparent to me once Eric and De’Andre stopped making music in the chapel. Pleased with their time with Whitney, they thanked him for the recording session. They had recorded what has now become a beloved rendition of the alma mater.

Before returning to Eric and De’Andre’s alma mater recording, I will consider some other renditions of alma mater singing. My goal here is to specify a process through which students at Fisk render alma mater singing as a *sacred* experience. My use of “religious” and “sacred” here follows that of historian Charles Long, for whom religion serves as ““that mode of experience which apprehends and discovers the sacredness of the forms of the world”” (Long 1975: 28 in Copeland 2013: 631). Informed by a Durkheimian approach, this analysis of alma mater singing at Fisk broadens examinations of formal “religious” practice and belief (Durkheim 1995; Thompson 1991) and critically unpacks religiosity in black music making more broadly. I also follow Donahoo and Caffey who draw upon the framework Gordon Allport and J. Michael Ross (1967) offer

in unpacking the relationship between religion and spirituality as “extrinsic and intrinsic elements of religiosity.” “Extrinsic religiosity,” they argue, “refers to the actions and activities associated with religious practice. Conversely, intrinsic religion is the personal internal value, central understanding, and daily meaning and direction an individual receives from having a connection to religion” (Donahoo and Caffey 2010: 82).

I too am less invested in differentiating between “spirituality” and “religion,” though I think that these distinctions are shaped by an individual’s engagement with the self and the supernatural as well as practicing these engagements through the world with others. This examination is not about spirituals, gospel music or the commercial recording industry as such, but about how Fisk’s vocal traditions are practiced within Fisk—among Fisk students on the campus—and what these vocal acts tell us about vocalicity’s relationship to black institutionality. Through my fieldwork, I find that it is through music performance, mostly singing, that Fisk students mediate their intrinsic and extrinsic religious experiences, and that the entire student body’s sincere singing of the alma mater exemplifies this. Eric and De’Andre’s performance of “The Gold and the Blue” that March afternoon is but one example of how students express their belief in divine providence leading them to Fisk, affection for the education birthed through a Fisk education, and the eternal connection to other Fiskites as siblings.

Steven Feld’s theoretical framework of “acoustemology” guides my approach to describing the practice of alma mater singing at Fisk. I follow how he attends to “local conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place” (Feld 1996: 91). In this discussion, the act of singing aligns

with what Fox would describe as the “conscious structuring of pitch, timbre, volume, signal-to-noise ratio and rhythm of vocalization that expresses the meaning of an independently structured poetic text, and conveys the interpretation of that text in the moment of performance” (Fox 2004: 272).

Fisk students participate in a rich set of university rituals, similar to those at other black colleges, including regular convocations commemorating campus events, formal self-presentation in the classroom, and lively fraternity and sorority activities. The singing of Fisk’s alma mater, “The Gold and the Blue,” is a central focus of these rituals, following what Catherine Bell defines as a “‘window’ on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds” (Bell 1992: 3). In this chapter, I review how many students believe that enrolling at Fisk is divinely purposed for their lives, contextualize students’ relationship to Fisk, discuss Christianity at Fisk, and describe the process through which students learn the alma mater. My goal is to show how the relationship between religious vocality and black university vocal culture contributes to black institutionality in the US.

### Why Did You Come to Fisk?: Divine Intervention, Music, Family Atmosphere and Financial Aid

Matriculating through Fisk was a circuitous journey for both Eric and De’Andre. During interviews with them, I observed that they share a commitment to music performance, Christian faith, and a belief that being a Fiskite is a part of a divine purpose for their lives. Other Fisk students regularly credit divine intervention for their acceptance to the university and matriculation through it. Singing “The Gold and the

Blue” expresses gratitude for such intervention, as well as for the opportunities Fisk offers, especially with regard to music. For example, at an evening freshmen orientation meeting on August 18, 2011, upperclassmen asked the new students, “Why did you come to Fisk?”<sup>95</sup>

One student explained, “Well, I was going to go to another school. I was going to go to Ashburn. Then, slowly stuff began to fall apart. You know, I really think I was led here by God, that it was my purpose to be here. [“Amen.” From a student across the room.] So, here I am” (ibid). Students applauded and cheered, resonating with his proclamation of divine intervention. Another student said:

I wanted to be in Nashville, it’s the perfect place for music. Fisk was not on my radar until my senior year when, my school full of idiots, yes, full of idiots, they accidentally sent one of my lower ACT scores to Tennessee [State University], so they said ‘no,’ and Tuskegee said they would offer to pay half, and really, Fisk, they were giving much more for it, and I think God led me here. Seriously” (ibid).

Others shared the role of Nashville, as a commercial recording industry hub, in their decision to enroll at Fisk. Financial aid also influences students’ decision to attend. “I came here because, originally,” another student expressed, “I wanted to come here all my life.” Her fellow classmates said together, “Awww,” some sarcastically, some sincerely. “But I had changed my mind until this real strict, predominantly white school, up north, they didn’t give me the big scholarship. And Fisk did, so I changed my mind again” (ibid). Other students appreciate the small student body and family atmosphere, saying “I came here, I have a close knit family...” (ibid), and still others want distance themselves from home, as one student explained: “I came here because I wanted to be somewhere far and with people that I didn’t know. And because I live in New York,

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<sup>95</sup> MKN recording of freshmen orientation Meeting 8/18/2011.

which is nineteen hours away. I came here and I met some really cool people and I love all y'all, and I'll see you the next four years" (ibid). The room exploded with cheers. The freshmen class' motivations for attending Fisk are similar to what De'Andre and Eric told me about theirs.

### De'Andre

De'Andre shared his his journey with me in an interview on December 4, 2011. He is the keyboardist at a small, African American church in an outer, rural suburb of Nashville. After I observed one of his voice lessons, he invited me to attend service. That Sunday, I attended the 11am worship service with this small, close-knit congregation of about sixty people. After service, De'Andre insisted on treating me to dinner at the Olive Garden restaurant. I resisted his offer to pay for our meal, but agreed to dinner and looked forward to the opportunity to speak more about his experiences at Fisk. Once service ended, De'Andre received his weekly stipend from the church, in the form of a check, from the pastor. "We need to stop by the plaza down the street before dinner, ok?" he told me. "Sure," I replied, a bit confused by his plan. I followed him by car to a plaza about a half-mile away from the church. After we pulled into neighboring parking spaces, De'Andre came to my window and said, "Just wait here. I need to cash my check and get gas."

It was at this point that I better understood De'Andre's business savvy and his tremendous effort to support himself through college. He went into a check cashing business and put twenty dollars worth of gas in his car as I waited for him. Smiling from ear to ear when the gas transaction was completed, he ran back to my car window and said, "Ok! I'm ready now! Just follow me!"

“De’ Andre—how about we take my car to the restaurant? I don’t mind driving. I can bring you back to your car after we eat.”

“No way, Miss Marti,” he continued, “Just follow me.” I conceded and we traveled some ten miles to Olive Garden.

Once we placed our orders, he told me about his background and his choice to attend Fisk. He explained:

I’m from Guthrie, Oklahoma. A small town. And in that time, it wasn’t... we had a lot of [whispering] *whites* in the town and the blacks, the black side of town, black churches and things like that. Of course, I went to a [racially] mixed high school. It was about 10 percent black [the town’s population]. It was very much so, kind of like, [whispering] *segregated*. My family has been there for generations. The myth is that we are from Kentucky. My great-grandfather killed a white man because he was stealing his land. And so we migrated to Oklahoma. That’s the story. I don’t know how true it is. But that’s what I’ve heard.

My father is a minister. Missionary Baptist. And you can see, from today [referring to the church service we just attended, which was a Full Gospel denomination], that’s a big transition. So we grew up Missionary Baptist.

I grew up playing in the church at about [age] four. You know, here and there. Started playing with the hymns, you know, and then progressed, by ear. Then, when I was ten, I went to another church program. Another black church, nearby. I think they were having a homecoming. I went there and I heard this woman on the piano. She was absolutely marvelous. So after the service, I approached her at the piano and I said, “Ma’am, do you give lessons or anything?” She turned around tells me she’s “Miss Sarah Phillips,” and that she is the piano teacher in the area. And certainly I was just so thrilled to see a black piano teacher, you know. I just said, “oh my gosh.” She asked me for my number and she asked me who my folks were. I told her who my father was. And she expected me to call her. I did not call her until maybe six months later.

I called her and she set me up as a scholarship student [of hers]. I guess it’s because she heard that my father was a single parent. And things like that. And she heard that I was playing at my church. And how talented I was, you know. And so she offered to do that for me. Since I have been with her, my life changed. Starting at ten, till maybe about 15, 16—we started having more of a relationship, mentorship. Before that, it was more like teacher-student (Jones 2011).

“Is she a long-term resident of your town too?” I asked.

No, she is from Wetumka, Oklahoma. She was born in the 20s. I think 1928. She studied piano at Fisk! I know, that's how *its* tying together. I took the long way. So, one day she said, "you need to start thinking about colleges." And, mind you, people think that Oklahoma has no black folk at all. But we have an HBCU (ibid).

Our food order arrived, and without hesitation, De'Andre bowed his head to say grace:

*Dear heavenly Father, we ask you to bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies thank you Lord for bringing us together. We ask you to continue to bless us in our lives. Keep us, bless us, guide us, protect us. Amen* (ibid).

"Amen," I echoed.

"Umm. I lost my thoughts. She, umm..." he said.

"HBCU in Oklahoma" I reminded him.

Oh, yeah, we have Langston University, which is an HBCU. But she had done a lot of work there as well. When she retired, she started taking in students. I had just got in [to take piano lessons with her] just as she was retiring. [When at her house for lessons] I looked through her yearbook. It's called the *Fisk Oval*. Now I had no idea about anything about Fisk. I didn't know anything about Fisk. I looked through the book and it seemed like the ultimate HBCU (ibid).

I asked, "What were the things that struck you that way?"

In *The Oval*, the yearbook, the buildings stuck out to me. The structure of the buildings seemed collegiate. And seeing how they acted with each other [students in pictures]. The class and poise they had. It was a good combination for me. And then, the "gotcha!" was when she played the CD of *In Bright Mansions* [the 2003 Fisk Jubilee Singers' commercial recording]. I said, "oh my God, who is that?" She said, "that's the Fisk Jubilee Singers" I said, "are you kidding me! They are great! Oh my gosh!" From that moment, I knew. I said "I want to come to Fisk" and be a Jubilee Singer. Of course, that wasn't my main goal. But it was one of the things that I wanted to do. Naturally (ibid).

He continued,

I saw the Oval, I heard the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Now, mind you, my high school grades were horrible. I didn't take it seriously. I can't remember even pushing myself in high school. I just flew by, did the minimum to get by. Because I didn't want to be there. At that time, when you apply to Fisk, they ask for a recommendation from your principal. A recommendation from your guidance counselor and all of that. I had all of the recommendations. They said [principal and counselor] "ok"—you know, they were still remaining hopeful. My guidance

counselor said, “you know, De’Andre, with the grades you have, you are not going to Fisk.”

At that time, when you apply to Fisk, they ask for a recommendation from your principal. A recommendation from your guidance counselor and all of that. I had all of the recommendations.

But I went to orientation, and all that, at Langston [an HBCU in Oklahoma]. Fisk sent me a letter the day classes started for Langston, and said that I had been accepted. Mind you, it was so hard to leave at that point. Because I was working in the president’s office. I was working, somewhat, with the [Langston] University Choir. And of course, they gave me good scholarship money to be there. But, you know, the next day, I went to the registrar and withdrew. I said, “I can’t work in the ‘what if.’ ‘What if I had gone to Fisk?’” I don’t want that to be.

So I got there to Fisk. Miss Phillips—she has been the main one. As an alum, you know. I know there were some strings pulled. I didn’t ask. I just said, “I will make you proud.” That’s the thing. And we just cried. When I got the acceptance letter, I came from Langston to her house and we just bawled together, you know. And she said, “You are going to make it DeAndre, you’re gonna make it” (ibid).

At this point, De’Andre’s eyes started to well with tears.

You know, I haven’t had anyone to believe in me like that. But when she told me that she believed in me. God, that meant the world to me. And then she, without me knowing... I didn’t know how I was going to get there [to Fisk]. I just said “I’m going.” And without me knowing, faith type things. That’s the first time that I can say that I’ve encountered, you know, making my religion personal to me. Before that, I’ve just gone to church out of ritual, and I’ve never made it applicable to my life. And then I said, ok. This is what faith means. It was a gamble. I’ve had people tell me: “He’ll be back [to Oklahoma].” [They] Didn’t want me to go. “Why you going way out there?” “Who you know in Tennessee?” I’ve heard it all....And, mind you, Miss Phillips bought my plane ticket to come to Fisk (ibid).

I was struck by how religious belief, music performance, and a relationship with an alumna shaped De’Andre’s Fisk entry story. He enacted faith in divine providence about enrolling in college, and for the first time in his life, this experience “makes religion personal.” I observed that the confluence of an alumnus’ belief in his ability to succeed, along with financial support and a personal religious faith, shaped De’Andre’s



relationship with Fisk and informed a religious sensibility in his performance of “The Gold and the Blue.” I now turn to discuss Eric’s journey to Fisk.

### Eric

“I’m from Kansas City, Kansas. On the Kansas side,” Eric told me during an interview on September 21, 2011. Both Erica and De’Andre were students at the end of their studies at Fisk, and vocal leaders on the campus. Eric, however, had not been a student at Fisk consistently through his undergraduate career. He transferred to Belmont University, another university in Nashville known for its strength in preparing students for careers in the commercial recording industry, and returned to Fisk when he felt that he got better vocal instruction from the Fisk faculty and missed being in the racial majority. Like De’Andre, Eric has been “in love” with music since he was four years old, attracted to recordings by pop vocalists Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, and gospel vocalist CeCe Winans. He told me, “I loved the tone of their voices, and I wanted it. Not to mention my dad sings. My mom too. So when we would go out of town, they would always play old school music [in the car while traveling]. So I would listen to Confucius, Earth, Wind and Fire, DeBarge. The Arethas, Natalie Cole, Stephanie Mills.” The musicians he lists as part of his early music exposure are representative of late twentieth century black popular music recordings. His first public performance was as a child, singing a solo in his non-denominational Christian church choir.

Singing in school and church choirs throughout his entire life, Eric also participated in the percussion section of his high school band. He was especially influenced by his high school band teacher, who is a graduate of Florida Agricultural and

Mechanical University<sup>96</sup> (FAMU), and who taught the students at Eric's high school in the fashion of FAMU's famous marching band, The Marching "100." Along with his band mates, Eric played arrangements of popular R&B and hip-hop songs and marched with flamboyant bodily gestures.

He told me:

And, there was a time I wasn't going to come to Fisk. I wanted to go to FAMU. So bad. I wanted to march in the band. I wanted to just be around that live part of music in college. And, it was too much money to pay. I had got a scholarship, but it wasn't going to help me through, you know [chuckles]. But I came to Fisk, I don't know how that happened. Well, Fisk costs a lot of money. So, I probably could have gone to FAMU. But, my decision was good. It's really great. Because, you know, when God closes one door, he opens another (Copland 2011).

Eric's entry story, with the elements of an exposure to HBCUs from his influential high school band director, concern about financing college education, and belief in divine predestination, mirrors the elements of De'Andre's entry story. Eric attended a predominantly black high school and wanted to attend a predominantly black college as well. He said:

I made up in my mind that I was going to a black school. Well, my parents didn't go to one. But every year, we would go to Lincoln University's homecoming. And my dad's part of the family all went to Lincoln. It was like a family thing to go to Lincoln's homecoming. And to see a whole bunch of African Americans commune with one another and fellowship, and build each other up, I thought that was just powerful. And, I was used to that upbringing. So I wanted to do that for my college career (ibid).

How he chose Fisk relates to the guidance of his mother and the impact of the Fisk

Jubilee Singers. Continuing, he told me:

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<sup>96</sup> William P. Foster founded the Marching "100," and his book, *Band Pageantry: A Guide for the Marching Band*, (1968) remains a seminal text for HBCU and black marching band performance practice. An incident involving FAMU marching band hazing led to the tragic death of a band member while fieldwork was being conducted for this dissertation. Here, HBCU marching band hazing and FAMU's history of student-to-student illegal abuse brought a fatal, dark aspect of HBCU music culture to nationwide attention.

I remember my Mama said something about Fisk. Cause I was looking up [music] ensembles to be a part of, and the music departments. And Morgan was one of them, Morgan State University.<sup>97</sup> And Fisk. So we looked at Fisk and Fisk Jubilee Singers. And I was listening to their music. All of the stuff that they did in their repertoire was the same stuff that we did in high school. Because, my high school director was from Lincoln, and he was in a black ensemble, a Negro Spiritual ensemble. And I was like [whispering] “I can do this.” And then in the spring, we came and visited the school.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers had a concert that night [of Eric’s visit]. They were presenting the documentary of them going to Ghana, *The Sacred Journey*.<sup>98</sup> It was somewhere in downtown Nashville. It was amazing. Watching it was completely amazing. I remember my mother and I crying. And that took me. And then they got on stage, and Mandisa got on stage and she did her single.<sup>99</sup> And, I was like, this is it. I have to do this. I’m not going to say that my reason for coming to Fisk was about the Jubilee Singers. But they have some great singers, and I know that I am going to grow to be just as great as they are if they can produce this type of people in their music department. Why not go?

So, when I came, I auditioned, and I made it. And that was a blessing. We [the Jubilee Singers] went everywhere. We went to New York, we went to DC. I got to go to the White House, the Decatur House, meet Colin Powell, Bush. A lot of great people. You know, if I don’t grow up to be a mainstream singer, to be able to travel and do those type of things again, I can already say that I have *done it*. And that is just enough for me (ibid).

Both Eric and De’Andre expressed the belief that Fisk will enable them to fulfill their desires for musical career success, either through financial remuneration and/or performance recognition.

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<sup>97</sup> Morgan State University’s choirs, The University Choir and The Morgan Singers, have followed the Fisk Jubilee Singer model of HBCU choral singing and receive critical acclaim for their international performances, and some argue that they are the “best” HBCU choir in the country.

<sup>98</sup> *Sacred Journey* is a 2007 documentary about the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ pilgrimage to Ghana, director Dr. Paul Kwami’s home country. The ensemble performed at Elminia Castle, a central port for the Atlantic slave trade, as well as at the National Theater in Accra.

<sup>99</sup> Singer Mandisa Hundley graduated from Fisk, where she was a Jubilee Singer, with a degree in voice performance. She earned national popularity as a top 10 competitor in the 2006 season of *American Idol* and a 2014 Grammy award winner for her Christian Contemporary Music album “Overcomer.”

## Eric and De'Andre Learning the Alma Mater

“But, after already being birthed here, and raised in that music department, it’s kinda hard to think otherwise.”

-Eric, 2011

In telling me about his voice performance education at Fisk, Eric described that being “birthed” at Fisk, and “raised” in its music department, defines how he thinks about his singing. These word choices symbolize Fisk as a mother—an alma mater. Though no different from most Fisk students’ experiences learning the alma mater—with initial hesitation growing to reverence—I want to highlight how Eric and De’Andre describe their alma mater learning as individuals.

Eric told me that the alma mater learning process during orientation allows one to learn to “love Fisk.” That week, he sang the alma mater with his entering class in front of the Havel portrait of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers. He said:

We saw the portrait of the Jubilee singers, and were singing it, it was so...it was just something. I think all of us cried. Because it was so deep. The story of it. They [orientation leaders] started talking about the story of Fisk. It made me so proud, to like, to stand up and to say that I was a student from a legacy of great people. W.E.B. Du Bois, Nikki Giovanni, these are people that I learned in high school. I never thought they went to Fisk at all. So...that alma mater. Amazing (Copeland 2011).

He continued:

I thought it was special [to learn the alma mater as an entering class]. It became natural, because I felt one with it, but it was special. All the way. I can’t describe how special it was. And like, I feel it now, just talking a bout it. So I can just imagine myself then, how I felt about it. Singing the alma mater...I felt the oneness [with other students]. Immediately. It seemed like we became a family, like we had each other’s back. The way that they brought us in, with learning the information, being with each other....It just seems like you can, anyone, that’s here at Fisk, instantly becomes your brother and sister. “Sons and daughters ever on the altar.” That was so deep to me. And the song represents that. Coming from anywhere (ibid).

Eric described the construction of familial ties with Fisk alumni and current students through learning to sing the alma mater. This construction of a Fisk family not only affiliates students with each other, but with the institution of Fisk. At Fisk, as an institution, all of its alumni and its current students are linked through singing.

When De’Andre told me about his experience learning the alma mater, he said, “That was surreal. Of course, I knew Langston’s alma mater. But, to have the whole student body learning the alma mater. And everybody on that campus knows it.”

“That was different from Langston?” I asked.

“It was absolutely different,” he said, “Well, people knew the alma mater. Maybe the concert choir more than the general population. They sung it in *parts* at Fisk. That was surreal to me. I was like, ‘they love their school, honey!’ it was just so...it was nice. That just brought it all together for me.”

#### Eric Posts the Recording on His Facebook Wall

Once Whitney shared his recording with Eric and De’Andre, Eric posted it on his Facebook page, only to receive an onslaught of comments from the Fisk community, both current students and alumni. The responses celebrated Eric’s singing voice, De’Andre’s piano playing, and Fisk University—exemplifying how singing and listening to Fisk’s alma mater is a process through which students and alumni shape university identity. Posting it on April 19, 2012, he titled it: “Fisk Alma Mater—Jazz Rendition.” I noticed that his use of “jazz” here does the work of communicating that this rendition of the song embraces a jazz impulse of liberal chromatic exploration, improvisation, versioning and formal structure.

Eric tagged thirty-four current students and recent graduates in his posting, and an onslaught of comments poured in, totaling forty-eight. Over the course of a week, the post was shared twenty times, and each of those shares received numerous comments and re-shares. The comments were from current Fisk students and alumni, most of whom had graduated in the last 10 years. These two groups responded in similar ways: current students consistently remarked about the sound of Eric’s voice, approving his singing style as a vocal achievement, though it falls outside of the institutional ideal of his singing as a Jubilee singer. Alumni consistently remarked about their devotion to Fisk. DeAndre’s piano playing did not get much attention on the Facebook post, which speaks to the way Fisk students recognize music as “sacred” primarily through vocal acts—vocal timbre, melodic choice, and the text being sung, as opposed to the harmonic choices an instrumentalist makes—similar to other instances of church music-making in Western worship traditions and art songs. Some of those admiring Eric’s singing voice wrote: “SING!,” “I luv it! Good job guys!,” “Singggg eric!!!!,” “you’re tone..,” “This guy is nothing short of amazing,” “LOVE LOVE LOVE IT!,” “blasphemy!! I have listened to this about 5 times and still can’t fathom how you thought of these runs! Your tones, how dramatic you are!”

Others commented about Fisk, most including the Twitter hashtag #FiskForever, said: “Checking for enrollment at Fisk!!!”; “Take a bow mr. copeland, u just rewrote the school song...(lean on me tease)...lol...” [this is quote from the 1989 movie *Lean on Me* about singing the school song at a troubled, urban high school]; “Eric, that was absolutely amazing. You did it justice. It made me want to go back to campus and sit under the Tree of Knowledge. Absolute genius!”

Still, others' comments took a more religious tone, such as: "somebody carry me out" [referring to the practice of a nurse, assisting congregants who have become spiritually overwhelmed out of the space of a worship service to recover]; "this blessed me man!"; "I got my life back after this one!"; "oh----wow----did anybody else cry a little? Just a little?...i wanna hug everyone that was posted in this and just sing..."; "This just blessed my soul!!!"

Eric also received comments about his vocal style, which fell outside of the traditional alma mater norm. "So proud of this generation of Fiskites!" an alumnus wrote, "Even if you're a purist, this will move you...or you ain't a true Fiskite!"

Only a few people made reference to De'Andre's piano playing. Eric posted the recording on his wall; De'Andre did not post it to his Facebook wall. As such, commenters focused on addressing Eric's performance. Still, Facebook comments about songs posted by a singer usually address singing more than instrumental accompaniment. Additionally, the fact that all Fisk students know the alma mater, and not all Fisk students play the piano, accounts for more commentary about Eric's singing than De'Andre's accompaniment. However, there were a few comments about De'Andre's piano playing, including: "Are you lying on the piano...that's what this is giving me. You laid Chrisette Michelle [a popular R&B singer], Brandy [a popular R&B singer], and Christmas [referring to the Christian holiday] in the same brick! Kudos boy, kudos!!!"; and "Make your mamas proud son! And the accompanist isn't slacking either."

“Anybody wanna be steadfast...anybody wanna be true?”

After listening to the recording, an alumna posts the comment: “anybody wanna be steadfast...anybody wanna be true.” These phrases incorporate lyrics from “The Gold and the Blue”—“steadfast” and “true”—and point towards a general call to religious adherence in one’s life. The majority of comments from alumni referred to Fisk with religiously inflected language, similar to this one. HBCU historian and Fiskite Crystal A. deGregory, a frequent blogger who founded the advocacy initiative HBCUStory, exemplifies this. She posted:

“THIS!!! Lord, I thank you for Fisk University, for her light and for her love. For her ability to make a way out of no way. For her ability to turn around the lives of all those she loves, righting their course, and sending them out into the world wiser, stronger and better than they came. For the way she loves us even when we don’t deserve it. I pray you always keep her in the light of your love and that no man or women may put out the light of her love. Bar selfishness, greed, short-sightedness and even the best of intentions from harming her. Amen and ahse! Fisk FOREVER! Say a prayer for Fisk today; then work to see its fulfillment like young Eric L. Copeland.”

Members of the Fisk community commented in response to deGregory’s prayer, posting: “You better pray, Mother!” and another “Amen!”

I observed that the religious rhetoric of Facebook posts responding to Eric’s “jazz version” of the alma mater participated in students’ personification of Fisk as a maternal figure, calling attention to the religious orientation of each other as “steadfast” and “true” to being “ever on the altar” as Fiskites, all through the listening pleasure of the performance. Though none of the Facebook commenters addressed Eric’s “jazz” labeling of the recording, references to popular music artists, Brandy for example, and performances of African American worship practices, like being “carried out,” signal how the Fisk community heard Eric and De’Andre as engaging a sacred *and* secular



black music tradition. The religious and popular music reception of the recording exemplifies a practice of African Americans individually expressing themselves through sacred music and the jazz idiom, expressions improvising upon a community's shared repertoire, performing devotion, virtuosity, and historical consciousness.

### Christianity and Fisk

The condition of Fisk's founding, especially the efforts of the American Missionary Association to build institutions of higher education fostering Christian morality, as discussed in the introduction (Anderson 2010), still influences contemporary campus life. From the perspective of the university's administrative leadership, Fisk's religious ethos, as stated in 1865 by AMA agents Reverend E. M. Cravath and the Rev. E. P. Smith, is to "provide African-Americans with an outstanding academic education that would be complemented by an equally rich spiritual and religious orientation" (Curry 2010). Fisk history professor and alumnus Reavis Mitchell explains that "both slave and free African Americans exhibited two related overriding concerns during the antebellum and Civil War period: a passion for religion and desire for education" (Mitchell 2003). In 1878, the school motto ("Her sons and daughters are ever on the altar") took hold, an idiom regularly shared among current Fisk students in everyday speech through greetings, farewells and expressions of solidarity encouragement.<sup>100</sup>

The Fisk community represents Fisk's religious affiliation with the Protestant church through discussions about its founders at university convocations. Additionally,

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<sup>100</sup>Other HBCU mottos include: Oakwood University and Winston-Salem State University "Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve;" Tennessee State University "Think, Work, Serve;" Clark College "Culture for Service;" Howard University "Truth and Service" (Douglas 2012: 389).

the religious quality of the university motto grounds a religious sensibility in Fisk sociability. I take the religious ethos of the students seriously in this analysis and investigate how religiosity is enacted through the vocalizing of the alma mater. Further, I approach the analysis through a consideration of the similarities between the institutionality of black churches and HBCUs. Historically, the black church was not only a spiritual, religious institution, but a social and political one as well. Through this “invisible institution,” as E. Franklin Frazier calls it (Frazier 1964: 35), the worship practices of enslaved Africans began to encompass not only spirituality, but also social concerns and resistance to oppression. Continuing from just after emancipation through the current moment, churches serving black congregants have provided local economic stability, political organization, and social programs. C. Eric Lincoln explains the “The Black Church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community. Not only did it give birth to new institutions such as schools, banks, insurance companies, and low income housing, it also provided an academy and an arena for political activities, and it nurtured young talent for musical, dramatic, and artistic development” (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990: 8). Many scholars have studied the black church as a site of worship and as a bureaucratic, racialized institution (Raboteau 2004; West and Glaude 2003; Higginbotham 1994; Lincoln 1990). This work points towards the importance of investigating the substance of black church’s relationship to black institutionality writ large—and within this relationship—what of music, and in the singing voice, in particular?

### “The Gold and The Blue” at Jubilee Day

I turn now to a traditional singing of Fisk’s alma mater “The Gold and the Blue,” composed by John W. Work, Fisk class of 1895. One of the more formal performance settings of the song is sung at the end of the annual October 6<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Day convocation, a university holiday first enacted in 1874, for the purpose of memorializing the original Fisk Jubilee Singers’ departure from Nashville to tour the world singing spirituals. Fisk music professor emeritus, and former Fisk Jubilee Singers director, Dr. Matthew Kennedy<sup>101</sup> (Fisk class of 1947) annually returns to campus to conduct attendees along with Dr. Anthony Williams, the university organist. All attendees stand, sing in harmony, and towards the end of the piece, lock arms until the final exclamation. This rendition is highly reminiscent of congregational singing in a place of worship, closing a program in the style of a benediction.

All Fisk students are prepared to sing the alma mater for moments like this—the closing of an official campus event, often held in the chapel. After announcements from the director of the alumni association, the Jubilee Day convocation program lists “The Gold and the Blue” to be followed by a benediction by the university chaplain and an organ postlude. Current students, local friends and alumni from around the country attend the convocation. During the 2010 and 2011 convocations, following speeches to the alumni, all attendees participate in the act of singing the alma mater.

During the 2010 Jubilee Day convocation, Adrienne Latham, the director of alumni affairs, gathered her speaking notes and prepared to leave the pulpit podium to energetic applause from the convocation attendees. As she left, Dr. Matthew Kennedy

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<sup>101</sup> Dr. Matthew Kennedy (1921-2014) passed away during the final stages of this dissertation writing. After completing a piano diploma at Juilliard, he came to Fisk and was the director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers for over twenty years.

walked up the stairs to the pulpit. University organist Anthony Williams sat at the organ, prepared to accompany the alma mater singing. Kennedy and Williams greeted each other with a nod. The Jubilee Singers, who were seated in the front most right pews, were the first to rise to their feet as Dr. Kennedy entered the pulpit. All attendees followed the Singers' lead and stood.

I was in the back row of the chapel's lower level. The chapel was packed full, almost to overflowing, with people. Freshmen sat in the middle pews, upperclassmen on the sides and throughout the upper level. A local women's club, a noticeable group of thirty white women, were in the front left pews. Local alumni, spanning a wide range of ages, were in attendance, as well as the entire faculty, many staff members, and trustees. It was a clear, sunny, warm day and the chapel was bright. All of the lights were on and the sun shone through the windows on all sides of the chapel. At the altar, a table in front of the pulpit podium, four three-foot wreaths of magnolia leaves were arranged with large blue ribbons bearing the names of the original Jubilee Singers who were buried in Nashville. Following the convocation, the Fisk student body organized into a motorcade and embarked on its annual pilgrimage to City Cemetery and Greenwood Cemetery to memorialize Ella Sheppard Moore, Mabel Lewis Imes, Georgia Gordon Taylor and Minnie Tate Hall. At each grave, an alumnus/a was given the honor of reading a biography of the singers' accomplishments, each ending with a statement of the school's motto: "a daughter ever on the altar." Following a moment of silence, the Jubilee Singers performed a spiritual in tribute to one of the original members of their ensemble.

Latham and Kennedy nodded to each other and Kennedy faced the students. He was dressed in a navy suit, with a white shirt, ivory vest, and navy tie. His baton was in

his right hand. As he arrived behind the main podium, the entire student body was already standing and holding hands with each other. After a few seconds, Kennedy turned slightly to Williams and gave a downbeat, to which Williams played the tonic F chord of the alma mater. Williams played an introduction comprised of the last two measures of the song, playing it as written by Work. Kennedy's conducting gestures remained slight, and at his waist through the introduction, only marking each beat with traditional 4/4 order. Just as the attendees were about to sing the first line, Kennedy gestured an opening breath by shaking his left hand while raising his baton, which was in his right hand. He raised his hands to his shoulders, and everyone in the chapel, no matter where they were sitting, was able to see his baton. Kennedy mouthed the words of the alma mater as the students began to sing, "*The warm and genial setting sun.*" The words of the first verse and refrain of the alma mater are printed in the program, as a reference for visitors. However, no one in the Fisk community dared to hold his or her program—all continued to hold hands and look directly at Kennedy.

I immediately heard four-part harmony. The bass line, which was the only voice to have a non-syllabic setting with the opening words, was most noticeable to me. Kennedy's conducting style changed once the attendees started to sing. He gestured an *upbeat* in rhythm for each word, as opposed to gesturing beats or rhythmic subdivisions. Students watched him intently and followed his tempo. They also followed his lead as to when to enter with the next phrase. Kennedy began to walk around the pulpit, smiling to students on both side of the chapel. Williams continued to play the organ—the exact homorhythmic setting of the song from Work's score. As the singing continued, Kennedy's arms got higher. When students sang "*majestic dear old gold and blue,*"

Kennedy bowed his head, keeping his arms lifted, and raised it again in anticipation of the refrain. His arms raised above his head as he conducted “Then hurrah, and hurrah!” The students began to sing at a slightly louder dynamic level. Kennedy continued to conduct, marking each syllable, including the pitch neighboring passages that the bass voices sang. When marking those movements, he turned towards the Jubilee Singers, expecting that it would be the males with lower voices in that ensemble that lead that section. The singing and conducting style continued through the phrases “*her sons are steadfast, her daughters true.*”

Then, there was a pause. There was no fermata in the score, but students followed Kennedy carefully. Kennedy placed his left hand in front of his mouth in a hushing gesture, Williams quieted his organ playing and the students sang at a piano dynamic level: “*where'er we be.*” Following this, still singing quietly and at a slower tempo than at the opening of the piece, they sang “*we shall still love thee.*” Kennedy gestured at each syllable and drove his baton into the air on “*thee,*” to which the students responded with a vocal crescendo. Kennedy then dropped his hands at his side and swung them above his head, with which all of the students raised one fist in the air and exclaimed loudly with speech-like timbre: “*Fisk!*” followed by a forte, ritardando singing of “*our alma mater.*” During “*mater,*” Williams added embellishments in the organ and Kennedy turned to the Jubilee Singers, and gestured his baton in the air for the soprano singers to sound an upper descant on the word. They did it. Kennedy smiled, and the attendees started to clap as Williams let the last chord ring in the chapel.

## Alma Mater Singing

Singing an alma mater, the anthem of a school or university, has been an act of school spirit for students since Europe's medieval period, as well as a specifically American, self-conscious stance towards "classical" or "European" elite traditions (Winstead 2013). Education scholars have explored this vocalized reverence for one's alma mater for over a century. I suggest that the Fisk community's Jubilee Day singing of "The Gold and The Blue" exemplifies a return to priest and Oxford scholar John Henry Newman's (1801-1890) Victorian-era view of the university as a family in which "an Alma Mater know[s] her children one by one," by way of being a site in which lifelong "habit of mind" is formed (Newman 1854 in Pelkin 1992: 180, 65). Fisk's alma mater singing tradition specifically links Western classical rituals with black American forms of religiosity. I argue that this vocal expression *for* the Fisk community, an expression *of* and *to* each other, performs a religious dedication to their alma mater as sons and daughters "ever on the altar."

This formal style of alma mater singing is one to which students introduce each other, beginning with freshman orientation. As new students arrive on campus, they are organized into groups of approximately ten to fifteen students by upperclassmen student leaders. Each leader meets with his or her group after sundown in different locations on campus to share reflections on the day's orientation events—and to learn how to sing the alma mater.

### “The Gold and the Blue” During Freshman Orientation

Freshman orientation at Fisk is similar to that carried out at colleges across the country. Parents, guardians and friends accompany students to Nashville and help their college student get settled in his or her dorm room. Over the course of a week in the month of August, the week before the first day of classes, freshmen are introduced to the campus buildings, registration policies, academic advisors, and residential life staff, as well as to the surrounding Nashville area. Additionally, workshops about academic achievement, extracurricular activities, wellness, and independence are presented in an effort to support the freshmen in their transition from high school to college.

Upperclassmen--“orientation leaders”—play a central role in the week’s events. Selected through an application process during the preceding spring semester, these student leaders are assigned a group of freshmen to mentor. In groups of ten to fifteen, freshmen meet with their orientation leader each night to discuss the days’ events, ask questions, and get to know each other. Camaraderie within these small groups grows over the course of the week. The orientation leaders are required to be in good academic standing and successfully perform in an interview in which they are tested for their knowledge of Fisk history.

Learning aspects of Fisk’s history is an aspect of orientation that distinguishes Fisk from other universities. Orientation leaders tell their small groups about the leaders whose names are fixed to buildings on campus, the story of Fisk’s founding, the successes of notable alumni, and the Fisk traditions that the students will experience throughout the academic year. The names of Jubilee Singers, AMA field secretary and early Fisk president Erastus Milo Cravath, early Fisk trustee Richard Harris, former Fisk



principal Adam K. Spence, philosopher and Fisk alumnus W.E.B. Du Bois, artist and former Fisk faculty member Aaron Douglas, activist former Fisk faculty member James Weldon Johnson, and historians John Hope and Aurelia Franklin, are all featured on Fisk's buildings. Orientation leaders tell their small groups about these members of the Fisk community. In addition to learning about Fisk's history, freshmen are also required to learn the alma mater during orientation.

### Art Gallery Tour Leading Up to Orientation Group Alma Mater Singing

August 17, 2011 was a balmy night in Nashville. Everyone had eaten dinner in Fisk's cafeteria, the atmosphere felt dense with both heat and sounds. The sun had set, and I could see a few stars in the sky. Lights from Jubilee Hall flickered in some windows, and only a few students were on a bench in the yard talking. The train whistle sounded louder than normal tonight, and happened more frequently, too, it seemed. The crickets were active, and made the atmosphere thick with a perpetual polyphony of their screeches. It had already been yet another rich fieldwork day, and I looked forward to meeting more freshmen as they learned the alma mater. Before joining the freshmen who were learning the alma mater, I accompanied the class during their visit to the art gallery on campus.

Having joined the freshmen class on their tour of the Carl Van Vechten Gallery, Fisk's art museum, I was happy to have revisited Georgia O'Keefe's "Radiator Building" (1927),<sup>102</sup> and to have collected a few posters of the Jubilee Singers' Havel portrait to

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<sup>102</sup> As discussed in the introduction, during fieldwork for this project, Fisk was in the midst of a lawsuit with the State of Tennessee. Then Fisk President Hazel O'Leary proposed to sell half of the rights of Fisk's Alfred Stieglitz Collection of American and European Modern Art (housed in

bring home. It was my first time back at the gallery since 2001. Each freshman was given a poster to put in his or her dorm room, as was customary when I was an exchange student. It impressed me that the university welcomed students with historical paraphernalia, quite different from more typical orientation gifts such as a token t-shirt, mug, or new computer. And, of course, such a memento of the Fisk Jubilee Singers emphasizes the connection of the new students to the Fisk legacy.

As I walked over to the entry stairs, the sun was just beginning to set and a group of women waved at me and invited me to enter the gallery with them. I sped up my walking and joined them, and we walked into the foyer together. At first, I wondered if they thought I was a freshman, but when one of them referred to me as “ma’am,” I embarrassedly understood that they recognized that I was not a current student. Still, their warmth surprised me, and impacted me as yet another iteration of the warm, familial environment at Fisk.

Once inside, the students quickly dispersed to greet other classmates. The freshmen energetically visited paintings and sculptures, until an upperclassman (an orientation leader, I assumed) called the group to order. I could tell that he enjoyed his position as an orientation leader by his assured smile. “So, greetings and salutations everyone,” he said, “we are about to start the exhi—*shhhh!* I’m not gonna yell. Dr.

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the Carl Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk), for \$30 million, in order to build the endowment. The art was a gift to the University from Georgia O’Keefe, given in 1948 after her husband’s death. O’Leary suggested that Fisk would share the art with the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, located in Bentonville, Arkansas founded by Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton. The State of Tennessee blocked Fisk from selling the art, arguing that it should at least remain in Tennessee. After a two-year lawsuit, Fisk won the case and now shares the art collection with the Crystal Bridges Museum. The collection is housed at Fisk for two years at a time, and then sent to Arkansas. Some students and many alumni were outraged with how O’Leary executed this fundraising effort, and felt that she had abused its prized artistic assets for little gain (Brooks 2010; Grant 2012; Ng 2012; Hall 2013).

Simmons is gonna be your tour guide today. Please remember that we are still in an art gallery, we are still in a museum. We are gonna act like we are in a foreign place and not at the university. We do not want to humiliate this university. So please be on your best behavior. Thanks.”<sup>103</sup> The freshmen sarcastically applauded him with a thin collection of slow claps, demonstrating a touch of resistance to the formality that pervades their orientation activities.

Dr. Victor Simmons, Art History professor at Fisk and curator of the gallery, welcomed the students saying, “Welcome to the Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery.” He also gave a brief history of the gallery:

No matter what your major, you will have an encounter with the art gallery though your core courses....you’ll also see a lot of dignitaries come in and out of this building, people from all over the world. This gallery has one of the most famous art collections in the South, in the United States, and one of the greatest collections among American colleges and universities. It’s a collection that spans almost 3,000 years of history....It’s one of the things that we treat as a special part of the Fisk legacy and will be special to you as time goes on....There will be names that you will become familiar with as a part of the art collection. I know you guys have already heard about Aaron Douglas, right?”<sup>104</sup>

I heard uncertain “umm, hmm” responses from some students, while others quietly chatted with each other, some tried to figure out if they have heard of him, others eager to show that they know who he is.

“Huh? No?!” Simmons asked, “You will. You will. Aaron Douglas was the most famous African American artist of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, was the founder of our art department, and he taught here until he died in 1979” (ibid). He continued:

You will also get a lot of questions from people that you meet, who come here and as you travel to different places. When you tell them that you go to Fisk, they will ask you about the art gallery, they’ll ask you about the Jubilee Singers, they’ll

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<sup>103</sup> MKN observation of Orientation 8/11/2011

<sup>104</sup> MKN recording of Orientation 8/11/2011.

ask you about things that people know about this university all over the world. I know many of you are standing here right now saying, ‘I’m a chemistry major. I’m a biology major, I don’t care nothing about the art collection. But believe me, you will know more about art when you leave this university than you ever thought you would ever want to know. And you will become very conversant as well....This [the art gallery] is an important part of the university, because it is a part of making you a well-rounded student, and a well-rounded person who will go into the world as a leader among your peers as a professional (ibid).<sup>105</sup>

Dr. Simmons’ announcement to the students about what they will value about art as a part of their Fisk experience and future was a sentiment I heard the faculty express to students frequently during orientation. Faculty members set clear expectations for what freshmen *should* embrace as Fisk students, and leave no terms uncertain. The inclination to tell students what they will value in their future is a vocal act full of expectation for the students—not only during their time at Fisk, but as citizens in the world going forward. The faculty members demonstrate that they expect Fisk students to value the visual and fine arts, music, excellence among African Americans, and for themselves, by performing their own affinity and affiliation to a classical liberal arts education as a specifically African American experience.

This future-oriented, preparatory<sup>106</sup> talk also coaches students about their immediate future at Fisk, one in which, as Dr. Simmons explained, they will need to be ready, at all times, to speak as a representative of the university and its legacy. I heard an

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<sup>105</sup> Marybeth Gasman discusses the role of art at Fisk in “...building a sense of identity among students and expanding the worldview of people of varying races and ethnicities” (2002: 13).

<sup>106</sup> Banners hanging on light poles with the inscription, “Fisk cultivates scholars one by one,” decorated the campus during my fieldwork. The university’s web homepage also featured this inscription. During President Hazel O’Leary’s administration, this phrase was used frequently to describe Fisk’s mission in educating its students and it evokes the American Missionary Association’s original, late nineteenth-century desire to “cultivate” the recently emancipated Africans through a Fisk education based in Christian morality and enabling literacy skills (Anderson 2010).

effort to prepare students to answer to a curious public, to be ambassadors for Fisk at any moment. The expectation for students to be ready to represent themselves, black history, black people, and the university as a part of college life is one shared by many historically black college communities. This augments the popular imagination of the collegiate years as a moment to “find oneself” and to explore oneself, to make “mistakes” with a cultural assurance that “bad” deeds in college are forgivable.

For Fisk students, and more broadly for black young adults, the dangers of such behavior are all too immediate. Faculty and upperclassmen respond to this by telling students who they are, and how to be: that they are black, that they are excellent, and that vocalizing their identity as a Fiskite will communicate this to the world, as discussed in previous chapters. As Dr. Simmons did with the freshmen at the art gallery, this ontological announcement is repeatedly expressed through layers of classical liberal arts educational rhetoric and reminders of the imperative to represent oneself well.

Dr. Simmons then called the upperclassmen orientation leaders to stand or wave their hands, and asked them to tell about how the gallery has figured in their experience, in a tradition of testifying in African American churches, inclusive of antiphonal texture (Reagon 2001). One female senior shared: “Well, I’ve had to come to the gallery numerous times to do research on an artist, or on a specific period of time, or on the building itself. So I’m always over there. And then, it’s also a nice place to study.”

“Yes, it is,” Simmons said.

“I come down here to do my work ‘cause I need a quiet place to study. So I need to come and, sit on this floor, in this gallery. This is my favorite part. And just do my homework. So, I’m always here.” It struck me how open the gallery was. Students were

free to study on the floor. There was a formality to the Fisk environment, but it could feel very homey as well.

Dr. Simmons followed her testimony by saying, "...Get comfortable coming into the gallery. Come over and visit....And to the gentlemen, when you want to impress the young ladies, and make them think that you act civilized, bring them to the gallery!" The students laughed, and after Dr. Simmons' closing comments, they began to speak with each other and walk through the gallery.

It was in this flurry of excitement that I met the orientation leader who called the group to order: Kenny. I could hear his voice above the clacking of heels on the wood floor, vibrant chatter, and increasing chuckles. He stood at the entrance of the gallery, with his back to the doors, facing the gallery's first floor. He was wearing a yellow polo shirt neatly tucked into pressed khakis.

"Guys, it's getting a little loud in here." The students didn't respond. "Ok. I need groups one through six to stay up here [the top level of the gallery], and groups seven through eleven to go downstairs." The students again did not respond. Kenny insisted, saying "*shhhh!*" He repeated his directions about splitting up the groups, and the students followed instructions this time, making the crowd more even, and less constricted, throughout the gallery.

I went over to him and asked if he was an orientation leader. After swiftly lifting his head a little higher and fixing his silver belt buckle, he looked me directly in the eye and said: "Why yes, I am!" I introduced myself and told him about my project and asked if I could join his group tonight in order to meet some freshmen and observe a small group meeting. He welcomed me and said to meet him at the Du Bois statue promptly at

9:30pm. Again, the warmth of the Fisk community struck me. This was the first time that we had met each other.

Kenny was a junior English and Gender and Women's Studies major from Memphis, Tennessee. He was well liked by the entire student body, always smiling, and eager to greet his classmates. He is involved in student government, a frequent soloist with University Choir and an alternate Jubilee Singer—all positions commanding the respect of his peers.

As was customary for the end of each day of orientation, small groups of the freshman class met to discuss the day's events and hear any announcements about activities that would take place the following day. Upperclassman orientation leaders designated an outdoor location on campus to hold these group meetings. In addition to reflections and announcements, these meetings allowed the freshmen to develop relationships with students in an intimate setting. The most important part of these daily meetings was the chance to learn Fisk's alma mater.

At about 9:00pm, I walked across the campus yard towards the W.E.B. Du Bois statue on campus. This is a twelve-foot tall bronze statue of the most famous Fiskite, standing with two books in his outstretched hands. It is situated in a grassy area between the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin library and the Carl Van Vechten Gallery. Several of us recognized each other from the art gallery. All of the students warmly welcomed me to their meeting. After the group introduced themselves to me—telling me their names, where they grew up, and their intended majors, I told them about myself and my project; then, Kenny reminded the students about the importance of the Art Gallery

visit and told them that he would miss the following morning activities, but would join them by lunchtime. After his announcements, he shared that it was time to sing.

The students, some of whom were sitting on benches or the ground, stood up and gathered hands in a circle. “Alright. Serious faces guys. You know this is serious,” Kenny began. He took a breath and sang: “*The warm and genial setting sun...*” A few students were reluctant to join him, a few students were eager, and some did not join at all, looking as though they were irritated and bored with the entire activity. By the end of the alma mater, a meek, collective set of voices was audible, and it was clear to me that this group of freshmen were somewhat familiar with the alma mater. Kenny sang the baritone line of the last few phrases, harmonizing with the freshmen who were singing the melody. All of the students, except for one, raised one fist in the air to exclaim: “Fisk! Our alma mater,” at the end of the song. Kenny told the group that he would text them in the morning, after having gathered all of their cell phone numbers at the beginning of the week, to remind them where to meet. The students said to each other “good night, guys!” and immediately left to go to their rooms.

It is in these nightly moments, in the dark, at places on campus meaningful to upperclassmen, that Fisk students learned “The Gold and the Blue.” Ritualized through a “passing-down,” the upperclassmen teach the alma mater to their new classmates. Practicing an oral tradition, the upperclassman orientation leader sings the alma mater repeatedly to the freshmen over the course of the week. The freshmen are encouraged to join singing as they learn the song. By the end of orientation week, each freshmen had learned the alma mater and energetically sung it at the orientation’s culminating event, the induction into the Fisk family pinning ceremony, held in the campus chapel.



## Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Politics of “Race” and US Higher Education

This dissertation was researched and written during a period of racial agitation in US higher education. Post-Civil Rights Era and (problematically labeled) “post-racial” questions about how to make the American system of higher education effective in enabling individual and group mobility is—again—of great concern to individual students, higher education leadership, and state and national politicians. Globalization, the post-2008 economy, and confusion about and abuse of “diversity” rhetoric ignited a reinvestigation into the use of “race” in higher education admission. The 2013 US Supreme Court decision of *The University of Texas v. Abigail Fischer* case once again destabilized Affirmative Action<sup>107</sup>, participating in a perpetually shifting pattern of federally sanctioned racial inclusion and exclusion in US education, a pattern beginning with the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment.

A US higher education future in which preferential admission based on race, or other social categories of difference and privileging, may be outlawed is possible. But increasingly universities are turning away from such practices of their own will. Socioeconomic class and the category of “international” students have emerged as a key factors in a consideration of current higher education admission trends. For the past twenty years, those racially underrepresented in higher education have included a large number of elite students of color—both US citizens and international students.<sup>108</sup>

At HBCUs, intraracial class politics garner respectability at the forefront of

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<sup>107</sup> This is in a long line of litigation about education equality in the United States, including *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Graz v. Bollinger* (2003).

<sup>108</sup> The category includes students who are from racial or ethnic groups that are not represented in their college or university as they are in the general US population. People of African American, Alaska Natives, Latino/Latina, Native American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders often fall into this category of “underrepresented.”

material, social, and institutional experiences of students, and Fisk is no exception. Most of the students with whom I worked during fieldwork were first generation students.

However, there were several students who were 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and even 5<sup>th</sup> generation Fiskites.

These “legacy” students often held student leadership positions either in the Student Government Association or in Greek life. Yet, as “sons and daughters ever on the altar,” in the way that all Fisk students are implicated as “children” of the Alma Mater and indebted to the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, the opportunity to be a part of a legacy, and the desire to hold or maintain it, pushes the majority of students to present themselves as “respectable” sons and daughters—expressed through dress, comportment, and, certainly, speech and song.

Singing “The Gold and The Blue,” Fisk’s alma mater, exemplifies how expressive culture, specifically singing, grounds students’ efforts to be recognized as “Fiskites” by other students and alumni whether they be legacy students or the first in their family to go to college. The *way* students sing the alma mater—how they learn it and the vocal approach they take—is at the heart, I argue, of this expression. Fisk administrators and upperclassmen students work to give the incoming students a sense of the past—especially a history of African American excellence and Fisk’s history in particular—and impress upon them that they are connected to that history and responsible for perpetuating the Fisk model of citizenry.

### Making an Institution

I have discussed how Fisk students learn the alma mater during freshman orientation and how they sing the alma mater at Jubilee Day, as well as an individual’s interpretation of “The Gold and the Blue.” In each of these instances, Fisk students

perform aspects of black American religious music—whether singing the alma mater in a chapel “congregational” style, or in Eric and De’Andre’s gospelized approach to their rendition of the alma mater. Eric and De’Andre evince audible affection for and belief in the Fisk model of nurturing, protecting and preparing its students for being citizens in the contemporary world, as well as demonstrating how to participate in and make an institution. Through their vocalizing of school spirit, I observe that these Fisk students are steadfastly devoted to embodying their university’s motto, “her sons and daughters are ever on the altar” and demonstrate how their religious vocal expressions practice institutionality at this black university.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation I have shown how Fisk students resist twenty-first century forms of racial violence, and how they create paths towards the world they desire, by sounding “black.” In the four chapters, I have described how the relationships between US higher education, popular culture and the politics of racial inequality racialize vocality as “black,” through the example of students at Fisk University. Fisk students’ awareness of racism is historical and current, local and global, interpersonal and institutional. The effects of colonization, and the Atlantic slave trade in particular, partially inform Fisk’s institutional vocal ideals, as does the desire for students to be unlimited by racial oppression and grounded in a black cultural heritage.

I have discussed the broad, modern imagination of “black” voices shaped through blackface minstrelsy performance practice, the commercial recording industry, the legacy of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, and African American religious vocality in relation to carefully constructed individual self-expression. These imaginations affect an ever-changing public sphere through which Fisk students vocalize to enact academic achievement and preparation for professional success. Connections with peers, individualized attention from faculty, and messages from the administration encourage a specific kind of non-violent vocality. I have argued throughout the dissertation that this vocality does not inflict vocal injury, strategically demonstrates a non-violent presence in public, and makes the subjectivity of these black college students audible. Fisk students refute racist accusations of black people as “uneducable” and “dangerous” in a way that is not unique to Fisk, but exemplary of the vocal performativity of African Americans.

I have not put forth a particular vocal sound or aesthetic as “black” in this ethnography, but traced how power structures, individual and collective expressions, and institutions, shape how vocality is produced and heard as “black,” how racial recognition and identification unfolds through vocal production and listening. In the introduction, I delineated how the curricular/non-curricular framework emerged in the project, marking how Fisk students participate in, resist and reform the institutional ideals of higher education within the broad context of the world. The first chapter described how the legacy of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers’ concert spiritual performances still impact performance practices and audience expectations of black classical singers. In the following chapter, I traced the range of curricular choral culture at Fisk through the rehearsal style of the contemporary Jubilee Singers and the University Choir. This second chapter detailed the capacity of repertoire to racialize vocality. I then showed how Fisk students participate in black popular music making, especially participating in vocalizing the neo soul genre, as individual self-expression. In the last chapter, I considered how Fisk students sing their alma mater as a sacred act of institution building.

I have, throughout, described how ritualized forms of vocalization at Fisk exemplify a mode through which the university promotes the self-worth of its students, as well as a remembrance of and recommitment to the social justice and citizenship journey of black people from the moment of emancipation through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This attention to racialized vocality shows how these black college students perform their social positions through vocal acts, with an ear that is historically aware and voices that aspire towards a desired future. I observed how Fisk students’ vocality transforms individual

lives and challenge listeners to destabilize their understandings of how blackness and music circulate through the singing and listening body.

During this historical moment, when mass-mediated vocal processing has juridical and economic, as well as cultural consequences, I contend that it is crucial to listen for the meanings of sounding like a black person in the United States. Whether vocalizing or listening to a voice through mass mediation (Baugh 2003; Sterne 2008) or acousmatically (Obadike 2005), understanding processes of sounding “black” gives a unique understanding of power, social flows and possibility. It is through Fisk students’ speaking and singing, that they, as Du Bois said, “ride Jim Crow,” to sound themselves through tight social spaces, and self-(re)construct racial, class, educational, national, gendered, genre and religious boundaries.

It has been my goal here to pay critical scholarly attention to the contemporary social life of college campuses, and to offer insight into a process of vocal racialization during a period when a focus on internationalization and online degree programs has increased among higher education institutions in the United States (De Wit 2002; Bowen 2013).

This is also a time when post-Civil Rights Era revisitings of Affirmative Action legislation (Antonovics and Sander 2013), the intensified racial violence of the Obama era (Alexander 2013), and the heightened anti-intellectual climate of the US (Claussen 2004) affects social life at Fisk and other HBCUs, as well as among the broader public, with college campuses as especially rich sites in which to investigate racial construction. Further, the relevance of the HBCU continues to be questioned with vigor in the media, and I hope to have contributed a counterpoint to such attitudes (Tatum 2010). This stance

extends from the (de)vocalization of logocentricity in Western philosophy (Cavarero 2005), to the role of language in constructing politics of inequality over the course of modernity (Bauman and Briggs 2000), and to cultural studies assertions about the hegemonic forces produced by educational institutions (Willis 1981).

The study of racialized vocality at Fisk challenges the academy's value for the devocalization of *logos*, and ruptures essentialized evaluations of black singing bodies as simply natural or irrational. Fisk students participate in and critique higher educational curricular norms, which includes taking pleasure in participating in African American cultural practices. Vocalizing, more than any other act, enables them to denaturalize modern constructions of speech style as a parameter for adjudicating cognitive ability, and "black" singing style as evidence of "soul." This complicates the naturalization of "black" voices as solely emergent from the horrors of enslavement or an ineffable spiritual trance in African Americans' long struggle for freedom, and speaks to the ways in which African Americans' institution building is always already grounded in a vocalized history of resisting racial oppression and a vocalized insistence upon citizenship. I have shown in detail how students at this black college, an American symbol for social mobility and privilege, exemplify this process.

And with this, I wonder, what if the original Fisk Jubilee Singers had never sung? What if they had never concertized spirituals and performed them for the world with a dignified, quiet public presence? What if they had never vocalized through racist oppression with assured artistry, Christian devotion, and determination to sustain an institution of higher education for black people? How would life be different for Kondra or De'Andre?

Perhaps Du Bois' thinking would be different, or the work between Dvorak and Burleigh. Perhaps Hurston's organization of her catalog of observations about African Americans' expressive culture would have taken a different course as well. Perhaps, too, the global circulation and commodification of African American music, and the global popularity of black entertainers, would be a bit less marvelously complicated. The vocal culture of HBCUs could have taken a different form. The vocal presence of an entire population of professional black Americans might not have the institutionalized the overarticulation of consonants in speech and singing, the nuance through and around the limits of the commercial popular culture industry, or the critique of "black" repertoire and "black" genres. The interconnection between HBCUs and black churches could have been less clear.

Above all, it is through the priceless privilege of *convocation*—of singing and speaking together on a college campus in a collective call to action—that the voices of Fisk students "unceasingly" sound the hard-fought accomplishment of educational access, sound their engagement with black cultural heritage, and sound a racial identity as black. And so they sing, "*hurrah, for the Gold and the Blue,*" continuing to teach the world what it means to sound "black."



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Appendix

Figure 1

*Fisk University Campus Map*

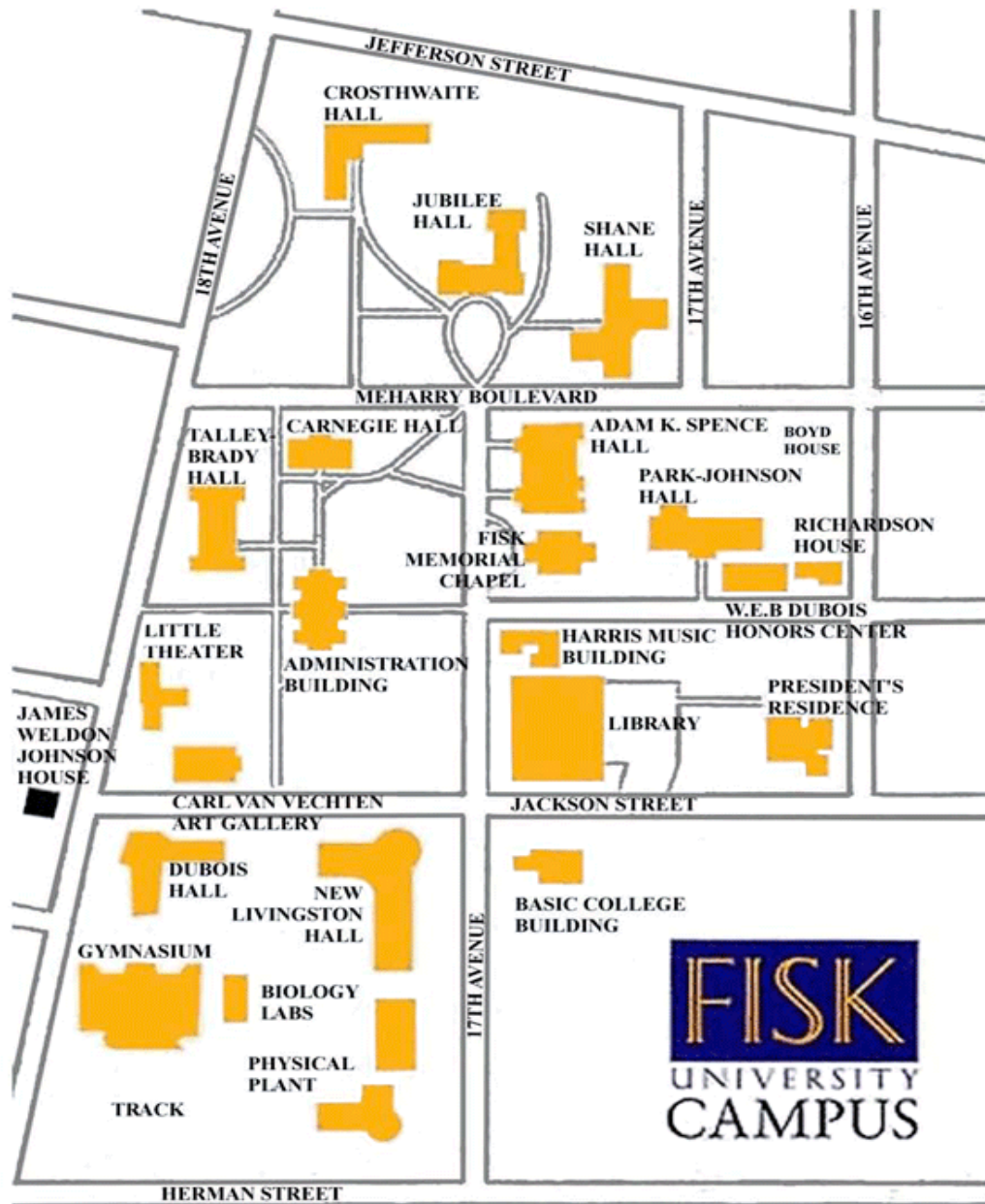


Figure 2

**The Gold and Blue** JOHN W. WORK, '95

1. The warm and gen-ial set-ting sun Lights up the hills with mel-low hue, Where  
Fisk our Al-ma Ma-ter stands Ma-jes-tic, dear, old Gold and Blue.

**CHORUS**

Then hur-rah and hur-rah! For the Gold and the Blue, Her  
sons are stead-fast, Her daught-ers true, Where  
e'er we be we shall still love thee Fisk our Al-ma Ma-ter.

From North, from East, from South, from West, To North to East, to South to West,  
Ethiopia's children gather here, Thy loyal children make their way  
And breathe in loftiest light and love To execute thy fine behest,  
Of this inspiring atmosphere. "Go turn the darkness into day."

4  
To heaven, to country, and to thee,  
Our hearts shall first and last be true,  
We e'en shall die with loyalty  
To heaven, to country, GOLD AND BLUE.

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Pictured above is the **alma mater** of Fisk University written by John W. Work, Class of 1895. "The Gold and Blue" was copyrighted in 1946.