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## REFLECTIONS ON FREEDOM AND THE SONGS OF MY PEOPLE

**Kim R. Harris**

Through this week of commemorating the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, I am touched by many historic sounds and images. Fifty years ago I was six years old, trying to comprehend how my father, Clifford Richards Jr. was participating in a non-violent march. Could it be that he would refuse to hit back if someone hit him first? Now as an adult, grateful for his service and determination, I watch the black and white grainy television images. Like I did as a child, I still try to catch a glimpse of my father in that crowd of 250,000.

As a Black Catholic Womanist seeing the footage, I lament that during the “formal” program Daisy Bates, the only female speaker, received literally one minute of time. Yet, I rejoice that the “Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom” included a Black Catholic woman, student leader, Freedom Ride coordinator and courageous participant, Diane Nash Bevel. I hear the pointed speech of twenty-three year old SNCC founder and chairperson, John Lewis. I also see an interview with Congressman Lewis many years after the march, now in high definition. Still mourning the lives of those who died for freedom, he gently touches the chiseled name of Black Catholic Civil Rights martyr James Earl Chaney, on the memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

Along with these many images, I hear what Sr. Thea called the “songs of our people,” spirituals and freedom songs. The SNCC Freedom Singers stand at the podium during the march, singing “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Len Chandler leads folk music luminaries in “Keep Your Eyes On The Prize.” Sign-waving young people in the

crowd sing their own Motown inspired version of “Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Stayed On Freedom.” During their song, an announcer brings Marian Anderson to the podium. She sings and prays “He’s Got The Whole World In His Hands.” Odetta excites the crowd with “I’m On My Way to Freedom Land” just after Joan Baez sings “We Shall Overcome” and “Oh Freedom Over Me.” Famed trio, Peter, Paul and Mary sing “Blowing in the Wind,” anecdotally based by singer-songwriter Bob Dylan on the spiritual “Many Thousand Go (No More Auction Block For Me).”

Watching these song leaders and performers prime the atmosphere, I reflect that just as the actions of Black Catholics strengthened the warp and weave of the modern Civil Rights Movement, so too, we are deeply embedded in the origins of this music of faith and freedom. We are not latecomers to the “songs of our people.” They belong to us, not only by memory through our grandparents, by adoption in our post Vatican II churches or by Protestant conversions to our faith tradition. They are ours by virtue of the “blood, tears, toil and sweat” of our brothers and sisters in the Movement.

These songs, in their form as spirituals, also belong to us through the composition, creativity, and courage of our Black Catholic ancestors who fought for emancipation from slavery. Black Catholic Civil War soldiers and presumably the women working and traveling with them, creating and reshaping spirituals in their interfaith regiment, the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment South Carolina Volunteer Infantry [African Descent], declared their freedom singing “No More Auction Block For Me.” They marched to the strains of “Hail Mary” as they called for more valiant soldiers to help them bear the cross. They admonished sinners and cried “holy, holy” as they told of the woman Mary who had one Son. They joined their voices with their brothers and sisters who

endured jail for singing “We’ll Soon Be Free” at the outbreak of the rebellion. They professed their faith in song.

He have been wid us, Jesus. He still wid us, Jesus.  
He will be wid us Jesus. Be wid us to the end.

These are songs of the formerly enslaved that fought for their dream of freedom. These are songs that also inspired the concept and even formed the content of Civil Rights Movement freedom songs.

Through this week of commemorations, I remembered, more convincingly, that the music and the movements for emancipation and civil rights are ours as Black Catholics, as well as they belong to our brothers and sisters in racial and cultural heritage, in religious tradition and in allied struggle. To read of Black Catholic bravery is for me to continue growing in knowledge. To find Black Catholic exploits in the struggle is for me to grow in justified pride. To sing the songs of our people is for me, for us, to become more deeply who we authentically and truly are.

