



Handout 2 - Bernice Johnson Reagon on Spirituals

Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock, and former curator of the Community Life Division of the Smithsonian Institution, discusses how black music has shaped the African American experience and identity. For more than a half-century Bernice Johnson Reagon has been a major cultural voice for freedom and justice; singing, teaching—speaking out against racism and organized inequities of all kinds. She counts her participation in the Civil Rights Movement while a college student at Albany State College (from which she was expelled after participating in a demonstration for which she and others participating were jailed) as a transformative. She was a member of the original SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) Freedom Singers.

Excerpt from “The Songs are Free” an interview with Bill Moyers

“When we sing, we announce our existence. In our tradition, we are told that crossing over — all of those words, **“crossing over,” “tomorrow,” “in the morning when I rise”** — all of those words, all of those phrases could be applied to any practical, everyday situation, talking about changing your life. It has to be a change that was as drastic as death so that, you know, if you were saying “in the morning **when I rise,**” you really might be talking about “in the morning when I rise, **I’m leaving.**”

The songs are free and they have the meaning placed in them by the singers so you can’t say every song that has **“Canaan”** means “Canada,” every song that says “crossing over **Jordan**” means “after I die.” It means Canada if it meant Canada. It means “crossing over Jordan when I die” if that’s what it means.

So really within the African American experience, you could own this story. You could own any story floating in your lee. And this has to do with this every moment being special. If every moment is sacred and if you are amazed and in awe most of the time when you find yourself breathing and not crazy, then you are in a state of constant thankfulness, worship and humility.

You might not have money. You might not have blah, blah, blah. **But you’ve got this culture that empowers you as a unit in the universe and places you and makes you know you are a child of the universe.”**

-Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, Historian, on the meaning and purpose of Black sacred song