

1-1-2008

Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd"

James Kelley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/msu-meridian-publications>

Recommended Citation

"Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual 'Follow the Drinking Gourd.'" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41.2 (2008): 262-80.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the MSU-Meridian at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in MSU-Meridian Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd”

JAMES B. KELLEY

IN AN EPISODE OF THE FIRST SEASON OF *THE FRESH PRINCE OF BEL-AIR*, a popular television sit-com of the early 1990s starring a young Will Smith, the character Vivian Banks takes up a temporary teaching position in order to offer the first course in African American studies at her children's elite private school. This course, however, quickly turns into solo and group singing practice; the only spoken content is the instructor's retelling of a popular story of the Underground Railroad, an explication-of-sorts of the African American spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” The spiritual, she explains matter-of-factly, contained a coded message with specific instructions for slaves on how and when to escape to the North and to freedom.

The claim of a coded message in the African American spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd” has widespread currency in American mass media and formal education today. The song was used in summer 2006 as the title of paired episodes of the reality-TV show *Treasure Hunters* that focused on the Underground Railroad and drew on popular claims of the use of spirituals and quilts to convey coded messages to escaping slaves. The same claim of a message encoded in the song is told and retold on Internet sites of all types, from personal pages to educator resources to government agencies. This essay takes issue not with the multiple retellings of the claim of a coded message but rather with the repetition of the claim as—and in place of—critical interpretation of the lyrics of “Follow the Drinking Gourd.”¹

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2008
© 2008, Copyright the Authors
Journal compilation © 2008, Blackwell Publishing, Inc.

Replication and Deferral

The readings of “Follow the Drinking Gourd” that are presented on Internet sites, much like those in the television shows named above, tend to demonstrate little familiarity with interpretive strategies or consideration of the need for careful documentation. One of the web pages most widely referenced by educators—“Explanation of ‘Follow the Drinking Gourd,’” hosted by NASA Quest—introduces the message purportedly encoded within the song with the terms “explanation” and “translation” in place of more fitting terms such as “interpretation” or “reading” (“Explanation”). This slippage in terminology suggests that the song’s lyrics are indeed written in code and thus will remain hopelessly garbled until carried over into clear and unambiguous prose. The lyrics and prose commentary reproduced here are from the NASA Quest site. They are not accompanied by a citation and, indeed, appear in very similarly phrased forms in numerous places on the Internet and in print:

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.
 For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,
 If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

“When the sun comes back” means winter and spring[,] when the altitude of the sun at noon is higher each day. Quail are migratory bird[s] wintering in the South. The Drinking Gourd is the Big Dipper. The old man is Peg Leg Joe. The verse tells slaves to leave in the winter and walk toward the Drinking Gourd. Eventually they will meet a guide who will escort them for the remainder of the trip. . . .

The river bank makes a very good road,
 The dead trees show you the way,
 Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.

This verse taught slaves to follow the bank of the Tombigbee River north[,] looking for dead trees that were marked with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot. The markings distinguished the Tombigbee from other north–south rivers that flow into it.

The river ends between two hills,
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.
 There’s another river on the other side,
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.

These words told the slaves that when they reached the headwaters of the Tombigbee, they were to continue north over the hills until they met another river. Then they were to travel north along the new river[,] which is the Tennessee River. . . .

Where the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom if you
follow the Drinking Gourd.

This verse told the slaves the Tennessee joined another river. They were to cross that river (which is the Ohio River), and on the north bank, meet a guide from the Underground Railroad (“Explanation”).

The vocabulary in these notes is simple, as is the grammar, consisting mostly of short, declarative sentences with occasional relative clauses and minimal subordination. The lack of grammatical and stylistic complexity is mirrored by the lack of subtlety in the assignment of meaning to these lyrics. Each line of the song “means” one thing: “‘When the sun comes back’ means winter and spring. . . . The old man is Peg Leg Joe.” The vocabularies of literary interpretation—beginning with the New Critical terms “theme” and “ambiguity” but not ending there—are absent from this and virtually all Internet discussions of the lyrics. What NASA Quest and many other sites do offer, thus, is less an interpretation and more an interpolation, a second text grafted onto the first. This interpolation is not a song but a set of instructions in prose that outline specific strategies and specify particular routes of escape: the slaves are to leave in winter, walk north along a particular riverbank, use a constellation as their guide, and so forth. The connections between the prose interpolation and the song’s lyrics remain largely unexamined and undocumented and, ultimately, the interpolation is of questionable literary, historical, and educational value.

Tracing the origins of the interpolated text on the Internet is quite a journey in itself, perhaps in some ways like traveling the Underground Railroad, with multiple points of entry and circuitous, sometimes tortuous routes. One of the many possible routes begins with Wikipedia, a popular but problematic reference source on the Internet. The Wikipedia entry for “Spiritual (music)” summarizes the claim of the coded message in “Follow the Drinking Gourd” and cites “Coded Slave Songs” as its external source, stating that the linked resource offers an “analysis” of the song’s lyrics. This linked page “Coded Slave Songs” does indeed make more extensive claims about the song’s

significance—including a bold statement that the song’s four stanzas contain “a complete coded map with full details of how to escape to Canada”—but there is no actual “analysis” to be found on this page. Instead, in an extended quotation from a *Detroit News Online* posting dated February 25, 1997, the page “Coded Slave Songs” presents the full lyrics of the spiritual accompanied by interpolated explanatory notes in prose, notes strikingly similar in both content and form to those found on the NASA Quest page. “Coded Slave Songs” closes by offering two additional Internet sources as documentation, the links to which no longer function (Ponomarenko). The section of the *Detroit News Online* posting quoted by “Coded Slave Songs,” however, credits Gloria D. Rall, a staff member at the New Jersey State Planetarium, with producing the children’s show “Follow the Drinking Gourd” for Black History Month in the mid-1990s. Rall might then be the equivalent of the “old man . . . waiting to carry you to freedom,” as her name brings one to perhaps the final way station on this long journey toward a source of the interpolated text. She has published two short accounts in astronomy journals—both presenting full versions of the now familiar interpolation—and cites as her source a short piece by the folklorist H. B. Parks that was first published in 1928 in *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society* and subsequently reprinted in various folklore collections.

Parks presents what appears to be the initial account of encountering and recording the claim of a coded message in “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” In a sentence toward the end of his piece, Parks provides the probable basis for the present form of the interpolation. Only the names are slightly different in his early version of the cipher: “the ‘drinkin’ gou’d is the Great Dipper,” Parks writes, and “the ‘wise man’ was the peg-leg sailor” (468). The lyrics he records (written from memory) also roughly parallel the contemporary lyrics; all of the main points of the song seem to be presented in the same order, but the language has not been sanitized. The song lyrics circulating today are written in standard American English with only a legitimizing sprinkling of African American vernacular, such as in the phrase “for to carry,” which famously appears in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”² Parks’ version of the song, by contrast, is written entirely in black spoken English, as remembered and transcribed by Parks himself. While not a completely authentic transcription, Parks’ version of the lyrics contains some characteristics commonly associated with African American

vernacular, including the uninflected third-person singular verb (“when the sun come back”) as well as copula omission, the dropping of the “be” verb, and nonrhotacism, the dropping of the final “r” (“nuther riva on the other side”).

What is most interesting about the 1928 essay is the manner in which Parks carefully identifies his various informants, each giving more information than the previous one: a boy and his grandfather in the Big Rich Mountains between North Carolina and Tennessee; a black fisherman in Louisville, Kentucky; two black musicians traveling with an itinerant preacher in Waller, Texas; the “old Negro at College Station, Texas”; and, finally, one of Parks’ own great-uncles up north. The white great-uncle lends a touch of credibility to the otherwise all-black tale—much in the way that white abolitionists authorized black slave narratives through prefaces and other ancillary materials—and he roots the stories more firmly in the real world. Parks’ great-uncle claims to have seen a written record of the peg-legged sailor and through him Parks is able to insert a number of new details into the stories that he has already gathered from the black informants: the man’s name (Peg-Leg Joe), the years of his activity (“his last trip was made in 1859”), the location (“the country immediately north of Mobile”), and the names of the three rivers referred to in the song (the Tombigbee, Tennessee, and Ohio).

Parks introduces his piece as a “story,” not a “study,” and he clearly lays out a string of coincidences that leads to the alleged discovery of the code in the song: Parks tells how he overheard the song performed by black singers at three different times in three different areas of the United States, then met a black man in yet another city who agreed to explain the secret of the song. Finally, Parks writes, he found it all validated by his own great-uncle’s recollections of something he had once read. In addition to these strained coincidences, Parks calls attention to the limitations (or even fictitiousness) of this account in at least two ways as he brings the piece to a close. First, he notes that not all of the song’s stanzas have been recorded in his account: “The Negro at College Station said that the song had many verses which he could not remember. He quoted a number which, either by fault of memory or secret meaning, are unintelligible and omitted” (468). Finally, he closes with an observation that the lyrics had been modified at least once, by the “colored revivalist” appearing earlier in his account,

and that the song had been performed in at least two wholly different contexts: the song was reportedly first used to help slaves escape to the North and was then modified for use in worship services. "The revivalist realized the power of this sing-song," Parks concludes, "and made it serve his purpose by changing a few words, and in so doing pointed his followers to a far different liberty [Christianity] than the one the peg-leg sailor advocated" (468).

Review of the source material suggests that Rall, not Parks, developed the interpolation in its present form, perhaps with additional influence from Winter's storybook. In any case, the interpolation in its present form erases the stories of transmission and the mention of missing stanzas, both of which make Parks' account so rich in interpretive possibilities, but the interpolation retains many of the details and even adds a few scientific comments (e.g., on migratory birds and the winter solstice) in a manner that causes the folktale to appear more and more as fact. If Parks' account creatively mirrors the process by which oral traditions might become part of the written record and African American folktales part of mainstream American culture, Rall's version focuses not on the process of this transformation but on the product, yielding something that looks very much like—and, indeed, often is taken for—the real thing, the authoritative account of what the song really means.³

Nearly all of the Internet discussions of the coded message in "Follow the Drinking Gourd" incorporate the interpolated text probably initialized by Parks and finalized by Rall but make no reference to these source materials; instead, the story's credibility is established, in part, through sheer repetition and through deferral of citations, perhaps allowing the interpolation to pass as "common knowledge." The story's credibility is further established through affiliation with prominent government bodies, including Internet pages hosted by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA Quest), the National Park Service (NPS), and the National Security Agency (NSA), all of which make statements in support of the "coded message" thesis and two of which host the song's full lyrics and the interpolated text (again, without citing a source). The inclusion of this material on their websites no doubt stems from a desire both to recognize and to celebrate the achievements of African Americans and to foster knowledge within their particular realms of expertise or interest. The use of the song and interpolated text by NASA Quest connects with

the teaching of astronomy and related sciences, by the NPS with the education about the routes of the Underground Railroad, and by the NSA with the celebration of “the array of codemaking and codebreaking devices used throughout our nation’s history to preserve freedom” (Weardon). In reproducing this “coded message” thesis, however, these government agencies also lend credibility to this simplistic approach to the song. Users of the Internet, after all, continue to struggle to develop the skills necessary to evaluate electronic sources, and one of the criteria they are encouraged to use is “affiliation,” which operates on the principle that reputable agencies and individuals will take care to present solid and supported information on the Internet sites they host.

In this regard, the National Park Service web page seems particularly problematic because of its presentation of the story in the guise of researched history. Of the three government agencies identified above, the NPS site has the greatest visual appeal, using a measured variety of colors, font sizes, and text styles. This professional appearance is accompanied by gestures toward researched arguments, something not found on the other sites, where claims about the song’s true meaning are made without documentation. The NPS page, by contrast, opens by naming Professor Wilbur H. Siebert of Ohio State University and includes an 1898 map of routes of the Underground Railroad, but no citation is given, and the NPS account moves quickly into emotional appeals and unsupported generalizations that draw heavily from the interpolated text and other widespread claims (again, undocumented) found on the Internet. The misspelled name at the top of the page—“Wilber” in place of “Wilbur”—is the first in a mounting number of errors in spelling and punctuation that might undermine the credibility of the NPS account, yet the page is cited with great frequency as primary material in the many Internet resources created for and by educators, as are the pages by NASA Quest and—to a lesser extent—by the NSA.

Every Tone a Testimony Against Slavery

Some of the more sophisticated online educator resources that draw on the claim of a message encoded in “Follow the Drinking Gourd” do more than link to or repeat from other online sources. Instead, they pair this explanation of the song’s lyrics with passages from important

and well respected works from the slavery era, particularly the autobiographical writings of Frederick Douglass.⁴

In his 1845 work, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*, the author describes the singing of slaves he observed on Colonel Lloyd's plantation as they made their way to the Great House Farm: "they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves." He continues: "I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs." This passage might seem at first glance to support a reading of songs such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd" as coded messages—conveying "unmeaning jargon" to outsiders yet remaining "full of meaning" to the initiated—yet Douglass discusses here both the capacity of songs to express something abstract, not specific details or strategies, and the ability to recognize that capacity only after having stepped outside of the subject position of the slave. These songs, Douglass continues, "told a tale of woe. . . they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains" (13–14).⁵

In a later work, *My Bondage and my Freedom*, Douglass again addresses the topic of dual meanings in songs. Here, he explains his view that the songs also allowed slaves to express more positive (but equally abstract) desires and makes clear that this underlying message was not always well concealed: "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan,/I am bound for the land of Canaan' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *north*—and the north was our Canaan" (278). This second passage demonstrates the use by black slaves of biblical themes, particularly Old Testament tales of deliverance, to articulate otherwise forbidden aspirations for freedom, but this passage, much like the previous one, does not support the claim that slave songs could and did convey specific information (such as advice or directions to an escaping slave) through coded references that would remain unintelligible to outsiders. If anything can be said to be encoded in these song lyrics, viewed in the context of Douglass' surrounding comments, it is a general desire to escape to the North or, at best, Douglass' own, barely contained excitement about his upcoming escape attempt, but it is

certainly not a specific set of instructions or even a signal to act. A subsequent passage of *My Bondage and my Freedom* does assert that several “pass-words” were used by slaves and abolitionists to communicate certain “things, important to us” (280), but Douglass’ account makes no connection between such secret signals and song lyrics. The “O Canaan, Sweet Canaan” passage from Douglass thus appears to be quoted out of context in these more sophisticated online educator resources in order to validate the otherwise undocumented “coded message” thesis.

While it is possible that “Follow the Drinking Gourd” was employed as a signal song or even as one part of a more complex communication system of the Underground Railroad, serving a specific group of escaping slaves in a specific place and at a specific time, there appears to be no real evidence beyond Parks’ account, and that account seems—as suggested in the analysis above—to call attention to its own status as a tale that is transformed with every retelling. In any case, the song’s meaning cannot be said to be fixed by the possibility of a coded message alone. At the very least, the spiritual has taken on new meanings and been put to new uses through the decades, moving from plantations through folklore collections to children’s books, video and theatrical productions, planetarium programs, classrooms, the Internet, and beyond. Parks’ source material maintains that the song can serve multiple purposes in multiple contexts. In the absence of solid evidence from the slavery era, one might do well to focus on the ways in which “Follow the Drinking Gourd” is currently being circulated and being made to carry new and very specific meanings.

This essay examines the retellings of the story on the Internet because the Internet serves today as a primary forum for the exchange of ideas and the retrieval of information; even university-level students and graduated teachers frequently turn first to Wikipedia, Google, and similarly nonrefereed Internet sources and search engines in their quest for material to incorporate into research papers and classroom activities. The ease of copying and pasting text from one site to another—or of linking page to page—encourages repetition with minimal variation. Indeed, nearly all of the educator resources found on the Internet present much the same explanation for “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” taking the interpolated text word-for-word or with only minor variations from other sites (without mentioning its origins in folklore) in a manner that defers authorization and ultimately undermines academic

inquiry and quality instruction. A number of lesson plans, particularly ones presented for use with elementary- and middle-school students, frequently follow this same pattern of replication and deferral.

Some Suggested Meanings

Reviews of the immensely popular children's book by Jeanette Winter and similar materials on the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd" appearing in print in the *School Library Journal* deserve attention, as these reviews suggest much about the reception of the "coded message" thesis among educators of young children in the United States. For example, Kathleen T. Horning takes Winter's book to task for what she sees as a disempowering presentation of five fugitive slaves who escape slavery by passively following the plans of a white man: she maintains that the protagonists are not individualized in the illustrations and, at every turn in the book, rely entirely on "benevolent whites, rather than on their own thoughts, ideas, and decisions." Still, Horning does not question whether the story of the coded message taught by Peg Leg Joe to the slaves, as told in Winter's book, is indeed a "part of U.S. history" (95). A letter critiquing Horning's review finds several points to debate and defends the children's book by emphatically maintaining that it is grounded in fact: "Winter's book is fiction based on the true story of an actual white carpenter, 'Peg Leg Joe,' who really did use the song 'Follow the Drinking Gourd' as a means of clandestinely passing on the directions for following the underground railroad." The letter's author goes on to repeat that the tale is "authentic" and depicts a "part of American history" (Cameron 60–61).

Other reviewers seem to share these assumptions about the grounding of the "coded message" thesis in historical fact, as seen in their reviews of the various video productions for children on the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and its purported role in the Underground Railroad. For example, Elise Wendel states that there is a "need for creating awareness of this part of our history" (53–54), and Fritz Mitnick praises one particular video production for "entertain[ing] with history and real adventure" (62). Of the reviews analyzed here, Joy Fleishhacker's brief piece stands alone in not making the leap from fiction to fact, from story to history, and characterizes Winter's book as a "fictional take on a folk song 'Follow the Drinking Gourd'" (77).

This tendency among educators, particularly in the early grades, to fully embrace the “coded message” thesis is further evidenced in the resources posted online for and by educators. These lesson plans from individuals and organizations are too numerous to be presented here in exhaustive detail, but there are a number of commonalities worth noting. The resources consistently reproduce or link to the interpolated text and, with few exceptions, present the interpolation as the single, true, and encoded meaning of the song. One resource for fourth-grade instructors even details using the interpolated text as way to correct students’ initial thoughts on how slaves and abolitionists might have secretly communicated in the past. The following is given in this resource as the final class activity: “Lead a discussion of what the children learned [through reading Winter’s book and reviewing the song lyrics and interpolation] about communication between North Carolina’s slaves, conductors, and abolitionists. Have them point out their misconceptions and their accuracies” (Hodgson). The activity is misconceived for two reasons. For one, the Tombigbee River, as the first river is identified in the interpolation used in this lesson plan, originates in northeastern Mississippi and ends in southwestern Alabama, never coming close to North Carolina. Also and more importantly, the lesson plan’s complete reliance on the interpolation serves only to shut down other, perhaps just as creative and valid approaches to the problematic topic of coded communication in the slavery era.

The uncritical adherence to the interpolation and its “coded message” thesis is also seen in the verbal constructions in the online educator resources. Very few of these resources make use of the conditional modality, even when clearly addressing other adult instructors. In one of the few instances of the use of the conditional, a lesson plan for grades K–2 contains in the opening Objectives section the following: “[Students will] listen to the words of the “Drinking Gourd” song and explain how it *might* have helped slaves escape” (“Finding Your Way,” my emphasis). However, the lesson plan soon slips into the indicative and provides a link (without commentary) to the NASA Quest’s undocumented claims that the spiritual “is a coded song” containing “route instructions [that] were given to slaves by an old man named Peg Leg Joe” (“History of ‘The Drinking Gourd’”).

It is the exceptional resource, indeed, that uses the conditional consistently in discussing the interpolation. The site “Pathways to

Freedom,” designed for grades 4–8, introduces the interpolated details as “Some Suggested Meanings” and expresses uncertainty toward at least parts of the interpolation. One section reads: “The old man may have been Peg Leg Joe, a carpenter who reportedly traveled throughout the deep [S]outh, teaching slaves this song.” Another section continues along this line: “If Peg Leg Joe did create this song, perhaps he left his mark on the trees” (“Follow the Drinking Gourd,” page two). These comments contrast sharply with the simple equation presented by NASA Quest and many others sites: “The old man is Peg Leg Joe.” The conditional is even applied in the classroom resources page of “Pathways to Freedom,” where this particular lesson is summarized as “explor[ing] the words to the song ‘Follow the Drinking Gourd,’ and what its words may have signaled to those traveling on the Underground Railroad” (“Teacher Tips”).⁶

Much like the other online resources, however, “Pathway to Freedom” falls short in failing to identify the source materials for the claim of the coded message. The statement it does give—“Many people think that slaves used the song to let others know about this pathway to freedom” (“Follow the Drinking Gourd,” page one)—is all too true but does not bring the reader any closer to a source that can be revisited and critiqued. Not one of the sixty-or-so online lesson plans and other educator resources examined for this essay refers directly to the content of the source material by Parks, much less questions it.

Intellectually responsible approaches to the lyrics of “Follow the Drinking Gourd” might require—even, to some degree, with the youngest students—presenting the interpolation (preferably in its source material) as one possible reading of the song and opening it up to criticism, prompting students to identify the assertions with which they agree or disagree and then to explain what evidence they would want to examine or questions they would want to have answered before accepting particular claims made in the interpolated text. Alternately, one might do away with the interpolated text altogether, replacing it with a suitable amount of historical context and a set of open-ended questions about the song’s possible meanings. Finally, although this may seem a minor point, one should consider making consistent use of the conditional rather than the indicative modality when discussing interpretations of “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” It is common knowledge that the Underground Railroad existed in one form or another, but one can only speculate about the possible meanings and uses of this

particular song among black slaves a century-and-a-half ago. *What the song meant* is impossible to say, but one can make informed and reasoned statements about *what the song might have meant* to different groups at different times.

These strategies—the examination or deletion of the interpolated text as well as the use of open-ended questions and conditional modality—may foster close readings or other approaches by students that yield original and useful results. Interpretation thus becomes the challenge it should be: reading closely, thinking critically, and developing a perspective that is determined but not predetermined by the text. Such a reading, for example, might take the same point of departure as the interpolated text, reading the “drinking gourd” as a synonym (but not a code term) for the Big Dipper, the constellation in the northern sky by which one can easily identify the North Star, but in this counter-reading one might then propose that the theme of “Follow the Drinking Gourd” (rather than its coded message) is the desire to escape to the North (rather than to relay specific instructions and escape routes). In this counter-reading, the sun’s return might signal a new day and new hope, and the reference to quail, though metonymy, might call to mind a passage from Exodus 16 of the Old Testament in which quail covered the camp of the Hebrews in the desert and left behind the “manna” to sustain them on their journey out of bondage (Exodus 16:1–34). The lines detailing the riverbank and dead trees, in turn, might present the Southern equivalent of the Desert of Sin, complete with signs guiding the way to the Promised Land, or they alternately might paint a dream landscape, terrain to be traveled in an imaginary or spiritual rather than physical journey. Finally, the puzzling “peg leg” reference—a point on which the interpolated text seems at its weakest—might signal the name Papa Legba through both consonant patterning (the “p-,” “l-,” and “g-”) and the visual cue of the wooden leg. Papa Legba is the African lwa (spirit or deity), often depicted in the New World as an old man with a cane or crutch, who serves as “the gatekeeper” and dispenses wisdom that might help a traveler find the way through confusing terrain.⁷ The widely accepted interpolation is often augmented in various sources by the claim that African American slaves relied on traditional methods of recording and transmitting knowledge through song, but there is no mention of other African influences that might be just as applicable to “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” Taken as a whole, then, this counter-reading would point not to a set of encoded

prose instructions devised by a mysterious white abolitionist but rather to the poetic articulation of black desires for freedom expressed through the syncretism of early African American religion, the creative mixing of the African belief systems that many blacks had brought with them on the slave ships with the Christian belief systems that were first introduced to or imposed on many of them in the New World.

Conclusion

The propagation of the claim of a coded message in the lyrics of "Follow the Drinking Gourd" reflects a propensity of all peoples, not just enslaved African Americans, to organize their past and present through shared, popular stories rather than researched histories; the story itself, not the proof of it, is what makes the story true. The widespread propagation and acceptance of the interpolation might also reflect—among other things—a general unwillingness to entertain multiple readings of a single text, a marked preference for explanatory prose over ambiguous lyric, a wish to uncover or invent resistant strategies for oppressed peoples in American history, and a failure on the part of educators and agencies alike to model and to foster critical thinking skills and sophisticated interpretive strategies. Some of the primary goals of education, particularly as students progress in their studies, should be to foster an informed questioning of received wisdom, a desire to move beyond surface analyses, and an appreciation for original thought and reasoned argumentation.

The criticisms raised in this essay are not leveled against Gloria D. Rall's planetarium show for children, "Follow the Drinking Gourd." This and similar, enormously popular programs that have been presented across the United States in recent years simply do not seem concerned with distinguishing between fiction and fact or between story and history. Rall's program, for example, moves smoothly from observations about the sun, constellations, and other relevant points of astronomy to a simple overview of the lives of black slaves, with particular focus on black slave children, and finally to the tale of the characters from Winter's illustrated book.⁸ The planetarium shows—along with the popular and wide-reaching theatrical and video productions, book readings, and related programs for small children—

thus appear to serve what Bruno Bettelheim has called “the child’s need for magic” and to weave together multiple ways of knowing into a tapestry that entertains young children even as it stimulates their curiosity about the social functions of music and song, the lived experiences of black slaves, and the human connections to the sun, constellations, and other heavenly bodies. Indeed, the opportunity they present to integrate various subjects of study—including African American culture, music, geography, and astronomy—must account, at least in part, for the enormous appeal of these programs in schools and communities across the country.

Rather, the criticisms developed here are leveled against Rall’s printed essays and the subsequent wave of unexamined replications of the interpolated text, often with few changes from the versions told to elementary-school children in classrooms, presentations, and illustrated books. These child-like stories are uncritically propagated by young adults and full adults who attend classes, write research papers, publish web pages, and frequently go on to educate young children in one fashion or another. When these adults accept popular and unexamined stories in place of (rather than alongside) researched histories and supported interpretations, they put genuinely intellectual pursuits at risk, and a serious topic such as African American studies, which is still far from established in the curriculum of American schools, may find itself replaced by little more than singing and storytelling.

NOTES

1. Postmodern theorists are skeptical of distinctions between “story” and “history” or “fiction” and “fact,” frequently pointing out that each item in these paired oppositions relies on the other for meaning and that both are ultimately grounded in narrative. Without loading itself with theoretical terms, this essay seeks to reflect that same skepticism and does not attempt to debunk the “myths” in order to present the “truth” or an authoritative reading of the song. Rather, this essay seeks to unmask an emerging “metanarrative,” to use Jean-François Lyotard’s widely recognized term to characterize the grand but constraining frameworks that simultaneously order and limit human knowledge or experience. The particular metanarrative to be challenged here is the “coded message” thesis that dominates in contemporary popular discussions of “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” A more exhaustive critical examination might position this “coded message” thesis within the larger metanarratives of liberation and scientific progress, both of which are explicitly critiqued by Lyotard and both of which shape our contemporary reception of the song. See, for example, NASA’s 1999 video for grades 6–12, *Underground Railroad: Connections to Freedom and Science*.
2. On his website, “Follow the Drinking Gourd: A Cultural History,” Joel Bresler traces the song’s current lyrics to a 1947 publication by Lee Hays of the Weavers. Bresler has been

actively challenging the Internet claims surrounding the song “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” and these challenges have resulted in a number of web pages referenced in this essay being pulled down at least temporarily (e.g., the National Park Service page) or being modified to include a link to his project as an alternative approach to the song (e.g., the NASA Quest page). Bresler’s project was launched in mid-January 2007, within days of the notification that this essay had been accepted for publication.

3. Many educator resources—including NASA’s 1999 educational video *Underground Railroad: Connections to Freedom and Science*—bring together the popular claims of a coded message in “Follow the Drinking Gourd” and the claims of the “Underground Railroad Quilt Code,” as presented in the popular book *Hidden in Plain View*. The two claims, indeed, have much in common. Both include transmission from oral to written culture and from black informant to white scholar only after an initial period of hesitation, a general explanation of what is claimed to have been a complex system of communication kept secret for more than a century, and a reliance on a single source—now dead—with no corroborating evidence. Finally, both codes have circulated widely in popular culture since at least the mid-1990s, with little effective challenge from scholars, and remain popular topics in classrooms across the United States, particularly when Black History Month rolls around. The quilt code may be slightly better known, due in part to the publicity it received on *Oprah*, but the “coded message” thesis of “Follow the Drinking Gourd” has a more interesting and complex history of transmission and permutation. In any case, both claims need to be critically engaged.
4. For examples of the pairing of Frederick Douglass and “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” see “Pathways to Freedom” as well as the resources prepared by Linda Caprio and by Barbara Bacon.
5. Prominent African American thinkers and writers have continued to explore the meaningful “incoherence” of black songs passed down through generations along with the related questions of lost knowledge and lost connections. See, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois’ chapter “The Sorrow Songs” in *The Souls of Black Folk* and Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*. It is an extreme oversimplification to replace such considerations with the claim of unraveling a hidden code.
6. The American Studies pages at Oak Park River High School also distinguish themselves for calling the interpolated text an “interpretation,” including an interpolation-free copy of the lyrics, and positioning the discussion of the lyrics within a larger discussion of the building of individual and communal identities. The lesson plans also include open-ended exercises—such as “bring in the lyrics to a song you are willing to defend as poetry”—that demonstrate an appreciation for poetry rather than a desire to reduce everything to prose (“American Studies: Unit 2”).
7. Parks’ account attributes nearly superhuman abilities to “Peg Leg Joe,” showing how he single-handedly engineers the escape of countless slaves. According to the stories recorded by Parks, the peg-legged sailor would “appear very suddenly” on one plantation after another only to “disappear” after having taught the code song to “nearly all the young men among the slaves” and thus enabled their mass exodus (467). He would then mark the trail for them (leaving prints “on every dead tree or other conspicuous object”—468), meet each wave of escaping slaves at the end of the trail, and ultimately disappear altogether from history. In short, Parks does not seem concerned with convincing the reader of Peg Leg Joe’s actual existence. The editors of the collections reprinting Parks’ account also do not take it at face value: B. A. Botkin writes that Parks’ account may approach “the truth” but not “the facts” (470), and Alan Dundes casts doubt on “the historicity of the ‘peg-leg’ conductor” (468). By contrast, Rall seems credulous; she struggles to account for Peg Leg Joe’s actual role in her 1994 article and shifts the action away from him in her 1994 and 1995 interpolations, where, for example, she does not name him as the one responsible for marking the dead trees or for meeting the escaped slaves at some point on the route.

8. The NASA Quest site contains a link to the images and RealAudio file of Gloria Rall's presentation. See <http://quest.nasa.gov/ltc/special/mlk/drink.html>. Much of the interpolated text appears in her presentation with several modifications, including added references to slave children and a number of simplified vocabulary items.

Works Cited

- "American Studies: Unit 2." Oak Park River High School. 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.criticsandbuilders.com/amstudies/unit2/index.htm>>.
- Bacon, Barbara. "Unit 4: Civil War and Reconstruction." 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.voicesacrosstime.org/come-all-ye/ti/2004/lessons/04BaconSlaveCodeSongs.html>>.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.
- Botkin, B. A., ed. *A Treasury of Southern Folklore: Stories, Ballads, Traditions, and Folkways of the People of the South*. 1949. New York: American Legacy, 1984.
- Bresler, Joel. "Follow the Drinking Gourd: A Cultural History." 1 Jan. 2007 <<http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/>>.
- Cameron, Ann. "Follow the Drinking Gourd." *School Library Journal* 35.11 (July 1989): 60–61.
- Caprio, Linda. "Douglass in the Classroom." 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.library.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=2920>>.
- Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and my Freedom*. New York: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1855.
- . *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1903.
- "The Ethnic Tip." *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Writ. Benny Medina and Jeff Pollack. Dir. Jeff Melman. NBC. 14 Jan. 1991.
- "Explanation of 'Follow the Drinking Gourd.'" NASA Quest. 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://quest.nasa.gov/ltc/special/mlk/gourd2.html>>.
- "Finding Your Way: The Underground Railroad." Xpeditions. 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/lessons/17/gk2/quilting.html>>.
- Fleishhacker, Joy. "Geography and Mapmaking." *School Library Journal* 50.1 (Jan. 2004): 77.
- "Follow the Drinking Gourd." Page one. Pathways to Freedom: Maryland & the Underground Railroad. 2006. 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/gourd1.cfm>>.

- “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” Page two. Pathways to Freedom: Maryland & the Underground Railroad. 2006. 4 Nov. 2006 (<http://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/gourd2.cfm>).
- “Follow the Drinking Gourd, Part 1.” *Treasure Hunters*. NBC. 10 July 2006.
- “Follow the Drinking Gourd, Part 2.” *Treasure Hunters*. NBC. 17 July 2006.
- “History of ‘Follow the Drinking Gourd.’” NASA Quest. 4 Nov. 2006 (<http://quest.nasa.gov/lrc/special/mlk/gourd1.html>).
- Hodgson, Elizabeth, and Rachel Vogelpohl. “All Aboard! Exploring the Secrets of the Underground Railroad—An Interdisciplinary Unit.” Day 3 Lesson. Hear the Whistle Blow!—Musical Messages of Freedom. LessonPlansPage.com. 4 Nov. 2006 (<http://www.lessonplanspage.com/SecretsOfTheUndergroundRailroadUnitDay3MusicalFreedomMessages4.htm>).
- Horning, Kathleen T. “Follow the Drinking Gourd (Book).” *School Library Journal* 35.9 (May 1989): 95.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition*. 1979. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Mitnick, Fritz. “Audiovisual Review: Film & Video.” *School Library Journal* 39.5 (May 1993): 62.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. 1977. New York: New American Library, 1987.
- National Park Service. “The Underground Railroad in Action: Communication and Codes.” National Underground Railroad: Network to Freedom. 4 Nov. 2006 (http://www.nps.gov/ugrr/TEMPLATE/FrontEnd/learn_b5.cfm).
- Parks, H. B. “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” *Publications of the Texas Folk-Lore Society* 7 (1928) 81–84. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folktales*. ed. Alan, Dundes. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990. 465–68.
- Ponomarenko, John. “Coded Slave Songs.” 18 March 2005. 4 Nov. 2006 (<http://www.localdial.com/users/jsyedu133/Soulreview/Understandingpages/coded.htm>).
- Rall, Gloria D. “The Stars of Freedom.” *Sky & Television* 89.2 (February 1995): 36–38.
- . “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” *The Planetarian* 23.3 (1994): 8–12.
- “Slave Quilt Exhibition.” National Security Administration. 4 Nov. 2006 (<http://www.nsa.gov/museum/museu00033.cfm>).
- “Spiritual (music).” Wikipedia. 4 Nov. 2006 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirituals>).

- “Teacher Tips for the Pathways to Freedom Website.” Pathways to Freedom: Maryland & the Underground Railroad. 2006. 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://pathways.thinkport.org/resources/tips.cfm#secrets>>.
- Tobin, Jacqueline L., and Raymond G. Dobard. *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.
- Underground Railroad: Connections to Freedom and Science*. International Network to Freedom Association/NASA Central Operation of Resources for Teachers, 1999.
- Weadon, Patrick D. “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” National Security Administration. 4 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.nsa.gov/publications/publi00011.cfm>>.
- Wendel, Elise. “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” *School Library Journal* 37.2 (Feb. 1991): 53–54.
- Winter, Jeanette. *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

James B. Kelley is an Assistant Professor of English at Mississippi State University, Meridian Campus, where he teaches literature and writing. He holds an MA in German from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a PhD in English from the University of Tulsa. He was the recipient of a 1999–2000 Fulbright Lecturer Award to Germany. His publications include articles and other works on African American and gay literature and on pedagogical concerns in the university classroom.