In-class introduction of African-American Spirituals:

**Note to Teachers:** The songs listed below for in-class use with students can be found in numerous online collections. I recommend the following collections.

“Wade in the Water: Vol. II African American Congregational Singing,” Smithsonian Folkways
“Steal Away: Songs of the Underground Railroad,” by Kim and Reggie Harris
“They Slice the Air,” by The Spirituals Project

1. **Question to Students:** **Reflect:** What importance does music have in your life?

2. **African American Spirituals:** What are they? What types of spirituals are there?
   - Religious based music form that evolved within the African-American community under slavery
   - Organic, coming up from the people
     - Living folk art—improvisational, nothing written, no formal authors or composers, no fixed authoritative texts
   - 6,000 or more were used, but many have been lost
     1. Transmission of biblical knowledge in a non-literate culture,
     2. Songs of Sorrow,
     3. Songs of Joy,
     4. Coded-message Songs (signal or map songs)

   “Little of beauty has America given to the world save the rude grandeur God Himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor & ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance 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 of the seas. . . It remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation & the greatest gift of the Negro people.” —W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

3. **Go Down Moses:** What categories does this fit into? How? What stories does it specifically reference? Why?

   When Israel was in Egyptland  
   Let my people go.  
   Oppressed so hard they could not stand  
   Let my people go.

   Go down, Moses,  
   Way down in Egyptland  
   Tell ol’ Pharaoh  
   To let my people go.

   “Thus spake the Lord” ol’ Moses said,  
   Let my people go.  
   “If not I’ll strike your first born dead.”  
   No more in bondage shall they be.  
   Let my people go.  
   And then shall all humankind be free,  
   Let my people go.

Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?  
Deliver Daniel, Deliver Daniel?  
Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?  
An’ why not everyman?

He delivered Daniel from the lion’s den,  
Jonah from the belly of the whale.

And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,  
An’ why not everyman?  
The moon run down in a purple stream,  
The sun refused to shine,  
And every star disappear,  
Yes, Jesus shall be mine.

5. “Wade in the Water:” What category does this fit into? What might be this song’s hidden purpose?

Wade in the water  
Wade in the water, children  
Wade in the water  
God’s a-gonna trouble the water  
God’s a-gonna trouble the water.

Well, who are these children all dressed in red?  
God’s a-gonna trouble the water

Must-a-be the ones that Moses led  
God’s a-gonna trouble the water.  
Who are those children dressed in white?  
Must be the ones gettin’ ready for flight.

Who are those children dressed in blue?  
Must be the ones that made it through.

6. “Run Mary, Run” What is the overall message? Why choose the people who are referenced in this song?

Some white listeners felt that the slave songs indicate the slaves were happy.  
“I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.” —Frederick Douglass

7. Spiritual scene in *Glory!*—What categories does this scene fit into? How?
“On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild haggard face lives today in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed “Gone! All gone! Why don’t God kill me?” I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence.” —Harriet Jacobs, escaped slave

“Sixteen children I’ve had, first and last; and twelve I’ve nursed for my mistress. I always set my heart upon buying freedom for some of my children . . . But mistress McKinley wouldn’t let me have my children. One after another—one after another—she sold ‘em away from me. Oh, how many times that woman broke my heart!” —Charity Bowery, slave in North Carolina

8. “Motherless Child” What category does this song fit into?

9. “Sinner Please, Don’t let this Harvest Pass” What is this song’s tone? Possible meaning?

10. Last 15 seconds of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, then play the song “Free At Last,”

11. “[Enslaved peoples] were not crushed by slavery; they endured and made within it a culture of their own.” The theologian James Cone writes: "Through song they built new structures for existence in an alien land. The spirituals enabled blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude.”