Sonic Records:
Listening to Afro-Atlantic Literature and Music, 1650-1860

by
Mary Caton Lingold

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

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Priscilla Wald, Supervisor

___________________________
Laurent Dubois

___________________________
Tsitsi Jaji

___________________________
Louise Meintjes

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2017
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“Sonic Records” explores representations of early African diasporic musical life in literature. Rooted in an effort to recover the early history of an influential arts movement, the project also examines literature and sound as interdependent cultural spheres. Increasingly, the disciplines of literature and history have turned their attention to the Atlantic world, charting the experience of Africans living in the Americas through innovative archival interpretations and literary investigations. “Sonic Records” brings this work deeper into conversation with sound studies, a field that puts pressure on the historical privileging of textual and visual material over auditory expression. I show that scholarship on the early African diaspora and sound-based research are fitting allies; the very people whose culture and history were aggressively silenced by the violence of slavery and the print regime of the colonial archive participated in flourishing aural traditions. Black studies has a significant and long-standing tradition of scholarship on sound and music in literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, yet the earliest eras of Atlantic slavery typically fall beyond the scope of this work, largely because of the scarcity of records from the period.

This project, therefore, takes on a significant challenge: how do you tell a story about a historical phenomena for which there appears to be no archive? “Sonic Records” argues that the sounds of the past are not actually lost, rather they are recorded in the pages of literature, on the surface of instruments, and in the evocative strains of living
musical traditions. Across four chapters, this dissertation chronicles a genealogy of early African diasporic music by drawing together diverse sources from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, including seventeenth and eighteenth-century travel narratives, nineteenth-century slave narratives, musical notation, and visual illustrations. As a literary scholar, I interpret these works by close-reading, but I also close-listen to them, a kin strategy that scholars of sound use to show how auditory expression produces cultural meaning. The first two chapters focus on representations of African and Caribbean music in seventeenth and eighteenth-century memoirs by European observers, Richard Ligon (1657), Hans Sloane (1707), and John Stedman (1796). The final two chapters turn to subsequent generations in the biographies of African-American performers, including John Marrant (1785), Solomon Northup (1853), and a singer named Tina (circa 1830).

African musicians living in the new world made use of the presumption that sound is ephemeral to craft enduring performances that escaped capture while resonating across great distances. These artful productions, which took many forms across diverse societies, amounted to a significant force shaping life in the Americas alongside other well-documented intellectual genealogies. “Sonic Records” restores this legacy to intellectual history by locating the confluence of print and aural culture within the literature of the early Atlantic world.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all the women in my family, and especially my mother, Margot Lingold, my late grandmother Marguerite Untermeyer, and my late great-grandmother and namesake Mary Susan Caton Lingold, known as Mamie to her friends, and Nana to me.
## Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iv

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ x

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... x

Introduction: The Sounds of Archival Silence ........................................................................... 1

Chapter One — Peculiar Animations: Listening to African Diasporic Music in Caribbean Travel Narratives ......................................................................................................................... 19

  Travel Narratives and Atlantic Literary History ........................................................................ 24

  Music, Ethnography, and Natural History ................................................................................ 28

  Sir Hans Sloane’s Musical Natural History ............................................................................. 31

  On Musical Notation ................................................................................................................ 36

  “Angola,” “Papa,” and “Koromanti:” Three Pieces to Consider ........................................... 41

  Stedman’s Musical “Specimen” .............................................................................................. 52

Chapter Two — A True and Exact History of Atlantic Music, Or, Instruments as Recording Technology .................................................................................................................................... 61

  Toward a Theory of Musical Instruments as Recording Devices ........................................ 67

  The Theorbo and the Balafon ................................................................................................. 72

  Charting African Diasporic Instruments .............................................................................. 92


  Rethinking the Talking Book ............................................................................................... 110

  Worlds of Sound ..................................................................................................................... 115

  The Slave Mark It ................................................................................................................... 128

  Fiddling with Freedom .......................................................................................................... 131
List of Figures

Figure 1: Musical Notation from Sloane’s *A Voyage to the Islands* ........................................ 43

Figure 2: Musical Notation from Stedman’s *Narrative*. .......................................................... 54

Figure 3: Musical notation from Stedman’s 1791 manuscript with my annotations. 
Courtesy of the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota.......................... 58

Figure 4: “Musical Instruments of the African Negroes” ............................................................ 94

Figure 5: Musical notation from Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* ........................................ 136

Figure 6: “Jungle Mammy Song” from *The American Songbag* ............................................. 159
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Introduction: The Sounds of Archival Silence

“If you know something and don’t want to teach it then you are selfish. You came after someone and someone else will come after you. This is why God created the waves in the river and the sea. Some leave and some come.” – Ali Farka Touré

This dissertation has been ghostwritten by a musical recording. While writing the pages before you, my ears have been filled with the sounds of a collaboration between the great blues guitarist Ali Farka Touré and kora player Toumani Diabaté. On In the Heart of the Moon (2005), Touré plays a driving, melodious rhythm while Diabaté offers a conversational response. The bright and pinging tone of Touré’s guitar blends beautifully with the gentler, more effervescent sound of Diabaté’s kora. The album features the artists’ original compositions, Malian standards from the fifties and sixties, and traditional Griot songs that are nearly one thousand years old. In a documentary film about the album’s production, Touré discusses the fact that he and Diabaté bring different perspectives to their collaboration. Although they are both from Mali and well-steeped in the region’s musical traditions, Touré is from the North, where he built his international career interpreting blues. Diabaté, on the other hand, is from the South,

1 This quote is from the documentary In the Heart of the Moon (produced by World Circuit Records) about the album of the same name. See World Circuit Records, Ali Farka Touré & Toumani Diabaté - In the Heart of the Moon, accessed March 16, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpWUcl7bGmY.
where his family have been Griot performers for centuries. Griot have a unique role within the Mandingue culture: they are responsible for preserving the history of their people in song.

These two performers are rooted in some of the very traditions that many enslaved Africans also brought to the Americas, but I did not listen to the album as research, imagining that what I heard would reflect the three-hundred-year-old performances I study in this dissertation. I listened to the music because it helped me, in a very practical sense, to write. Yet, as the music burrowed into my consciousness, I grew increasingly cognizant of the way it cut through the din of my thoughts driving me to the completion of this project. As I finished writing the dissertation, I decided to learn more about the album and discovered the documentary online. After watching it I began to appreciate how deeply connected the music is to the story that “Sonic Records” aims to tell. This dissertation argues that sounds produce historical knowledge, and In the Heart of the Moon proves the point. It took me a while to realize what was happening, but the music sang me a tale of its own that I did not need to understand to know.

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In his work theorizing “archival silence,” Michel-Rolph Trouillot leaned on the language of aurality to explain how structures of power impede historical parity.2

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Trouillot’s framework, and particularly the metaphor “archival silence” has become emblematic for scholars studying the Atlantic world, galvanizing an effort to fill in the gaps in the archive through new forms of evidence and innovative methods of interpretation. Yet, the term “archival silence” itself entails an irony that is not often appreciated: that is, the very events that regimes of power “silenced” were, in fact, often noisy activities.

Silence is, after all, a matter of listening. For if you sit silently as you read this, there will still be sound: the barely perceptible rhythm of your heart beating, the hum of an air conditioner, footsteps falling in the hallway, the tick of a clock, or the vibrating of your phone that has been set to “silent.” In order to experience silence, one must actively ignore intruding noises. So it was for the authors of archival documents who chose to listen to some people and not to others, and so it is for researchers, as we choose to tune in to particular kinds of information when interacting with objects of study. The imprints of the audible world are abundant in the written word, but their study requires an interpretive strategy grounded in listening, which is itself a historically and culturally contingent practice. This dissertation presents methods for accessing historical sounds in literature in an effort to recover performances by Afro-diasporans who revolutionized global music, but whose earliest history remains underexplored.

At stake in this work is a broader imperative to study sound-based intellectual traditions as substantive in their own right, an effort championed by the field of sound
studies, and that dovetails with the ongoing endeavor to understand the experience of enslaved cultural producers within early American literature and Atlantic history.³ Although few enslaved and free Afro-diasporans had access to alphabetic literacy, not to mention opportunities to compose and publish original works, many participated in musical traditions that circulated widely across the plantation societies of the Atlantic world. As such, African-Atlantic musical life demands to be considered alongside other forms of cultural production as a vital component of the media ecology of the early Americas. To do so, I bring literary techniques of interpretation to questions of sonic life and in turn listen carefully to audible resonances within literary texts.

Because musical expression was such a vital part of African diasporic communities it provides an excellent analytical frame through which to examine the emergent intellectual genealogies of the Atlantic World. Black studies has a substantial and long-standing tradition of scholarship on music and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that examines the influence of aural expressive genres on literature, but the earliest eras of Atlantic slavery typically fall beyond the scope of this work, largely because of the scarcity of records from the period.⁴ This project, therefore, takes

³ For a broad overview of the emergence of sound studies see the introduction to The Sound Studies Reader (2012) by editor Jonathan Sterne. There are many excellent examples of recent scholarship advancing the inclusion of enslaved and free African diasporans in early American literary studies. Early African American Print Culture (2012), edited by Lara Cohen and Jordan Stein, has been particularly influential to this project. Édouard Glissant,⁴Amiri Baraka (neé Leroi Jones), Henry Louis Gates Jr., and before them, W.E.B. Du Bois all wrote about the importance of sound and music to the foundations of African
on a significant challenge: how do you tell a story about a historical phenomenon for which there appears to be no archive? “Sonic Records” reveals that the sounds of the past are not actually lost, rather they are recorded in diverse artifacts including literary description, musical notation, illustrations, instruments, and living musical traditions.

In so doing, this dissertation presents an understanding of early American authorship that privileges the aesthetic innovations of performers whose compositions traversed print and oral boundaries. The migration of people along the Atlantic rim distributed knowledge that left an indelible trace within manifold cultural forms. This project identifies key circumstances in which Afro-diasporans mobilized sound to establish intellectual traditions that have become foundational broadly to modern culture. Enslaved and free musicians were especially prolific in creating and proliferating musical styles that seeded the development of countless music genres, dance styles, and expressive traditions in written and spoken word.

And yet, the condition of captivity troubles the very grounds on which artistic expression historically has been interpreted. Enslaved musicians operated within and innovated upon existing traditions, but importantly, they did so under unique circumstances as captives subject to constraints on their activity and violence on their person. Some enslaved musicians had been ripped from their homelands and made to survive in a foreign and hostile environment while others were born into a slave society that was constantly being reconstituted as a result of death and repopulation. Sometimes they were forced to perform by demanding masters. At other times, they performed for their own community during rollicking late night dances. They raised their voices and fingered instruments in exultant spiritual worship or simply to pass the time. They made music to soothe the daily terrors of slavery, to ease the toil of labor, to experience pleasure, to calm children, and to woo lovers. They performed during revolt and in defiance of unwilling listeners. They collaborated with musicians from varied traditions. They invented new instruments when their old ones were stolen from them, and at times they played alone, in the dead of the night, just to find a little peace. As this dissertation documents, these diverse activities combined to generate an enduring legacy that survives in some of the sounds we hear when we listen to today’s genres.

5 For wide-ranging and detailed description of diverse musical practices in the early Atlantic world such as those I have described, see Epstein’s Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War (1977). Solomon Northup’s memoir, Twelve Years a Slave (1853), also provides first-hand insight into musical life under slavery. He writes in particular about the comfort that playing his fiddle brought him while enduring slavery in Louisiana (217).
from meringue to country, classical, jazz, and more. Sound could not be stolen from enslaved people.

This project examines a distant past, but it also has a contemporary urgency. Despite the substantive scholarly attention to the history of the African diaspora, mainstream popular narratives of Western history continue to marginalize the role of Africans. These “silences,” as Trouillot called them, continue to fuel and be fueled by ideologies of white supremacy and anti-black racism that thrive in many parts of the globe but especially in the societies of the Western Empire, which created and were created by colonialism and slavery. The ongoing attention to African diasporic history and culture must proceed in order to shift the preponderance of Euro-centrism in the conceptualization of the global modernity in which we all live.

Ironically, an awareness of racism in some cases has discouraged scholars from seriously studying early African diasporic music and literature. As I discuss in the first two chapters, many of the literary sources documenting early performances were travel narratives written by Anglo-Europeans who were complicit in slavery and greatly influenced by racist perceptions of African culture. Their cultural lenses shaped how they interpreted what they heard and also how they chose to write about it for a readership that largely resembled them. Thus the written documents from the earliest periods are significantly mediated, leaving some scholars to dismiss these sources as
fundamentally unreliable. Similarly, many of the earliest writings by African descended authors in the Americas were heavily edited by publishers and transcribers. Both John Marrant and Solomon Northup, whose narratives I explore in chapter three, told their autobiographies to amanuenses, who presumably altered what they heard to some degree as they wrote it down. Elizabeth Dillon offers a powerful rejoinder to those who would dismiss the validity of works by Marrant and others on this score. She points to the fact that book historians and literary scholars have dismantled the notion that publication is “transparently linked to individual authorial interiority,” and that it is well established that print documents are always multi-voiced, created through collaborations among “authors, editors, printers, publishers, consumers, booksellers, reviewers, and readers not to mention technologies related to such matters.” I share Dillon’s conviction that beyond the imagined “resolutely white public sphere” there exists a far more complex and inclusive model of communication transfer that illuminates the widespread impact of African diasporans and others with limited access to alphabetic literacy in the early Americas.

Not incidentally, scholars in the field of performance studies have been at the vanguard of envisioning methods of historical scholarship that de-privilege print

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6 In Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music (2003), Ronald Radano goes so far as to suggest that the entire mythology of Black music is a product of white fantasy.
7 This quotation is from Dillon’s chapter on Marrant, “John Marrant Blows the French Horn” in Early African American Print Culture (2012); see pp. 228-229. She develops the ideas further in the introduction to New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849 (2014).
artifacts and recover underrepresented voices. In particular, Diana Taylor argues that in addition to the material objects populating conventional archives, there exists a “repertoire” of song, ritual, and embodied performance practices that reconstitute memories into history.\(^8\) Paul Gilroy’s foundational black Atlantic thesis helped to set the stage for such work by re-conceptualizing the early American world according to the experience of enslaved Africans, whose counter-cultural networks took on a shape oriented to the slave ship’s triangular voyage rather than the imperial paper mill. He, too, emphasizes the important role of musical performance in constituting the “counter-culture of modernity” he locates within the Black Atlantic.\(^9\)

In this project I bring renewed attention to sonic performances within the Black Atlantic, a topic that Rich Rath has revealed to be vital to understanding the diverse cultures of the early American world.\(^10\) There is a strong current within Atlantic studies acknowledging the limitations of print-based archives and seeking to expand the scope of not only what we study but how we study it. For example, Ana Maria Ochoa constructs a cultural history of sound in her book on “aurality” in nineteenth century

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New Granada. Matt Cohen reveals that book historical methods and media studies approaches shed welcome light on the communication technologies of indigenous North Americans in a project that brings influential voices from the margins to the center of histories of the period. Inspired by these predecessors and others, I bring to early American studies a reimagining of what constitutes a sonic “record.” I demonstrate that cultural histories of sound are not merely recoverable, they can actually be heard.

Two foundational books of scholarship on early black music in the Americas by Eileen Southern and Dena Epstein, respectively, have served as inspiration for this project, providing direction and illuminating rich sources. Both of these works are bibliographic masterpieces that draw from a vast array of material to stitch together music histories that have otherwise gone uncharted. Southern focuses on the long arc of music history in primarily mainland North America whereas Epstein focuses specifically on the era of slavery as she looks beyond the United States and British colonies to the multi-lingual Caribbean, taking on a circum-Atlantic method long before it became de rigueur for scholars of the period. Epstein’s and Southern’s books, published over thirty years ago, ought to have ushered in a robust era of scholarship on early African diasporic music, and yet instead, they have been allowed to stand as definitive studies of

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a vast network of performance traditions. Encouragingly, in recent years scholars have begun to return to the questions and archives brought into view by Southern and Epstein in their field-defining works.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the copious sources that Epstein and Southern brought to light, a sense that the records documenting early black music are insufficient persists. It is true very little musical notation and relatively few first-hand accounts survive, but scholars working in literary studies and history have managed to do remarkable work with the constrained and highly problematic colonial archive to portray the experiences of enslaved, indigenous, and other marginalized early American figures.\textsuperscript{15} Much of the literary scholarship reads “against the grain” of the sources to


\textsuperscript{15} In particular, Black feminist historians have uncovered histories where other scholars heard only silence. For example, Jennifer Morgan’s \textit{Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) on African diasporic women in the early modern Caribbean, Annette Gordon-Reed’s revisionary reading of the Jefferson archive \textit{The Hemingses of Monticello: an American Family} (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), and Stephanie Smallwood’s remarkable work on the Middle Passage in \textit{Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007) stand out as prime examples. In literary studies, Saidiya Hartman’s scholarship also sheds much light on the experience of enslaved people and especially enslaved women. For example
illuminate information and ideas humming beneath the surface.¹⁶ I sharpen these methods by incorporating specifically sonic ways of knowing as I interpret sources for their soundfulness and examine the listening practices of mediating authors. By revealing that printed works are themselves sonic records, this project exposes the manifold noises embedded in the archive’s presumed “silences.”

Scholars working on the eras after the dawn of mechanical recording in black studies have demonstrated the deep connectivity between musical practices, both aesthetic and commercial, and the broader social and political sphere.¹⁷ In this project I provide a pre-history for some of these studies by paying close attention to the vernacular recording technologies of the long eighteenth-century that set the stage for modern innovation. The rich archives created by the long twentieth-century recording industry may seem to be more accessible than the sources I survey in this study, but by

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¹⁶ An example of such work on Caribbean literature is Nicole Aljoe’s *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709-1838* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), in which Aljoe recovers slave narratives from within white-authored travel writing like John Stedman’s memoir. She likens such work to what reggae dub recordings to do to bring the base line in the background into the fore (33).

interpreting auditory culture on its own terms, outside of the constraints of materialist focus on things over ideas, I reveal that sounds survive to make history in distinctive ways. Chiefly, I show that written documents convey sound, which in turn makes it possible for performances documented in print sources to be heard again. Yet this project is not a fact-finding mission in pursuit of an empirical truth about the past; it is a careful meditation on performances that teach us how to perceive and study knowledge created in and through sound, even today.

Literature is itself a performance mode that creates worlds of ideas that exist both on and off the page; literary criticism likewise trains readers to perceive and understand all the information that writing conveys, especially that which is not explicit. Literary investigation, when tuned to the sonic character of written works, thus can reveal a great deal about aural culture. Indeed, in this project sound and print are not discrete spheres competing for prominence; they are instead deeply interdependent modes of knowledge production that contribute equally to the historical record. Such an awareness pulls up from the roots the myopic notion that knowledge, history, and culture are confined to textual sources. The European elite who believed that African and indigenous people deserved to be conquered were influenced by their own culture’s predilection for book knowledge. The roots of settler-colonialism and racism are of course complex, but a dismissive attitude towards non-print based knowledge traditions is an important ideology threaded throughout the long era of Western empirical
expansion. To say that this legacy continues to shape the academy would be a gross underatement. Recognizing and taking seriously the aural traditions of African diasporans does not undo the injustices of the past, but it does help carve out a more prominent space in our collective historical memory for legions of influential artists who helped to shape the worlds we inhabit. Furthermore, reimagining documents to record sonic performances welcomes new voices into the spectrum of early American authors and composers.

Across four chapters, “Sonic Records” chronicles a genealogy of early African-Atlantic music by drawing together diverse sources from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, including seventeenth and eighteenth-century travel narratives, nineteenth-century slave narratives, musical notation, and visual illustrations. The first two chapters focus on representations of African and Caribbean music in seventeenth and eighteenth-century memoirs by European observers, including Richard Ligon, Hans Sloane, John Stedman, Richard Jobson, and William Beckford. The final two chapters turn to subsequent generations in the biographies of African-American performers and authors, including John Marrant, Solomon Northup, Frederick Douglass, and a singer named Tina.

Each chapter presents a unique method for accessing historical sound in literature. In the first chapter, “Peculiar Animations,” I interpret the earliest transcriptions of African vernacular music in the Americas, arguing that notation both
mediates and preserves the sounds of musical traditions. The notation was published in Hans Sloane’s 1707 *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbadoes, Nieves, St Christopher and Jamaica*, which documents his travels in Jamaica in particular, and John Stedman’s 1796 *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. These musical excerpts, along with the written narratives surrounding them, preserve audible records allowing us to hear echoes of performances that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

Sloane and Stedman’s documentations illuminate the unique significance of musical life under slavery by demonstrating that enslaved performers’ sonic expressions could never be entirely possessed by their masters and other powerful witnesses.

Musical instruments proliferate in narrative and visual illustrations of slave societies. In the second chapter, I read these instruments as a form of historical evidence documenting the sounds of performance. I argue that musical instruments are in effect recording technologies engineered to facilitate the preservation, transmission, and circulation of musical traditions around the Atlantic world. This thesis emerged from my study of American musicians living in the early-twentieth century who are direct inheritors of the traditions developed by African diasporans. By describing their instruments as if they are audio playback devices, these performers articulate an alternative theory of musical performance that provides insight into the important role of instruments in vernacular traditions. Several works of travel literature describe the practices of African instrumentalists: Richard Ligon’s 1657 memoir, for example, profiles
a lutist from the Cape Verde islands off the coast of Africa as well as an enslaved instrument-builder Macaw, who lived on a Barbados plantation. I also interpret instruments illustrated in Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition to the Revolted Negroes of Suriname* (1796) as well as descriptions in William Beckford’s Jamaican travel narrative to trace the impact of Afro-Atlantic performers on global music history before, during, and after the Columbian era.

I turn from the sounds of African-diasporic music to the voices of African-American authors living in a different cultural moment in the third chapter. Writing nearly seventy years apart from one another, John Marrant (1785) and Solomon Northup (1853) were both professional musicians who use used sonic performance to gain social and physical mobility. Marrant was a free man living in Charleston who worked as a French horn player and fiddler before his conversion to Christianity, and subsequent capture in a Cherokee village—two experiments he documents in rich sonic detail in the memoir. Northup was also a free professional fiddler, but he became enslaved illegally and trafficked to Louisiana plantations, where he describes playing music for his fellow slaves and local planters. Both Marrant and Northup map out their journeys using sonic signposts, revealing that both sonic expression and sonic interpretation were key to black American survival at freedom’s perilous border in the North American plantation landscape. Along with Fredrick Douglass’ discourse on music and slavery, these works elucidate the theories of sound animating life for the authors and their contemporaries.
The fourth and final chapter recovers historical narrative preserved in the bended notes and pulsating rhythms of vibrant folk traditions, while documenting the influence of enslaved female artists performing in the domestic sphere. I follow the voice of a woman named Tina, whose biography I uncover across diverse sources, from U.S. census slave schedules, to a book of folk songs compiled by Carl Sandburg in 1927, and a radio show produced by a South African musicologist in the 1950s. Tina appears to have lived in East Africa before being captured and forced to labor as a domestic in Georgia in the 1820s. By tracing the circulation of her beautiful song, I show how musicians like Tina, though they have been obscured by text-based archives and print histories, yet communicate their story in resounding music that leaves indelible traces among diverse media.

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Once I realized the extent to which *In the Heart of the Moon* was influencing this project, I began to appreciate the many pollinations between the album and the musical worlds I had been immersed in through my research. For one thing, Touré’s and Diabaté’s method of collaboration shares a kinship with their ancestors who had been carried away in the diaspora. They recorded the album without rehearsal, relying on a shared repertoire and improvisational techniques to orchestrate their performance. They had made music together previously, when Diabaté took the opportunity to join Touré’s rhythm section for a performance, and of course they knew each others’ work, but the
album was produced during a single session at a hotel in Mali. Their recording company brought in equipment and engineers from its base in London—a geographic node familiar to this project—and when the two sat down, they put on their headphones, undoubtedly checked their sound system until they got it right, and made music. As they worked away on their instruments together, they participated in ancient processes that are constantly evolving and yet always reaching back through the eras for established tools and patterns.

When enslaved Africans survived the Middle Passage and found themselves in the communal spaces of the plantation, deprived of simple pleasures and basic sustenance, many of them also sat down together to play music. Some were fortunate enough to be enslaved alongside other members of their language-tradition but others were not. They generally had to build their instruments; fortunately, there were many gourds that they could use as well as an abundance of timber. But there were obstacles, too: where would one find the time for such work? Not all of the American building materials would prove equivalent. How would one procure the proper tools to have it done? Through such activities performers braided together the old ways to create new ones. Their voices sang in languages both familiar and experimental as they told stories and recited prayers. As Touré puts it, “some leave and some come,” and as the tide bore them away, many sank to the bottom of the sea. The following pages attune to these processes— to the ebb and flow of the human tide, the start and stop of the jam session.
Chapter One

Peculiar Animations: Listening to African Diasporic Music in Caribbean Travel Narratives

In a vivid passage describing the music of boat rowers in late-eighteenth century Suriname, John Stedman identifies stylistic elements that are common in many African diasporic traditions, including call-and-response singing, improvisation, and the practice of accompanying labor—in this case, the rowing of a boat—with song.¹

Their vocal music is like that of the birds, melodious, but without time, and in other respects not unlike that of a clerk performing to the congregation, one person constantly pronouncing a sentence extempore, which he next hums or whistles, and then all the others repeat the same in chorus; another sentence is then spoken, and the chorus is a second time renewed, &c.

This kind of singing is much practiced by the barge rowers or boat negroes on the water, especially during the night in a clear moonshine; it is to them peculiarly animating, and may together with the sound of their oars, be heard at a considerable distance. (362)

Stedman’s status as an eavesdropper frames this aural portrait: readers "hear" the singers from ashore as the rowers paddle along, with the volume of their song presumably swelling and receding as the boat moves past the author’s vantage along the riverbank. The music is unfamiliar and yet enchanting; he perceives it to be "peculiarly

¹ In volume one of the Narrative, Stedman describes the importance of river transportation within the colony. A related illustration of a plantation barge portrays a scene resembling this passage (99). Not long after Stedman’s work was published, Alexander von Humboldt would also describe South American rowers, known as “bogas,” who used poles to push barges along the Magdalena River in New Granada. Ana María Ochoa Gautier discusses Humboldt’s descriptions of barge-rowers in Ana María [author Ochoa Gautier, Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
animating” to the performers, a curious choice of words that unwittingly bespeaks a broader discourse surrounding slave society. Decades later in the antebellum United States, the phrase "peculiar institution" would be used repeatedly in conversations about slavery. A mild euphemism for a gruesome custom, "peculiar" denoted the distinctive character of the forms of captivity and forced labor it entailed; it also signaled to anti-slavery ears the moral debasement of the practice. The slave society Stedman observed was as different from the antebellum United States as it was from Hans Sloane’s seventeenth-century Jamaica, which will also be discussed in this chapter, but his choice in language establishes him in a long lineage of white authors who attempted to explain the inexplicable qualities of Atlantic slavery, including the cultural forms that burst from within its chokehold. The boat rowers quicken the life in Stedman’s breast with their queer melodies, compelling him to record the event for his readers, yet words fail to fully capture what he witnesses. His picturesque portrayal of the performance invites questions about what the event really sounded like and why Stedman felt that the singers were "peculiarly animated" by their music.

Because the rowers sang in the evening over the water’s surface, their vocalizations would have been particularly sonorous since sound waves travel farther at night; the reflective surface of the water, especially if placid, would further enhance

reverberation. Stedman found the acoustic environment pleasurable, but there are actually two distinct listening experiences that should be taken into account in this episode. From the riverbank, observers might have perceived the steady beat created by the repetitive movement of the oars, but to the performers on board the barge, the rhythm would be articulated into multiple components. Initially, the paddles would strike the river, then they would pull through the water, creating a gurgling sound. As they rose back into the air, a subtle percussive spray of droplets would ripple onto the water’s surface and as the oars were thrust forward again, they might issue a creaking sound of wood on wood. Standing along the shore, Stedman might not have been able to perceive the subtle textures of the cadence created by the rowing aboard the vessel, hearing instead water lapping arhythmically near his feet, or the sound of voices talking as people fished nearby. On the boat, the volume of the song’s chorus might make it difficult to distinguish one’s own voice from within the group. Or perhaps some rowers would sing loudly while others barely hummed along, preserving their energy for the task at hand. Distinguishing the boat rowers’ field of aural perception from Stedman’s exposes crucial differences between their subject positions while also demonstrating that a single performance entails multiple possible listening experiences.

As the barge rowers come and go along the riverbank the sounds they create effuse and wane, but they never slip entirely away. The music reverberated in the memories of the performers and earwitnesses, over time contributing to the slow
sedimentation of distinctive musical styles and genres. Years later, Stedman would document the sounds in his published memoir, a form of cultural production that is also shaped by relatively ephemeral encounters. Readers encounter printed works in moments of time, coming and going to the pages as intermittently as a barge docking along a winding river. Books organize, distribute, and preserve ideas, but as is widely accepted, the information they contain is by no means entirely fixed; what I am suggesting is that literature may operate far more like sound than is generally understood, and visa versa. Entrenched narratives privileging written over aural forms of knowledge production fuel the misconception that sonic performances are ephemeral whereas textual sources are durable. What’s more, a hierarchized visual/oral binary serves to obscure the considerable co-involvement of script and sound, a fact that Stedman’s aurally-inflected narrative exemplifies.

Print’s preeminence is further cast into doubt when we consider what is made permanent when ink is pressed onto paper in this case—representations of a series of subjective encounters that John Stedman may or may not actually have had, much less described accurately. In fact, he does not write about the singing barge rowers in his original manuscript, leaving uncertainty as to whether or not the excerpt was added later by the book’s heavy-handed editor or the author himself. As Richard and Sally Price explain, Stedman’s manuscript was considerably reworked by the publisher, and much to his chagrin, his commentary was sanitized of its more salacious content and his
views on slavery were diluted to be less explicitly critical. Scholars now scrutinize two very different works when they write about Stedman’s narrative since both the published volumes and the original manuscript represent historically significant documents. The multiplicity of meanings that may be attributed to a single author’s oeuvre underscore the transitory nature of literary knowledge. It is crucial, therefore, to incorporate habits of critical listening into literary interpretation. Doing so reveals, as this dissertation argues, that written documents are not simply multi-vocal, they are also sonic records.

Travel writers such as Richard Ligon, Jean-Baptiste Labat, Sir Hans Sloane, John Gabriel Stedman and others reported on their fascination with the vernacular music of enslaved Africans in the Americas, and in so doing, created some of the only descriptions of their performances prior to the nineteenth-century. Although these colonial elites were far from ideal witnesses to slave society, their writing records crucial information about the practices of enslaved musicians and the way that their compositions were converted into narratives about racialized others at the site of imperial expansion. Sloane’s *Voyage to the Islands of Madeira, Barbados, Nieves, St. Christophers and Jamaica* (1707) and Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) are especially revealing because of the authors’

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4 The published *Narrative* was reprinted multiple times and published in several languages.
efforts to transcribe what they heard into musical notation. These passages, particularly when coupled with narrative explanation and visual illustration, preserve audible records allowing readers to hear echoes of performances that would otherwise remain inaccessible. In this chapter, I interpret this musical notation as a form of textual authorship that was shaped by culturally and historically specific listening practices.

**Travel Narratives and Atlantic Literary History**

Since the cultural turn in literary studies, scholars have explored European travel narratives as purveyors of imperial ideology, mining them for insight into attitudes about the colonies and their inhabitants. Mary Louise Pratt’s bellwether study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) articulated a framework for understanding the role these books had in creating the colonial imaginary. By serving as the chief source from which Europeans learned about the Americas, travel writing was responsible for communicating the fledging histories of the colonies as well as surveying the ecology, economy, and cultures of what was considered to be a “new world.” The Americas were hardly new to those who had been living there before the Columbian era, so I use the term advisedly to underscore the tenor of Europeans’ fascination with colonial life as this impacted the popularity of travelogues.

The typical travel writer was a man who went abroad in pursuit of financial opportunity. Some crossed the Atlantic as proxy to wealthy landowners to manage their Caribbean estates, while others served in military expeditions or were tasked to
communicate official directives of the crown. Whatever instigated their journey, travel authors were generally well-educated individuals circling the fringes of elite society. Most were not wealthy enough to have no need for income, but were well-connected in some respect. Although some narratives criticize governmental activities and deviate from dominant views, for the most part, these authors were far from politically radical. At the same time that travelogues are written from within (or with aims of entering) the ranks of colonial power, part of their appeal is that they are plotted around the promise of a fresh and novel view of the territories by authors visiting the Americas for the first time. In this sense, these books re-perform the narrative of Columbian "discovery," substituting characters, national affiliations, and destinations in a predictable formulation. Many begin with Atlantic sea-crossing, so that readers witness arrival from the deck of the ship after enduring a long and arduous passage. Once arrived, the visitors catalogue the "newness" of their encounters and ensure readers that they will offer a frank and unbiased view of the destination. Despite overtures to objectivity, the authors' unique perspectives frequently give way to trite descriptions that read like their predecessors' assessment of the terrain. Indeed, travel writers read one another and

5 Examples of travel writing about the Americas include: Richard Hakluyt, *Divers voyages touching the Discoverie of America and the Ilands Adjacent…* (1582), Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657), Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands of Madeira, Barbados, Nieves…* (1707), Alexandre-Stanislas, baron de Wimpffen, *A voyage to Saint Domingo, in the years 1788, 89, and 90* (1797), Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle de Saint-Domingue* (1797), and Bryan Edwards, *Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo* (1797). These are but a few examples within a wide-ranging genre.
quoted each other, creating a feedback loop whereby first-time visitors would encounter their destination with the words and ideas of other writers ringing in their ears and perhaps, with their books packed snuggly in their luggage. As Pratt and many others have shown, the impact of travel literature on European perceptions was detrimental to native Americans and enslaved inhabitants, whose cultural forms and even bodies were subject to incessant scrutiny by authors whose reading conditioned them to racialize and objectify the non-Europeans they met during their travels. As these narratives developed and circulated stereotypes that denigrated colonial others, they contributed to the entrenchment of European racism and the institutions fueled by it, such as Atlantic slavery.

In spite of travel authors’ acute biases, their writing provides some of the lengthiest and most vivid records of life in the colonies. For this reason, literary scholars and historians have mined the genre for information about the history and cultures of native Americans and Afro-diasporans. This body of scholarship creatively interprets episodes written from the perspective of the colonizer and enslaver to uncover the experiences of sub-dominant groups. Work in this area initially focused on the ways travel literature shored up colonial power and spread ideologies of race slavery, but increasingly scholars have turned to these publications to reveal the impact of the

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6 In Laboring Women (2004), Jennifer Morgan provides an excellent example of this in her study of enslaved women in the early American colonies when she notes that many colonial visitors arrived having read sexualizing descriptions of Africans and Native Americans (49).
Atlantic underclasses on the institutions that purported to enact their erasure. As Susan Scott Parrish puts it in *American Curiosity* (2005), "because America was a great material curiosity for the Old World and its immigrants to the New, America’s unique matrix of contested knowledge making — its polycentric curiosity — was crucially formative of modern European ways of knowing" (6-7). Parrish also looks to John Stedman’s narrative to reveal how a formerly enslaved Surinamese herbalist, “Gramman” Kwasi (or Quacy) cleverly influenced Dutch authorities (1-6). In a similar vein, Nicole Aljoe reads travel literature against the grain to unearth biographies of enslaved people who function as minor characters in these books, arguing for the way their stories should be understood within the slave narrative tradition. Following these innovative studies, this chapter looks to eighteenth-century travel narratives to understand how enslaved musicians’ performances communicated to and through the authors of travel literature, resulting in a far-reaching broadcast of their music. As portrayals of early Afro-diasporic musical forms circulated to North Atlantic audiences, a nascent theoretical tradition announced itself to Anglo-European society, even if it was not to be properly understood. Until now, literary scholars largely have failed to address the musical episodes in new world travel narratives. As explained in the introduction, much of the

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existing research comes from historians and historical musicologists who have
methodically surveyed the literature for information about early Afro-Atlantic musical
practices.9 These studies present rich material inviting a literary scholars’ attention to the
rhetorical properties of particular texts and the genres in which they are carried out.

Music, Ethnography, and Natural History

The musical notation in Stedman’s and Sloane’s memoirs are not without
precedent from within the larger genre of colonial American travel literature. The
second edition of Jean de Léry’s Histoire d’un voyage faict en la terre du Brésil (1580)
includes five short excerpts of musical notation documenting songs sung by the
Tupinamba society in Brazil.10 The overarching function of the musical passages in Léry,
Sloane, and Stedman, as well as the narrative descriptions in other works of travel
literature, is to supply ethnographic data about inhabitants of the Americas. Indigenous
communities and Afro-diasporans were of great interest to readers of travel literature,
and the conventions of the genre require detailed descriptions of the physical

9 See Dena Epstein, Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War (Urbana:
York: Norton, 1983); and Richard Cullen Rath, How Early America Sounded (Ithaca: Cornell
10 For music in Léry, see Olivia Bloechl, Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Gary Tomlinson The Singing of the New World:
Indigenous Voice in the Era of European Contact, and Michel de Certeau, “Ethno-graphy: Speech, or
the Space of the Other, by Jean de Léry” in The Writing of History, translated by Tom Conley (New
York: Columbia University Press, 1988). I’m grateful to Jennifer Wood for bringing Léry’s
notation to my attention during a presentation “Bewitching and Blotchy Notes: Afterlives of
Tupinamba Music Inscribed by Jean de Léry” given at the Society of Early Americanists
appearance and lifestyles of the population of a given destination. Descriptions of music generally complement information about other customs, including cuisine, bathing habits, religion, housing, marriage and disease. The bulk of the musical information in Stedman's narrative falls within a multi-page section subtitled, "General Description of the African Negroes." Léry's sixteenth-century memoir, written roughly 200 years before Stedman's narrative, presents an enormous amount of detail about indigenous groups living in sixteenth-century Brazil and nests the musical notation within broader ethnographic descriptions, much like Stedman and Sloane's eighteenth-century narratives. Although each text is unique, there is a great deal of continuity in the type of content they convey.

The importance of ethnographic description in colonial travel writing is connected to discourses of scientific racism that emerged alongside colonialism and Atlantic slavery. Enlightenment-era natural philosophers theorized biological links between phenotype and cultural difference as part of a larger effort to stratify human races as though they were distinct species. This scientific project furnished pro-slavery advocates with arguments in favor of race-based slavery and helped to form the intellectual grounds on which race would be understood for centuries to come. It was not until the late twentieth century that the concept of race came to be fully understood
as a social construct rather than biological fact. Enlightenment pseudo-science helped to foment racial theories that would serve to sustain slavery and colonialism, but it was also very much a response to these practices. New world travel literature was a chief source of information for continental armchair racial theorists, who read accounts of indigenous and African life in the Americas to construe scientific theories about racial difference. Immanuel Kant, for example, developed his theory of race and authored an anthropological treatise having never traveled beyond his home country of Germany. Scholars have established an intellectual history tracking the emergence of scientific racism with Carl Linnaeus and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, figuring as central characters. Such studies chronicle the influence of slavery and colonization and its primary genre of reportage, travel literature, on the development of modern scientific disciplines. What is not so clear, however, is how music figures into enlightenment-era taxonomic accounting of racial difference. The travel writers under discussion in this essay engage to varying degrees with the intellectual enterprise they would have

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understood as “natural history;” John Stedman refers to the musical excerpt in his memoir as a “specimen” and tellingly, the only other sample of musical notation in his memoir documents birdsong (vol. 1, 245). Sir Hans Sloane’s tome is primarily a natural history of Jamaica and only secondarily a travelogue providing context for the engravings of Caribbean ecological life in the text.¹⁴

Sir Hans Sloane’s Musical Natural History

The study of naturalism may seem at present incompatible with a sustained treatment of musical performances by African slaves, but the pairing is emblematic of positions relegating black cultural forms to the realm of natural phenomena. Sir Hans Sloane’s personal reasons for traveling to the West Indies in the late 1680s were to pursue scientific scholarship but his formal role was to accompany the newly appointed Governor of Jamaica as his private physician. (The Governor died not long after their arrival.) In addition to empirical observations and clinical reports from Sloane’s medical practice, the first volume features more than 150 pages illustrating flora and fauna. The second volume, published almost two decades after the first, in 1725, includes even more engravings and scientific data. Although Sloane is primarily concerned with documenting natural phenomena, his works are deeply inflected with observations

¹⁴ In Slave Songs of the United States (1867), a foundational work transcribing African American music, the editors also uses the term “specimen” repeatedly to refer to musical notation. For an insightful essay concerning the volume see Radano, “Denoting Difference” Critical Inquiry 22.3 (1996) 506-544.
about culture. For instance, his frank prose, issued as though from an unwavering authority, evinces cultural biases that are evident to contemporary readers in ways they would not have been to most of his milieu. A man of his time, he prescribes the “letting of blood” for nearly every ailment he encounters, from difficult childbirths to festering wounds and viral fevers.

In addition to the printed chronicle, Sloane began to build a vast collection of material objects during his visit to the West Indies in the late 1680s. Eventually, his private holdings would form the basis for what is now the British Museum, and, as Laurent Dubois points out, Sloane’s Caribbean travels (and his subsequent marriage to a wealthy Jamaican planter’s widow) fueled not only his scientific pursuits, but also one of the British empire’s greatest cultural institutions.15 This detail underscores the degree to which African and indigenous knowledges impacted colonial powers at the highest level. Sloane accrued cultural artifacts, including a banjo that, as depicted in the Voyage, is the earliest known image of the instrument.

The illustration of musical instruments provides insight into the logic connecting musical production to naturalism. One of very few representations of man-made objects of any kind in Sloane’s Voyage, the engraving is reproduced in both volumes, a testament to its importance within the work as a whole. In the first volume, the instruments are sandwiched between pages illustrating a species of land crab and items from a Spanish

15 See Dubois, The Banjo (60-61).
shipwreck: coins and what appears to be a rusted nail, encased in oceanic flora. The second volume includes an agricultural scene in Mexico and a diagram of a type of “ginn cotton.” These portrayals of human life are startlingly scant considering the several hundred engravings of plants and animals in the two volumes. Presenting musical instruments alongside wildlife and shipwreck souvenirs overwrought by the ocean’s natural forces subtly articulates a perception that the cultural forms of African and Indigenous Americans are a product of nature or biology rather than innovation and culture. Yet at the same time, it suggests that the instruments are noteworthy enough to be represented in a collection largely unconcerned with culture. Identified in Latin in terms translating to “Strum Strumps, lutes of the Indians & Blacks, made of different hollowed-out gourds covered with animal hides,” the instrument illustrations subtly apply racial significance to musical culture. For centuries, racial essentialism has haunted black musical expression as performance styles are perceived to be manifestations of innate biology rather than cultural knowledge. In Sloane, the racialization of black music is in a nascent form only subtly detectable, but in its place are notions popular in the eighteenth century, such as stereotypes of African and Indigenes as being driven by nature, instinct, and bodily impulses in contrast to the

17 Translation comes from Dubois (66).
idealized European Enlightenment (male) subject, who is imagined to be motivated by culture, interiority, and reason. This duality is an enduring subtext for eighteenth-century portrayals of non-European society, but it is also under debate during the era. Rousseau’s “noble savage,” for example, is an archetype that combines exceptional intellectual faculties with the supposed physical intuitions of non-white civilizations into an idealized figure. Discourses around “sensibility,” an important keyword for Enlightenment letters, also sought to undermine mind/body and nature/culture binaries. Sloane’s early eighteenth-century work both employs and contests portrayals of African music as uncivilized and merely instinctual utterances.

Sloane documents early Jamaican music in what might be understood as a pre-mechanical field-recording. By transcribing music into notation, he makes unfamiliar sounds audible to his readers and lends legitimacy to the performance traditions through the machinery of print. A valuable record of early Afro-Atlantic music—it is probably the earliest and lengthiest transcription of African vernacular music in the Americas—the pieces are also mediations and appropriations that foretell the way black musical forms would be commodified by outsiders in the following centuries. The following explanation precedes the notation, suggesting the music was performed at a single event prompting Sloane to solicit the transcription:

Upon one of their Festivals when a great many of the Negro Musicians were gathered together, I desired Mr. Baptiste, the best Musician there to take the Words they sung and set them to Musick, which follows.

You must clap Hands when the Base is plaid, and cry, Alla, Alla.
The injunction to “clap Hands when the Base is plaid, and cry, Alla, Alla” clarifies that these pieces are indeed meant to be “plaid” by readers.\(^{18}\) They are not merely specimens designed to rest inertly on the page for scrutiny; they are intended to make it possible for readers to experience an Afro-Caribbean performance through imitation. There is a long tradition of Anglo-Europeans performing foreign identities in public and private. These practices would flourish most recognizably during the nineteenth century in the United States as blackface minstrelsy surged in popularity, but Europeans were dressing up in foreign garb for entertainment long before then. The eponymous character of Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724), for example, memorably dons a Turkish costume and impersonates a traditional dance. Defoe’s characters look East in Orientalist fascination, but the popular forms of cultural curiosity follow the empire’s gaze in all directions, including towards Sloane’s West Indian subjects.\(^{19}\)

\(^{18}\) “Alla” likely refers to the Islamic deity, since the Muslim faith was practiced in several of the West African societies from which slaves were captured during this time. See Richard Cullen Rath, “African Music in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica: Cultural Transit and Transition.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4 (Oct., 1993), p. 724.

\(^{19}\) For an explanation of eighteenth-century Orientalist discourse in literature, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). See also Parrish, who explains these forms of cultural curiosity in regards to Stedman’s narrative to reveal how Surinamese herbalist “Gramman” Kwasi (or Quacy) cleverly influenced Dutch authorities (1-6).
The text provides very little information about the transcriber, Mr. Baptiste, but his perspective as a listener and his expertise as a composer are vital to way he adapts musical performances into notation. Sloane writes that Mr. Baptiste is the “best musician there,” but this designation is frustratingly imprecise as it remains unclear whether or not Baptiste is a European immigrant to the colonies, a white “creole” native Caribbean, or a diasporic African performer. Dubois notes the likelihood that he is a freed black from a nearby francophone colony such as Saint Domingue, which would explain his apparent familiarity with the musical traditions he attempts to convey through notation. He is clearly very adept at music writing, since transcribing is difficult in even the best of circumstances, and he renders three pieces that are remarkably distinct in character, suggesting that at the very least, he attempts to portray the music with complexity and accuracy.

On Musical Notation

Like the intricate engravings decorating volumes by Sloane, Stedman, and their fellow travel literature authors, musical notation is a decidedly visual form of communication.\textsuperscript{20} Although transcriptions aim to convey auditory information, their presentation in written form demands that they be interpreted as symbols designed to

\textsuperscript{20} Voigt and Brancaforte explore the circulation of illustrations in sixteenth-century travel narratives, noting the complexity of the role they played in creating the colonial imaginary. See Lisa Voigt and Elio Brancaforte, “The Traveling Illustrations of Sixteenth-Century Travel Narratives” \textit{PMLA} 129.3 (May 2014) 365-398.
be first seen and then only possibly heard. The listener who transcribes live musical performances into notation operates in much the same way that an artist sketching “en plein air” attempts to capture a landscape. The sketches are initially rough and preliminary—they must be done quickly, while the light is still good—or, in the case of the field transcriber, during a performance or soon after when the music is still sounding in the listeners’ ears. Much like other forms of note-taking, musical notation is an incomplete shorthand that bears meaning for those familiar with the writing system and its accompanying genres. It serves as a memory device and a teaching tool, but not as a totalizing set of detailed information. What is on the page is necessarily far less sonic detail than is communicated in a musical performance, and without a performer’s unique tonal qualities and subtle rhythmic and melodic expressions, even the simplest melodies can only be very minimally rendered through transcription. In fact, even in contemporary Western classical music, which is centered on the practice of composing and reading written music, it would be impossible to know how to play a particular piece without first being schooled in the proper sounds of given genre’s vernacular.

The music in Sloane’s and Stedman’s travel narratives raises fundamental questions about the value and purpose of musical notation. In a seminal 1958 essay on its use in musicology, Charles Seeger explains that musical notation can be either prescriptive or descriptive; when it is descriptive, it is “a report of how a specific performance […] actually did sound” and when it is prescriptive it is “a blue-print of
how a specific piece of music shall be made to sound.”[^21] Seeger contends that notation fails at both of these objectives because in its basic form it represents just two musical elements: pitch and rhythm. Other sonic qualities like tone and style are not communicated well through traditional notation. Although supplementary information such as semantic directives may elaborate on rhythm and pitch, they are indistinct and marginal to the notes on a staff.

The limitations of musical notation historically have presented challenges for scholars of popular and vernacular traditions. Within the discipline of musicology, notation is the lingua franca, so scholars must use it to document and analyze performances that are poorly suited to its formal properties. For example, the symbolic representation of pitch in notation reflects genre-specific stylistic preferences for fixed and unwavering pitches. (A single note on a single line indicates a single pitch.) In contrast, consider the speech-like vocalizations of a blues singer, whose expressions may be shaped like whines and sighs. Such mobilizations of pitch are not easily symbolized through single dots on lines, even if they are linked together with a mark indicating movement between two or more notes. A note that drops in pitch in the shape of a whine does not begin rigidly on one note and fall categorically to another, yet this is how it would have to appear when transcribed into conventional notation. In reality, a

vocalist may merely hint at a bottom note while diving right past it into a guttural non-pitched resolution. Ethnomusicologists routinely supplement notation with creative symbols and verbal directives to indicate pitch variation such as I have described, but the overall unsuitability of the form remains a challenge for today’s practitioners. A pronounced obstacle for the emerging field of ethnomusicology in the twentieth-century academy, this politicized problem is also at work in Sloane’s and Stedman’s eighteenth-century narratives.

The limits of musical notation also reveal the limits of musical perception for non-expert listeners and transcribers. When we consider Mr. Baptiste setting out to transcribe a complex live performance into a musical language that is poorly suited to represent the sounds being expressed, we must also consider that Mr. Baptiste may be ill-prepared to hear the sounds his ears perceive. Musical literacy is not simply about knowing which pitches match which line on a staff, it is about understanding the inner workings of musical forms and how to anticipate and interpret patterns according to the conventions of a particular tradition. This is why so many European observers heard “noise” when they happened upon unfamiliar performance styles during their travels; their ears had not been trained to understand nor appreciate what they were hearing.

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22 For further reading on the use of notation in musicology, see Bruno Nettl, The Study of Ethnomusicology: twenty-nine Issues and Concepts (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), and Peter Winkler, “Writing Ghost Notes: The Poetics and Politics of Transcription” in Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997). I am grateful to Alex Corey for directing me to these sources.
It is also important to understand how the use of notation differed for
eighteenth-century musicians like Mr. Baptiste. It wasn’t until the nineteenth century
that written music began to take on the prestige that we are still familiar with today.\textsuperscript{23}
During the Romantic era, juggernaut European composers published scores that were
received as artistic masterpieces in and of themselves, but previously, music was
imagined to be located in the performer rather than within the text. Many of today’s
music readers and performers have inherited a reverence for written music from the
nineteenth-century cult of the composer, which imagines notation to be a fully realized
blueprint for performance. Yet, for eighteenth-century music literates, notation was
primarily a tool for learning, disseminating and describing performance possibilities.
That is not to say that compositions and their composers were completely insignificant,
but that printed music was one of many important tools for creating music rather than
sacrosanct. The Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau was famously dissatisfied
with the limitations of musical notation and authored a treatise arguing for the use of his

\textsuperscript{23} See Lydia Goehr, \textit{The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music}
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) on the late-eighteenth century invention of the
concept of musical “works.” In discussing the philosophical and political fallout of this concept,
she explains that “most of us tend … to see works as objectified expressions of composers that
prior to compositional activity did not exist. We do not treat works as objects just made or put
together, like tables and chairs, but as original, unique products of a special, creative activity. We
assume, further, that the tonal, rhythmic, and instrumental properties of works are constitutive of
structurally integrated wholes that are symbolically represented by composers in scores” (2).
own innovative system of music writing. To account for the historical specificity of eighteenth-century musical notation as well as the limits of the symbolic system, it is best to engage with Sloane’s and Stedman’s scores impressionistically, as broad, imprecise strokes that provide a sketchy, but nonetheless significant trace of early Afro-Atlantic musical sounds that warrants careful listening.

“Angola,” “Papa,” and “Koromanti:” Three Pieces to Consider

In the absence of traditional forms of evidence, one must pay close attention not merely to the fragmented data itself, but also to the mechanisms that render such information legible in the first place. Sloane’s musical notation must be evaluated along with the system of musical writing in which it is illustrated, for as I hope to have shown, notation is a culturally specific practice that excludes nearly as much sonic information as it communicates. Furthermore, both the literary genres shaping the over-arching narrative and the physical features of the book itself contribute to the layered meanings embedded in this profoundly complex musical artifact. On that score, an initial glimpse of the music will impress upon readers the unique nature of the material as it is presented far differently from other content in the larger work. As Kay Dian Kriz points out, the two pages on which the pieces are displayed are strikingly visually distinct from the rest of the volume.

The importance of this transcription, stretched over two pages, is underscored not only by its location in the first volume, but by the typography. The font used in the descriptive text above the music is the largest to be found throughout the entire two volumes with the sole exception of the title page. (Kriz, 57)

Because of the sheer size of the pieces along with the bold typography introducing them, the material makes a pronounced visual impression. Anyone thumbing through the pages of the hefty volume would likely be drawn to pause and acknowledge the music.
Figure 1: Notation from Sloane’s *A Voyage to the Islands*.

Courtesy of Duke University’s Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library

The oversized font is probably a result of the printer’s need to fill a large swath of empty space left by the three pieces. Embedding musical notation into the volume would have created logistical challenges for the printer, but they evidently were deemed necessary to overcome, underscoring the importance of the music to the overall book project. The printer’s execution was not seamless, however, and the fissures between the presentation of alphabetic writing and musical notation expose how very different these
forms of textual communication are. The note-less staff left at the bottom of the second page dangles blankly like an in-complete task, whereas the strikingly large lettering at the outset of the section grabs the reader’s attention with a sense of urgency and loudness. These aberrances create the impression that the music is foreign to its textual surroundings.25

To date, the most substantive treatment of the pieces comes in the form of an essay by Richard Cullen Rath, and although our interpretations diverge at points, his conclusions are worth summarizing here.26 Rath attempts to discern whether or not the titles of the pieces—“Angola,” “Papa,” and “Koromanti”—properly correspond to the West African regions to which they refer. Each of the three areas was a location from which Jamaican slaves were trafficked during the era, but Rath ultimately concludes that the regional affiliations provided are not completely accurate descriptions of the performers’ origins, although the music transcribed does correlate (he argues) to distinctive western and central African musical practices. His central claim is that the transcriptions “provide a unique glimpse into the process of creolization among enslaved Africans of known ethnicity. Baptiste unintentionally rendered a number of

25 Facing these challenges, other publishers excised the musical notation entirely. For example, see the French translation of Stedman’s narrative, Voyage a Surinam (1798).
26 I cite Rath’s article “African Music in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica” published in 1993 in discussing his interpretation of the pieces, but he also revisits much of this information in his monograph How Early American Sounded (2003). A more recent blog post, also titled “African Music in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica” (2008) briefly discusses the pieces and includes a recording in which Rath performs the pieces on an mbira using midi technology.
distinctly African features ... that were not yet recognized or employed in the
seventeenth-century European music with which he would have been familiar” (707).
Whether or not the regions of origin can be accurately traced, it is notable that African
nationalities and regional affiliations were being associated with musical practices,
suggesting an investment among enslaved performers, their captors, or both in
maintaining these identities on the plantation. Rath argues that the music transcribed by
Baptiste can best be understood as a musical “pidgin,” a term that names the earliest
system of communication emerging after two languages come into contact with one
another. Ultimately, he concludes that the musicians would have been dissatisfied with
the performance resulting from their preliminary cross-cultural collaborations. While the
musical pieces are not sufficiently detailed to evince of the quality of the performance, I
nevertheless share Rath’s interest in exploring this documented incident as a site of
musical innovation.

If Sloane attempted to collect musical variety for his catalogue, then he was
successful, because each of the three pieces is strikingly unique. The first, “Angola,”
stages a musical conversation between the upper and lower registers. The upper staff, or
treble clef, presents a dramatically descending and short melodic line, apparently
accompanied by a single voice or chorus speaking or singing the lyrics “Ho-baognion.”
This melodic phrase is quickly followed by a percussive melody in the bass line, whose
rapid-fire repeated notes are reminiscent of a drumming pattern. The call-and-response
framework repeats throughout the piece, and when the treble melody shifts, the bass responds in kind. In the final two measures, the two parts join one another in a rhythmically dramatic resolution. “Angola’s” exacting termination likely reveals the transcriber’s hand, or that of another musical editor who sought to lend finality to the piece, and thereby fashion it for readers who would expect a distinct beginning and end. Whereas notated music generally terminates according to the composer’s specifications, many vernacular musicians repeat and elaborate upon musical patterns indefinitely. As Rath puts it, in African traditions, “musicians end a piece when they are finished rather than when it is finished” (emphasis mine, 716).

Despite “Papa’s” brevity, David Garner, a composer and expert transcriber, explains that musically, it begs repeating. In his interpretation, the final phrase perfectly launches into the beginning again.27 Although the piece is squared off in a straight line in its written form, when played this way, it has a circular quality. This might explain why the excerpt is so brief – if it is meant to be repeated or varied in an indeterminate performance, the short section here is merely a bare bones structure that would be improvised upon during multiple repetitions. The final piece, “Koromanti,” is much longer than the first two, consisting of three distinct sections that might be considered individual pieces, given their marked changes in key and meter. The lengthy and varied nature of this final section suggests that it aims to capture a particularly complex...
performance by skilled musicians who played in a variety of styles, perhaps in a single sitting. The first “Koromanti” piece sounds somewhat similar to renaissance-era lute music as a result of the arpeggiated notes and modulations from minor to major key and back again. Mr. Baptiste appears to be drawing from multiple musical vernaculars throughout the notated music and particularly within “Koromanti.” The second section’s dramatic and abrupt descending scales issued in minor tones would require a virtuosic performer and a nimble instrument. The third section of “Koromanti” nests between the first two segments in tonal quality, but the arpeggiated note patterns recall the initial section. Rath argues that taken together, the transcriptions “contain features that were not present in Western music of the time, including particular forms of syncopation and polymeter, [and] microtonal blues scales” indicating that they may accurately reflect features of early Afro-Jamaican music.28 Here, Dubois’ speculation that Baptiste is a native Caribbean would help to explain the his facility in executing African as well as European musical characteristics.

The degree to which these pieces sound “European” or “African” depends greatly on the instruments being used to play the music, the performer’s interpretation, and the listener’s expectations. As I discuss in the following chapter, there was considerable musical exchange between Africans and Europeans before and throughout the colonial era. Mr. Baptiste may represent a much larger group of performers with

28 This citation is from Rath’s 2008 blog post “African Music in Seventeenth-century Jamaica.”
facility in a range of styles germane to diverse regions. Ultimately, there are myriad possibilities for interpreting the pieces musically and these interpretations will necessarily be as subjective and idiosyncratic as the initial transcription. This is not a hindrance, however, because a diversity of interpretations will uncover heterogeneous approaches to understanding the musical practices themselves. The ambiguities of musical notation require rigorous and diversified scrutiny, particularly in a case such as this when so little is known about the performance styles being represented. An abundance of scholarly attention to these pieces across disciplines would greatly enrich understanding of early Afro-Atlantic music, particularly if consensus were to build around a set of interpretations. This is one of the reasons that I co-created the website Musical Passage: Voyage to 1688 Jamaica, which tells the story of Sloane’s transcriptions for a broader audience, and accompanies the text with sound recordings of musical interpretations of the pieces.²⁹

The performances represented in Sloane’s narrative were not readily notable, and as such we can imagine that they remain under the dominion of musicians whose sonic expressions evaded capture, even while suffering the indignities of regulation and observation. In the same vein, the lack of scholarly certitude regarding this music is itself

²⁹ Visit Musical Passage at www.musicalpassage.org. The project is a collaboration by myself, Laurent Dubois, and Dave K. Garner.
an important testimony to the incongruities between sound-based cultural expression and the colonial archive’s restrictive regime.

Music-making and dancing were features of life across Atlantic slave societies, attracting attention from observers who chronicled a range of styles, instruments, and dances. Sloane’s observations corroborate with many other accounts from the period. Although musical expression was abundant, plantation owners and colonial authorities attempted to regulate it. Sloane remarks that the slaves he encountered on the Jamaican plantations were given free time on Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and holidays like Easter and Christmas. They used this time to cultivate their own gardens and partake in activities like the music and dancing Sloane refers to as “festivals.” But it was not merely time that was constricted; specific instruments became forbidden. Calling the drums and horns “trumpets,” Sloane explains:

they formerly on their festivals were allowed the use of trumpets after their fashion, and drums made of a piece of a hollow tree, covered on one end with any green skin, and stretched with Thouls or Pins. But making use of these in their wars at home in Africa, it was thought too much inciting them to Rebellion, and so they were prohibited by the customs of the island. (lii)

Sloane’s arrival on the islands was preceded by attempted uprisings in the Jamaican colony and a subsequent crackdown on the use of horns and drums. Despite

30 See Epstein for many fascinating excerpts from travel narratives and other published sources.
31 Sloane’s description and the use of the term “festival” suggests that he is referring to a large gathering of enslaved people, possibly from a collection of nearby plantations.
noting the prohibition on these instruments, he writes as though he has seen them used, suggesting that these regulations were not always followed to the letter.\textsuperscript{32} Music travels from the realm of entertainment to the realm of political activism when instruments come to signify threats of organized revolt, making music, in such circumstances, both mundane and extraordinary. Addressing plantation life in the antebellum United States, Saidiya Hartman articulates the variety of possible meanings created by performances of individuals living under slavery. She argues that musical expression amounted to subtle and ongoing acts of resistance as she theorizes subjectivity from within conscriptions of power in the slavery regime:

To complicate the picture still further, how does one make any claims about the politics of performance without risking the absurd when discussing the resistances staged by an unauthorized dance in the face of the everyday workings of fear, subjugation, and violence? How does one calculate or measure such acts in the scope of slavery and its reasoned and routinized terror, its calibrations of subjectivity and pain, and the sheer incommensurability of the force that it deploys in response to the small challenges waged against it? Ultimately, the conditions of domination and subjugation determine what kinds of action are possible or effective, though these acts can be said to exceed the conditions of domination and are not reducible to them.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} For more on drums and West African military practices and laws prohibiting their use in Caribbean and North American colonies see Rath, \textit{How Early America Sounded} (77-89).

\textsuperscript{33} Saidiya Hartman, \textit{Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55. Scholars, including Hartman, subsequently have challenged the “resistance” formulaic. Walter Johnson also questions “finding agency” because both critical moves have the effect of repositioning the enslaved subject as always acting in response to white supremacy. See Johnson, “On Agency.” I am grateful to Paula Austin for articulating this point and directing me to Johnson’s work on the subject.
When Baptiste transcribes the musical sounds being performed on the plantation, he also documents the social and political significance of the musical acts he witnesses. These events are endemic to plantation life, yet they undermine the logic of the slave economy with every beat and note. Enslaved peoples’ flourishing musical expression provides a sonic contestation to the circumstances of their subjugation.

Carving out a space for cultural expression within such a world amounted to a radical rebellion against the condition of being “property.” Where Baptiste fails to accurately turn the musical phrase, he inadvertently records the complexity of the music he is unable to effectively inscribe. His errors may be perceived as a lack of information or as an abundance of information; the sounds and sound systems he fails to reproduce with precision exceed the capacity of music writing, just as they exceed the logic of the plantation. By eluding the scribe’s grasp, the performances escape domination, enacting a musical marronage that performs uncontainability from within the bounds of enslavement.⁴

Embedded also in this story, of course, is Anglo-Europeans’ growing fascination with Afro-American performance styles. Plantation owners and overseers were not the only ones attempting to “capture” it; the powers generating literary culture at the time

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⁴ Ronald Radano reaches similar conclusions in a study of nineteenth-century transcriptions of slave spirituals “Denoting Difference” (525). His views are developed further in Lying Up a Nation (187-188). For an insightful take on accessing New World African perspectives in the written records of the Middle Passage, see Skeehan.
were also developing the business of commodifying blackness. As publishers attempted
to square the capacious sounds of live performances between the confining margins of a
page and into hieroglyphics symbolizing finite pitches and restricted rhythmic
possibilities, plantation music was gobbled up into the European literary machine, and
rolled through the presses in digestible form for the amateur English-speaking, literate
musician. Although the pieces can be productively read against the grain to uncover
circumstances facing enslaved performers, they are punctuated with lines and spots
that, like black irons, constrain the free movement of captive sounds, visually re-
performing the originary violence of enslavement. The notation in *Voyage to the Islands*
threatens to obscure the expansive aural traditions it purports to capture, but careful
listening to the many different stories being performed through the printed object offers
access to the musical arts of the enslaved African performers.

**Stedman’s Musical “Specimen”**

The musical notation in John Stedman’s narrative provides an opportunity to think
further about the way specific listening practices shaped representations of early Afro-
Atlantic musical life in literature. The author traveled to Suriname in 1772, nearly 100
years after Sloane’s trip to Jamaica, encountering a plantation society that was markedly
different. The island Sloane visited was just gaining a foothold in large-scale agricultural
production as a colony, whereas Stedman’s Dutch Suriname had been populated by
Europeans and Africans for several generations. Yet the two geographically and temporally distinct locations share continuities because of the fact that slaves were being newly imported en masse in both societies. In Suriname, that meant musicians from Africa were interacting with performers trained within an established mainland colony. In both settings, performers participated in a very complex musical culture home to multiple genres and traditions.

Although a British subject, Stedman traveled to Suriname to help the Dutch government’s efforts to subdue uprisings of maroon communities formed by escaped slaves. In addition to soliciting help from mercenaries like Stedman, the colonial military recruited enslaved men to join the fight. In exchange for their service, they were promised emancipation and a small garden plot. Because the European troops were so poorly skilled in the guerilla warfare practiced expertly by the well-established maroon militias, the Dutch government was in need of more experienced soldiers. The recruits were offered a crude choice (if they were even allowed to make one): gain your freedom and run the risk of dying in battle, or from disease or starvation in the jungle, or remain a slave. Such were the opportunities presented to black colonial subjects in Suriname.

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35 Suriname was originally colonized by the English but transferred to Dutch rule in 1667 in the wake of the second Anglo-Dutch War. The English conquered Jamaica from Spain in 1655.
36 On the history and culture of Suriname’s maroon communities see Price, Guiana Maroons.
37 For more on the rangers, see Richard and Sally Price, “Introduction” in Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) XXIV. This volume is their edited edition of Stedman’s original manuscript.
Stedman’s song is issued from the perspective of one of these soldiers, known as “rangers” who, heading off to battle, must say goodbye to his lover.

Figure 2: Musical Notation from Stedman’s Narrative. Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago. (G 987.84, vol.2 p. 259)

John Stedman’s musical excerpt and accompanying descriptions are part of a much longer section, "General Description of the African Negroes," that presents a universalizing portrait of black culture vacillating between admiration and disparagement. The author cites the literary accomplishments of authors Phyllis Wheatley and Ottobah Cuogano along with the musical expertise of Suriname’s enslaved performers, explicitly putting musical performance on par with literary production (269-270). Stedman’s editorial choices thus underscore this dissertation’s insistence upon the pronounced connections between literary and aural cultures of the African diaspora.
The author-cum-composer implies that he heard the melody, or at least something like it, during his travels, but that the lyrics are of his creation. The tune calls to mind the sort of love song that might be issued in honeyed tones from a balcony.

Situated right in the center of a typical vocal range of either a man or woman, the notes feel warm and somewhat sad because of their minor tonality. With the first and second sections both being repeated, as the notation indicates, it takes roughly one minute to sing. Considering the fact that the song is sung by a lover who doesn’t wish to say goodbye, presumably the piece would be performed at a moderate tempo.

Printed nearly 100 years later than Sloane’s musical excerpts, Stedman’s notation is more clearly wrought and would be easier for readers to perform. For instance, the lyrics are translated into English and align with the melody. The lyrics are not given translations in the original manuscript, so they may have been created in response to a publisher’s recommendation. In the manuscript, the musical notation and creole lyrics are written in Stedman’s own handwriting, unlike the rest of the document, which appears to have been created by a professional copyist. Curved lines indicate to singers that specific notes should be performed in a group using elision. Fermata symbols at the end of the phrases advise performers to hold the ending notes longer even than the given values – an explicit license to interpret the music liberally. There are two repeat

\[\ldots\]

38 In the manuscript, Stedman also adds the chart of African musical instruments to the table of contents in his own handwriting. The manuscript is housed in the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota. I’m very grateful to the staff for their generous assistance.
signs giving precise direction, whereas Sloane’s readers are left wondering whether phrases should be repeated at all. In light of Charles Seeger’s framework, the musical transcription in Stedman’s narrative is more demonstratively prescriptive than its predecessor. Stedman invites readers to sing this example aloud, just as they might have read aloud the excerpts of poetry by Phyllis Wheatley that shortly follow the music.

Stedman’s “Description of the African Negroes” subsection is not simply a cold accounting of observational data; it reads like a sampler of cultural ephemera including examples of local dialect, a lyrical song, poetry, and cultural anecdotes. His more romanticized portrayal of African life in the Americas signals the changes in literary fashion that led late-eighteenth century travel writers to compose with greater novelistic flair. Stedman and other travel writers of the 1790s were central characters in their travelogues whose emotional experiences are plotted along with the trajectory of their journeys.39 Famously, Stedman’s romantic relationship with an enslaved woman,

39 Examples include M. L. E. (Médéric Louis Elie) Moreau de Saint-Méry, Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’île Saint-Domingue, Early American imprints. First series; no. 32504 (A Philadelphie, 1797); Alexandre-Stanislas Wimpffen, A Voyage to Saint-Domingo, in the Years 1788, 89 and 90 (London: Cadell, 1797). Although both of these narratives concern the French colony Saint Domingue, and the Haitian revolution that was ongoing throughout the decade to establish the first black republic, because of the British attempt to overtake the colony and ongoing military interest in the island, these narratives would have been circulated in much the same fashion as Stedman’s. Indeed, de Wimpffen, a French subject, published his travelogue in English before publishing it in French. Other examples of narratives from this era include Bryan Edwards, An Historical Survey of the Island of Saint Domingo, Together with an Account of the Maroon Negroes in the Island of Jamaica; And a History of the War in the West Indies, in 1793, and 1794 (1801). . . This volume includes a short travel narrative by Sir William Young, Bart, a “tour through Several Islands of
Joanna, and their son Johnny became the subject of a great deal of intrigue, spawning other works of literature that took up the tragic story that Stedman pens in his memoir.40

The song participates in European musical tropes, but it also enacts some of the characteristics of Afro-diasporic music in Suriname that Stedman catalogues. The extemporaneous call-and-response pattern of vocal improvisation appears in the song’s structure: the second half of the tune is essentially a re-working and elaboration of the first half. Also, the striking triplet formations at "Me lobby fo fighty me mano," attempt to capture the unusual rhythms he writes about. The pattern is somewhat technical to sing, but what survives in the what the 1796 first edition of the narrative is even less rhythmically complex than what Stedman originally penned in the manuscript (below).

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Barbadoes, St. Vincent, Antiguea, Tobago, and Grenada.” Young’s travelogue is more similar in character to the others in that it presents a first-person account of travel in which the author’s perspective and emotions are foregrounded.

40 See, for example, Joanna, or the Female Slave. A West Indian tale. (London: Printed for Lupton Relfe, 1824); “Joanna” in The Oasis, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: Benjamin C. Bacon, 1834), 65-105; John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of Joanna, an Emancipated Slave of Surinam, Selection of Titles from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Series 2. Section 4, Creative Spirit; Reel 30 (Boston: I. Knapp, 1838). For more bibliographic information about these texts see Price and Price, “Introduction,” lxxx-lxxxi.
Figure 3: Musical Notation from Stedman’s 1791 manuscript, with my annotations. Courtesy of the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota.

The manuscript provides three triplets per phrase, whereas the edited print edition includes only two. The publisher might have wanted the rhythm to seem "exotic" but familiar enough that it could be executed in London drawing rooms with relative ease, or perhaps Stedman decided to revise the composition after producing the manuscript. The addition of an English translation in the print edition further reflects the expectation that the musical excerpt would be sung by readers, a prelude to the mass popularization and appropriation of African-American performance that would come in subsequent decades, as sheet music purporting to capture plantation melodies would be peddled up and down the United States and across the Atlantic to Europe.

In the passage discussed at the outset of this chapter, Stedman expresses his perception that singing boat-rowers are “peculiarly animat[ed]” by their own performances (362). “Peculiar” signals strangeness, but in its most basic definitions, it also refers to possession and ownership; the term shares a root with “pecuniary.” The phrase “peculiar institution” was originally expressed as “our peculiar institution” from
within the ranks of the Southern planter class in the antebellum United States. Stedman’s use of the term, itself peculiar, documents experiences that exceed the bounds of his perceptual domain. Because of his physical location along the river’s shore, and his subject position as an Anglo-European colonial elite, Stedman cannot hear precisely what the boat rowers experience aboard the barge, nor can he faithfully reproduce the performances he witnessed in the form of musical notation. In effect, the musicians maintain ultimate possession of what we might rightly call their intellectual property. Enslaved performers were legally human chattel, deprived of rights to ownership, but their musical expression gave voice to the fundamental injustice of this condition. They took advantage of sound’s presumed ephemerality to pronounce meanings that slipped through the enslavers’ grasp even as they echoed in their ears. When Sloane and Stedman remediate these musical performances into literary description and printed notation, they create “peculiar animations” documenting the innovative performances along with the violent conditions that gave rise to their creation. Thusly, early African diasporic music is broadcast from aboard print vessels that assemble widely divergent meanings.

The representation of Afro-diasporic musical life in eighteenth-century European letters was foundational to the way black music would be examined, mediated, and ultimately commercialized over the course of the following century. Gradations of white

41 Again, see Stampp.
racism are endemic to these texts and the discourses surrounding them. As such they are important sources of information about the “love and theft” — as Eric Lott would put it — of black musical forms within the white supremacist Americas, but print works like Stedman’s and Sloane’s travel narratives do more than simply racialize and objectify early Caribbean music; they also document the degree to which the sonic epistemes of slave societies infiltrated European writing systems. The capaciousness and sheer force of musical life among enslaved people disrupts the fiction of print’s preeminence in historical understanding, exposing the plain fact that aurality is fundamental to human expression, writ large.
Chapter Two

A True and Exact History of Atlantic Music, Or, Instruments as Recording Technology

The limited archive of early African diasporic music presents a challenge to researchers, but it is not the only impediment to serious study of the topic. Perhaps the greatest obstacle has less to do with a lack of evidence, and more to do with the staying power of a particular narrative about Africans’ role in the development of global music. In this Eurocentric story, the Columbian era marks a significant turning point in which a musical “first contact” of sorts occurs between European colonists and African slaves. Presumably, this interaction resulted in the flourishing of new world genres that blend instruments and stylistic components germane to Europe and Africa, respectively.1 But this story is misleading for many reasons: it erases the influence of indigenous American musicians and downplays the significant multi-directional exchanges between Africans, Europeans, and Asians prior to the fifteenth century.2 Furthermore, African musicians

1 For example, in the quintessential music history undergraduate textbook the first mention of African musical influence comes in a section on the music of New Spain, where it is explained that in the seventeenth-century colonies, “More than a century of colonization had produced an ethnically diverse society, encompassing a wide range of native peoples, Spanish immigrants and their descendants, African slaves imported to work the mines and plantations, and people of mixed race. Each group had its own music but also borrowed elements from other groups, a habit that has characterized music in the Americas ever since” (374). J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, A History of Western Music (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

2 For example see chapter one in Sublette, Cuba and its Music (2004) and also John Thornton, A Cultural History of the Atlantic World: 1250-1820. Thornton discusses the performances of
continued to pour into the colonies well after the dawn of the triangular trade, meaning that there was no initial era of musical contact that immediately gave rise to the evolution of creolized musical forms. Additionally, during the long era of Atlantic slavery, African descendants became active participants in musical genres that had originated in Europe and were now thriving in the Americas.³ Scholars have been well-aware of this more nuanced history for a long time, and yet the dominant narrative of “global” (read, Western) music demands continued pressure, particularly because the archives of early modern music are so heavily populated by the work of European musicians and documentarians, who were themselves influenced by a false narrative of music history. It is often said that history is written by the victors, and that is certainly true, but it might be more accurate to say that history is written by the writers. Because many early modern European musicians read and composed notation in manuscript and print, their perspectives dominate the records of musical life during the era, giving false weight to the centrality of their traditions.

³ European sacred music in colonial Brazil and Mexico (New Spain), noting in particular that Indigenous musicians were trained to be composers of in New Spain (371).

³ For example see Davies, “Finding ‘Local Content’ in the Music of New Spain” (2013). Ira Berlin’s essay “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America” (1996) discusses the complex linguistic capabilities of African communities along the Atlantic rim who traded with Spanish, Portuguese, English, and Dutch, creating an “Atlantic Creole,” that was beneficial for enslaved transplants to the Americas, allowing some to negotiate freedom, mobility, and power within the developing colonies.
In this chapter, I place African diasporic musicians at the center of global music history by examining musical instruments as a form of recording technology that documents historical performances. Aural ways of knowing are already intrinsic to the concept of recording. The term’s Latin roots (re as in repeat and cordare as in heart) signify memorization, or “learning by heart,” an activity that precedes and exceeds written communication. Today, in colloquial use, recording primarily signifies mechanical audio reproduction, a fact connected to much older practices preserving and circulating sonic information. Understanding the way sonic information was transmitted before the dawn of modern recording techniques makes it possible to study sounds of the supposedly un-recorded past. In the vernacular music traditions of the early African diaspora, sound-based knowledge traveled great distances and expanded widely. As I argue in this chapter, musical instruments facilitated these processes, and their physical trace is a form of evidence that can be studied to reveal the deep grooves of sound-based historical records.

Instrument builders inscribe musical knowledge into the surface of objects by designing and constructing a set of possibilities for making sound. For instance, the number and length of strings on an instrument determine the pitches that may be produced from it; the shape and size of a drum will affect the object’s resonance and pitch. Of course, instrument design is only part of what creates possibilities for making instrumental music. By emphasizing the role of instruments in performance, I do not
intend to de-privilege the musician’s agency, but rather to reveal the way that
instrument designers and musicians manipulate sonic technologies for the purposes of
both sustaining existing traditions and inventing novel sound systems. Encoded in these
practices, I argue, is a form of “recording” that animated and sustained musical life long
before the dawn of mechanical audio reproduction. When a musician learns a song by
heart they record it in their body and mind for the purposes of reproduction. Musical
objects instrumentalize this process by setting structural possibilities and limitations into
play.

In order to explore the way seventeenth and eighteenth-century vernacular
musicians used instrument technology to transmit musical knowledge, it is helpful first
to reflect on the way we imagine “recording technologies” to reproduce sounds in our
historical moment. For, as Jonathan Sterne demonstrates in *The Audible Past* (2003), the
innovations that brought about the creation of telephones, gramophones, and other
sonic devices were influenced by pre-existing beliefs about hearing and practices of
listening. In a similar vein, Lisa Gitelman shows how reading and writing practices
were foundational to the way inventors like Edison conceived of possibilities for
inscribing sound into surfaces for the purpose of recording. Sterne and Gitelman both

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5 See Gitelman, Lisa. *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison
caution against over-emphasizing the changes that audio technologies brought about while ignoring important continuities. It is true that once recordings began to proliferate, listeners gained access to performances that originated great distances away and musicians began to rely on recorded music for exposure to new styles and to facilitate the acquisition of repertoire. In many traditions, especially jazz, over the course of the twentieth century, performers came to learn their trade by studying signature albums by legendary artists. Media formats from LPs to broadcast radio had a profound impact on modern musical arts and these modes of transmission have singular qualities, but performers practicing before the eras of mechanical recording were also exposed to music from near and far. In the colonial era, musical styles and instruments were in wide circulation, largely because of the vast movement of people and goods around the Atlantic rim, including especially, enslaved Africans.

In the earliest eras of slavery, people were captured and trafficked to the Americas from disparate African societies that were home to diverse performance cultures. Added to this cross-cultural interaction, the planters and European émigrés hailed from locations and social classes in which a variety of genres were popular. Indigenous societies like the Caribs and Arawaks also influenced the emergent American performance traditions, while in port cities, diverse cultures mingled as

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6 For an account of how jazz musicians use recordings as pedagogical tools, see Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
sailors from places as far flung as New Zealand and Amsterdam docked, further contributing to a cultural mixture in societies that were only nascently forming their contours. Prior to the rise of Atlantic slavery, trade routes traversing the African continent connected the Middle East, Southern Europe and the far East, generating long-standing musical exchanges. As Ned Sublette describes, African musicians were influencing performance styles in Persia and Iberia as early as the ninth century and probably far earlier. Europeans also influenced early modern African music. For instance, in 1607 King Fatema from what is now Sierra Leone recruited a German horn player to join his band of court musicians and teach them to play the instrument. With North Africans traveling within Europe during the medieval period and Europeans traveling to Africa in increasing numbers during the early modern period, African diasporans brought with them to the Americas centuries of cross-cultural exchange. As

8 As Thornton describes, Islamic West Africa sharing instruments with North Africa and influence of middle eastern practices on Sudan and patronage system supporting the griot. p 387
9 See Sublette, who notes that the spread of Islam along with Moorish conquests in Europe greatly contributed to the circulation of people and cultural forms during the medieval period. The “black songbird” Ziryāb’s life story is one notable example of such exchanges (14).
10 This report is from a European missionary writing in 1607, quoted in Thornton (386). Thornton is drawing from Fernão Guerreiro, Relaçam annual das cousas que fizermam os Pades de Companhia d Jesus (Lisbon, 1611), Book 4, chapter 4, fol. 234v. He also notes the influence of Baroque Christian sacred music in the Kongo as the area as Christians attempted to evangelize in the late sixteenth century.
this history makes clear, you don’t necessarily need radios and record players to hear music from far away. Nor do you need them, as I argue, to “record” music.

**Toward a Theory of Musical Instruments as Recording Devices**

In the absence of period-accurate theorizations of vernacular performance, the insights of twentieth-century folk musicians are instructive for imagining ways in which enslaved performers, and early American vernacular performers more generally may have “recorded” their music using instrument technology. In an effort to search widely for information about early African diasporic performers, I turned to the archive of twentieth-century folklore and ethnography to study the inheritors of traditions created by African diasporans. While I discovered it to be somewhat tenuous to link particular musical elements to earlier eras, I was struck by how many performers describe their instrumental practice. Their insights offer a different way to conceptualize performance, one which emphasizes particularly the agentive role of instruments in the creation of music and the circulation of musical knowledge. The sources documenting early African-Atlantic music do not explicitly evince this same practice, but reports of the widespread construction and use of musical instruments suggests that devices were important for establishing performance possibilities in these communities. For one twentieth-century vernacular music theorist, banjo player Hobart Smith (born in 1897), his instrument helps him gain access to sounds he wants to produce. He explains how he learns a new tune through aural transmission using his instrument:
You've first got to get the tune on your mind and then find it with your fingers—keep on till you find what you want on the neck. But keep that tune in your mind just like you can hear it a playin'. I've been to the cornfield many of a time when I was a farmer and I'd hear a good fiddle tune or a good banjer piece and I'd commence whistling' it. And I'd whistle that till my mouth got so tired, and I'd go home keeping' it on my mind. I'd go pretty fast and I'd whistle all the way into the holler on the mountain and my banjer would be hang in' on the wall ... I'd keep that tune right on my mind and I'd find that tune on the string before I'd quit.\(^\text{11}\)

By explaining the process of learning the tune as being able to find the music on the neck of the banjo, Smith articulates music acquisition as a process of discovery that is generated through interaction with the instrument. This method of artistic production emphasizes the inherent relationship between artwork and the materials from which they are constructed. For sculptors, for instance, the conditions of the stone or wood—its grooves and sedimentations—make it possible or impossible to craft a particular kind of figuration. Similarly, the strings on a banjo dictate the notes that can be played on it. The limits posed by these physical constraints simultaneously produce manifold possibilities for innovation. Smith exhibits an animated curiosity for the sounds his banjo is capable of making. For fiddlers, this attitude is encoded in the instrument’s name: “to fiddle” means precisely to tinker with a mechanized object to get it to function in a particular way. In North American colloquial speech, fiddlers “saw” at their instrument to reveal

the sounds within, working out tunes through patient, deliberate explorations of the instrument.

Smith’s biography underscores the influence of African diasporic musicians on wide-ranging genres, including Appalachian string band music, a genre that became inaccurately coded as “white” by the recording industry in the twentieth-century.\(^{12}\) Many of the black performers that Smith studied, including Jim Spencer, were “raised up in slave times,” as he puts it, establishing a direct link between Smith’s musical education and African performers living under slavery in the Americas. Smith was a multi-instrumentalist whose earliest musical influence was African-American fiddler James Spencer, and he learned to play the guitar by listening to itinerant Black railroad workers, including Blind Lemon Jefferson, explaining “I liked his type of playin’. I just watched his fingers and got the music in my head and then I’d thumb around till I found what I was wantin’ on the strings” (2). Again, Smith describes the instrument object as if it, not he, contains musical possibility, an important distinction that he seems to have learned by observing elder musicians develop and execute their craft.

Some dancers talk about the performing body in similar ways to musical instruments, identifying the shared possibilities for creating sound and musical expression. In the documentary film *Talking Feet* (1987), which explores the world of flat-

footing, buck dancing, and clogging, practitioners describe their methods of self-teaching as they let the music guide their craft. The three styles involve improvisational techniques that respond to the sounds of the music. One of the dancers, an elderly man, explains his performance method in the following manner:

To me, the buck and wing dance is a well, it’s a great deal like a banjo player. If he walks into a room and a banjo is sitting there, he wants to pick up the banjo and get the music out. If I walk into the room while he’s playing that banjo, the music within me is in my feet and therefore I bring it out that way. He’s getting it out of the banjo and I’m getting it out of my feet. (5:52)

Like Smith, the dancer perceives music to be something that is “gotten out” of an instrument, or in his case, feet. Both the dancer and Hobart Smith theorize music as an interactive process of discovery that occurs when a listening performer tunes into the possibilities created by the materials at hand, be they a stringed instrument or one’s living, breathing body. “Patting juba” is a related performance style that was common on North American plantations, and described in literary narratives of slavery, including Solomon Northup’s, which is discussed in the following chapter. When patting, performers use their hands and entire body to create rhythmic accompaniment, whereas the dancers profiled in Talking Feet primarily use their feet to execute a variety of percussive sounds on the floor. The dance styles documented in Talking Feet along with Hobart Smith’s banjo playing are traditions that emerged from centuries-long

interactions between American immigrant and Afro-diasporic communities and their forbearers.\textsuperscript{14}

Theories of musical performance revolving around the technologicization of musical instruments extend to the performing body and also found musical objects like washboards, buckets, jugs and cigar boxes, to name a few. Hobart Smith identifies his first instrument as the shovel his mother used for baking bread over an open hearth, which he “picked” from the early age of three. The idea that the music is contained within the music-making device, be it a body or an instrument, allows for a perspectival shift that illuminates the trace of early African diasporic performance.

When Hobart Smith and the buck dancer discuss instruments and the dancing body as the source of musical possibility, they do so in much the same way that people talk about audio playback devices today. If a turntable is powered on and the needle is set in the grooves of a record, the music will “come out.” It is not incidental that one presses “play” to activate a tape deck and that platforms designed to read mp3 files are known as “players.” These modern devices make it possible to listen to recorded sounds; embedded within this underlying concept of recording is a theory of musical acquisition centered around instrument technology that prefigures the invention of modern recording machines. That is to say, then, that sounds were recorded before the

\textsuperscript{14} Continuing from 05:00 to 08:00 in \textit{Talking Feet}, a circle of mixed-race North Carolina dancers discuss the concepts behind their dance technique. One artist specifically articulates the dance genre’s debt to African American performers.
invention of audio inscription technology, and in order to access those sounds, the archives of early vernacular music must be studied with alternative theories of musical knowledge transmission in mind. It is with such an aim that I return to the sources documenting the musical practices of early Afro-Caribbean musicians, singling out instruments as a form of material evidence that inscribe possibilities for generating sound. Richard Ligon was an English musician whose memoir about life in seventeenth-century Barbados profiles a lute player living off of the coast of West Africa as well as an enslaved performer and instrument-builder, Macaw. I examine the three musicians’ use of instrument technology along with their unique positions within an era of global musical exchange. John Stedman’s narrative contains a chart depicting eighteen African musical instruments in Suriname supplemented with commentary about each object’s unique sounds. Ligon’s descriptions and Stedman’s chart illuminate early Afro-Atlantic performers’ instrument practice along with the circulation of particular music technologies around the Atlantic world in the long-eighteenth century. A Jamaican mouth bow player and seventeenth-century Gambian balafon players also play a role this study of musical instruments and sound systems of the early Afro-Atlantic world.

**The Theorbo and the Balafon**

When travel narrative author and music aficionado Richard Ligon traveled to Barbados in 1647, he brought with him a state-of-the-art lute called a theorbo. This large and intricate object was invented in Italy and, along with other Italian exports like the
sonnet, was quite fashionable in England at the time. By taking the instrument with him to the Caribbean, he maintained access to the music he enjoyed playing and hearing at home. If he wanted to hear a familiar melody, he needed only to tune the instrument and pluck out the notes. In contrast, when Macaw, an enslaved musician whom Ligon met in Barbados, traveled across the Atlantic under captivity, he did not have the luxury of ensuring safe passage of an instrument. Captives were not allowed to carry possessions aboard slave ships and deep fear of revolt led slavers to be particularly vigilant about the use of musical instruments at sea. Drums in particular had the reputation of being used in warfare in African societies. For this reason they were widely banned in the colonies, as Hans Sloane explains regarding Jamaican regulations put into effect in response to an uprising. During the Middle Passage, ship captains often demanded that captives sing and dance aboard the deck of the ship in an attempt to exercise their human chattel and provide them with fresh air. Some instruments probably made it to the Americas in the hands of captives, but more commonly, enslaved performers had to construct them anew once they arrived. Some of their

17 Sloane, p. lii.
designs replicated instruments used in existing performance traditions, whereas others were entirely novel creations or hybrid objects that combined American indigenous, African, and European models.\textsuperscript{19}

A serious amateur musician, Ligon became intrigued by the sounds he heard during his travels, documenting several musical episodes in his travel narrative. As a result, the autobiographical work offers insight into the Atlantic musical cultures in the mid-seventeenth century, from the Eastern port of Cape Verde to the Western colony of Barbados. Although Ligon attends to music with more precision and care than other documentarians of the era, his observations are colored by his musical training and cultural biases. In order to read through Ligon’s perspectival filter to study the musical practices he observes, it is necessary to identify the way his theoretical and historical conceptions of music shaped his experiences abroad. Ligon traveled to Barbados in pursuit of fortune. He was a gentleman by birth, but he was not to be the inheritor of his family’s estate.\textsuperscript{20} Active in the music scene in England, he was the executor of composer John Coprario’s estate, with whom he had become connected at the court of James I. Just as Ligon’s theorbo bespoke fashions for Italian music, John “Cooper” or “Cowper” took the surname Coprario, likely to signal a continental arts education -- studying music in


\textsuperscript{20} For biographical information on Ligon, see Kupperman’s Introduction in Ligon (2011).
Italy was a serious credential at the time. Ligon was part of a musical culture in England in which an instrument like a theorbo or lute would often accompany singers and violins in intimate spaces or in slightly more formal settings like court. Theorbos were often very large, and in one painting from the period, the instrument stands as tall as the woman playing it. It would have taken considerable care to travel with it to the Caribbean, suggesting that Ligon intended to study and to perform on the island. Prior to his departure from England, he had been involved in the enclosure of the commons as landowners moved in and capitalized on areas historically used to graze livestock and grow crops by peasants. The impulse to develop and industrialize lands in the Americas was part of this broader movement, and Ligon brought with him to Barbados a record of participation in agricultural systems of domination.

Barbados was the first successful British colony in the Caribbean and as such served as a model for the development of other British plantation economies in the region. First settled by the English in 1627, when Ligon visited, planters increasingly were turning to labor-intensive sugar production, resulting in a rapid increase in the

22 For information about these performance styles, see Peter Williams and David Ledbetter, “Continuo [basso continuo].”
23 See image reproduced in Robert Spencer, “Chitarrone, Theorbo and Archlute” (412). The portrait is of Lady Mary Wroth, who happens to be an English poet. From 1620, attributed to John de Critz.
24 For connections between enclosure movement and colonialism see the Introduction to Dillon, New World Drama.
importation of slaves. Because of this, the majority of Africans Ligon interacted with would have been survivors of the middle passage. When he describes the music in slave societies on Barbados plantations, he may in some instances be referring to a sub-population representing a single ethnic group from a distinctive African region and in others describing a group comprised of people from several different cultures. He notes that slave revolts were difficult to organize because many captives did not speak the same language: “some of them are fetched from Guinny and Buinny, some from Cutchew, some from Angola, and some from the River of Gambia” (97). Cultural differences such as these would also have impacted the musical practices of Barbadian slaves. While some musicians may have preferred to perform alongside their countrymen, others may have enjoyed collaborating with musicians schooled in unfamiliar genres. There also may have been layers of hostility or alliances among these groups that further contributed to the organization of social life.

As such, when Ligon describes the music of “negros” on the island it is unclear if he is describing a heterogeneous society on a single plantation or if he is authoring a composite portrait combining a variety of practices into one generalized description. His lack of familiarity with the languages and a widespread tendency among European observers to universalize “African” cultural forms means that Ligon probably

25 See Kupperman and also Russell Menard, Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).
overlooked differences among groups he encountered. Like the musical notation from Sloane’s narrative discussed in chapter one, which bears titles referring to distinctive African regions, it is possible that musical production would have been similarly genre-distinctive on plantations in Barbados. Ligon traveled to the West Indies some forty years before Sloane, but both of the English colonies they visited were at those times in a similar state of development, resulting in a vast importation of slaves.

During his ocean crossing, Ligon meets a musician in Africa in an encounter that provides insight into his self-perception as a culture-bearer within a broader narrative of global music history. En route to Barbados, his ship stops in the Cape Verde islands. Colonized by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, the islands were populated by people of Portuguese and African descent. Cape Verde was a well-positioned trading post during the era and Ligon’s vessel stopped to acquire water for the remainder of the voyage and to purchase cattle and horses. During the sojourn, Ligon visited the home of the “chief Commander of the Island,” Padre Vagado, where he took note of a local lute player’s after-dinner performance. Ligon recounts the dinner party and the musical entertainment that accompanied it with detail and personality. His descriptive style speaks to the nature of his musical expertise – he uses vocabulary like “Graces, Double

26 Ligon lingers over details about the cuisine and the attractions of the island’s female inhabitants. See Morgan for a reading of Ligon’s sexualizing, denigrating characterization of African women throughout his travel narrative.
Relishes, trillos” and critiques the performer’s instrument in detail. He also draws upon theatrical repertoire to attempt to identify the lutist’s musical influences.

Dinner being near half done … in comes an old fellow, whose complexion was raised out of the red Sack; for near that Color it was: his head and beard milk white, his Countenance bold and cheerful, a Lute in his hand, and he played for us a Novelty, the Passame saes galiard; a tune in great esteem, in Harry the fourth’s days; for when Sire John Falstaff makes his Amours to Mistress Doll Tear-sheet, Sneake and his Company, the admired fiddlers of that age, plays this Tune, which put a thought into my head, that if Time and Tune be the Composites of Music, what a long time this Tune had in sailing from England to this place. But we being sufficiently satisfied with this kind of Harmony, desired a song; which he performed in as Antique a manner; both savoring much of antiquity; no Graces, Double Relishes, Trillos, Grops, or Pianoforte’s, but plain as a packstaff; his Lute too, was but of ten strings, and that was in fashion in King David’s days; so that the rarity of this Antique piece, pleased me beyond measure. (54)

Ligon’s narration works to position the lutist within categories that would be familiar to his European readers, describing the performer’s first piece as a “novelty” that he had heard previously during a performance of Shakespeare’s Henry IV back home in England. Ligon takes it for granted that the music accompanying the play was historically accurate, assuming that the piece must have originated in Henry IV’s day during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. According to musicologist Christopher Field, the “Passame saes Galiard” that Ligon heard the character John Falstaff perform during a production of the play was likely a “passamezzo galiard,” a
sixteenth-century dance tune. If Field’s analysis is correct, then the tune would have been close to one hundred years old when the lutist performed it. Around one hundred years prior to Ligon’s voyage, Sir Francis Drake had attacked the Cape Verde islands during, as Ligon puts it, “the time of the wars between Queen Elizabeth and the King of Spain” in the 1580s. Although Ligon incorrectly historicizes the tune’s origins, he inadvertently draws attention to long-standing cultural connections between England, Italy, and Cape Verde.

Ligon continues to reveal his own prejudicial understanding of music history as he attempts to describe the performer’s next number, a song. The lutist sings a piece that Ligon describes as plain and void of vocal embellishments, which he connects to the instrument’s “antique” design, equating it to those played in King David’s era because it has merely ten strings. A theorbo from the era would have had, by contrast, 14 to 15 strings, and each of those probably doubled, so nearly 30 strings in total. Instruments with a large number of strings were fashionable among Ligon’s milieu and led observers of African instruments to comment on the relatively paltry number of strings. Richard Jobson, writing of the musicians in “Ginny and Binny” in a travel narrative published in 1623 observes that they have “not above sixe strings upon their greatest instrument”

27 See Christopher Field, “Musical Observations from Barbados, 1647-50.” Field explains that the “passamezzo galiard” is not specifically noted in manuscripts of the play, but that it may well have been performed in stage productions.
28 For details about theorbo design during the period see Robert Spencer, “Chitarrone, Theorbo and Archlute.”
For Ligon and Jobson, a large number of strings signaled the height of modern musical technology, a belief shaped by his specific historical and cultural moment. His perception that the Cape Verde lutist’s performance is “old-fashioned” participates in broader tropes characterizing the music of urban metropoles as advanced in contrast to the antiquated tastes of provincial areas. Rather than interpreting the Cape Verde lutist’s performance style as a product of musical taste, Ligon portrays him as unschooled and therefore unskilled in his abilities. However, Ligon’s dismissive comments about the lutist’s performance technique does not mean that he disliked the performance; on the contrary, it “pleased [him] beyond measure.”

Ligon was invested in a particular narrative of music history whose genealogies of influence enabled him to imagine a seventeenth-century Cape Verde lutist to be playing an instrument designed in King David’s era. He imagined the lute-player to be carrying on an ancient tradition that had been inflected by English performances, but he was incapable of perceiving the multi-directionality of centuries of colonial and precolonial contact that he was himself participating in as he and his theorbo docked on the African shore. As Laurent Dubois explains, the story of lutes within global music history is deeply tied to the history of Islam and its circulation within North Africa and the Iberian peninsula:

Part of a broader silencing of the contributions of Arabic science, philosophy, and culture, Renaissance versions of musical history conveniently elided the actual history of many of Europe’s instruments, which were born not out of the genius of an ancient God but out of the sedimentation and collective genius of musicians in North Africa and Iberia. What was lost in the process was the recognition of the centuries of trans-cultural dialogue had shaped the styles and instruments played on the European continent. (29)

Not only had African musicians like the Cape Verde lutist been exposed to European musical arts for centuries, but perhaps more importantly for the history of the instrument, Africans may well have invented it. As Dubois traces in his study, the central difference between most African and European chordophones (stringed instruments like lutes) during the era was that in Africa, the resonating instrument body was covered with an animal skin membrane, whereas European chordophones had wooden tops and resonators. Dubois argues that these distinctions historically have been overstated, resulting in the misperception that African artisans could not have been the progenitors of stringed instruments. Dubois charts specifically the history of the consummate chordophone of the Americas, the banjo, which emerged from within and across several slave societies as something distinctively African in the new world (29-31). The musical instruments constructed and played by African diasporans during the era of Atlantic slavery constitute a counter-archive of global music history. Although Ligon was unaware of these alternate histories, his own globetrotting serves as material

30 For another take on of Islamic/West African/Iberian musical co-influence, see Nathaniel Mackey’s essay “Cante Moro” in Sound States (1997).
evidence challenging the dominant narratives of global musicological influence he so believed in. 31

Ligon thought himself to be the bearer of musical knowledge, as is made plain in his dismissive descriptions of African music in Barbados. Speaking generally of what he heard on the plantation he writes that he finds African drumming styles to be sophisticated—“how strangely they vary their time”—but that their music lacks a “variety of tune” (99). Ever confident in the superiority of his abilities, he writes that if he had stayed in better health during his visit to the island he would have taught the musicians techniques that would have improved their practice. For, as he believes “time without tune, is not an eighth part of the Science of Music” (99). He spoke, both during his encounter with the Cape Verde lutist and later on the Barbadian plantation, of philosophies of music in which the deific composition of “time and tune” harkens the spheres. For Ligon, music held a scientific but also spiritual significance. His musical ideologies are transparent in the memoir, but the beliefs and preferences that drove Macaw and his contemporaries to play music are opaque. We know that musical performance was regularly undertaken and enjoyed by Africans living in slave societies and that many took the time to build instruments using materials that were unfamiliar

31 The field of organology, or the study of musical instruments, has long been invested in the cataloguing of African instruments, as Dubois discusses. These practices have vexed colonialist origins as the field’s earliest practitioners were invested in the notion that African and other vernacular global musics were representative of “primitive” practices from which European, Western classical traditions evolved (6-11).
and therefore challenging. In short, we know that music was important to at least a considerable subset of the society. The material accumulation of this significance in the form of instruments tells a story about early Afro-diasporic music that is, as ever, worth listening to carefully.

Ligon’s descriptions of plantation music in Barbados echo reports by his contemporaries. For instance, he notes that it was conventional practice for masters to relinquish slaves from their duties on Sundays. In most American plantation societies, Sundays were a day to tend to domestic duties, trade, and enjoy entertainment and worship through dance and music. In Ligon’s account, the men on the plantation play kettle drums of several different sizes, and he notes that the smallest drum is played by the best musician. It is not clear whether or not the person playing the smallest drum is Macaw, but in a later passage, he refers to him as the “chief musician,” suggesting the possibility that he was the soloist performing on a small instrument whose diminutive size would create a higher, and therefore more audible pitch. Ligon bemoans the lack of “variety of tune” among the drummers, but since the drums were all different sizes, they would have varied in pitch a great deal. Ligon heard percussive sounds as lacking tonality, but participants in the musical practices may have been able to appreciate the tonal variation among the drums. The techniques and patterns may have been imperceptible to Ligon due to his lack of training in the music.
As a multi-instrumentalist and instrument builder, Macaw exhibits forms of expertise that were vital for the performance of music in the context of slavery. He also held a unique status within the plantation hierarchy that provided him with mobility and access to restricted spaces. In addition to being “the chief musician,” Ligon explains that he was an “officer” and “keeper of our plantain grove.” These details suggest that he held a position of authority, possibly being tasked with overseeing the duties of fellow slaves in a disciplinary capacity. He may have been tapped for this position because he was already a leader within his community, either before or after capture, or because of his perceived social prominence as “chief musician.” Or, perhaps he spoke English well, which would recommend him for an intermediary position requiring communication with the colonists. Because of his unusual status, Macaw was allowed to venture into the master’s house, which Ligon notes was a rare privilege. The two meet in the central domicile, where Macaw sees Ligon playing the theorbo. The encounter makes plain, despite the author’s lack of recognition, that Macaw is an experienced performer familiar with diverse techniques.

In a pair of revealing exchanges, Ligon and Macaw interact with each others’ instruments across the colonial divide. Each musician brings a unique set of studied

32 Aside from details about his status as a musician and officer, Ligon reports that Macaw had plans to kill his wife after she gave birth to twins, a taboo in his culture. The master of the plantation had heard of the plan and threatened to kill Macaw if he carried out the murder (97-98).
expectations to the encounter; their cultural knowledge, personal experience, and expertise shape their understanding of the other musician’s instrument and music. That being said, Macaw and Ligon did not collaborate as equals, for Macaw, as a slave, would have had to be continually conscious of his status and vulnerability. Likewise, Ligon viewed Macaw through his own prejudicial assumption that Macaw’s musical abilities were unstudied. Like many of his contemporary colonial authors, Ligon is interested, broadly, in whether or not African civilizations measure up to European ones. He scrutinizes Macaw’s music and cultural in a comparative mode, seeming always to affirm the superiority of his culture. However, on the whole, sixteenth and seventeenth-century European travelers were more open-minded about African societies than modern readers might expect. Anglo-American and European forms of anti-black racism had not yet cohered to the extent that they would by the nineteenth century, when descriptions of Africans and slaves were distinctly primitivising. To my surprise, the early modern travel narratives of Africa that I have read assess African religions and performance traditions with far more neutrality than eighteenth-century authors and especially nineteenth-century travelers. When travelers encounter Africans primarily in American slave societies rather than in Africa, they generally evaluate Africans more suspiciously. Ligon’s perspectives speak to a larger shift in Anglo-European consciousness that took place during the long era of European conquest. This is one of many reasons why musical encounters like Ligon’s can teach us so much about the
emergence of African diasporic music in the Americas and especially how European perspectives gave rise to the obscuring dominant narratives about that history.

In the first portion of a lengthy passage detailing the parallel interactions, Macaw finds Ligon playing and singing along with his theorbo.

I found Macaw very apt for it of himself, and one day coming into the house, (which none of the Negroes use to do, unless an Officer, as he was,) he found me playing on a Theorbo, and singing to it, which he hearkened very attentively to; and when I had done, he took the Theorbo in his hand, and struck one string, stopping it by degrees upon every fret, and finding the notes to vary, till it came to the body of the instrument; and that the nearer the body of the instrument he stopped, the smaller or higher the sound was, which he found was by the shortening of the string, considered with himself, how he might make some trial of this experiment upon such an instrument as he could come by; having no hope ever to have any instrument of this kind to practice on. (99-100)

Ligon recognizes in Macaw’s careful listening the habits of a musician, particularly when Macaw approaches to take the instrument in his hands, a somewhat bold act given the circumstances. Macaw studiously explores the device by plucking the strings while working up and down the fretboard. Perhaps what Ligon characterizes as wide-eyed curiosity is Macaw’s display of his own musical knowledge. Ligon presumes that Macaw has never before encountered an instrument of this nature, but because of the many different kinds of stringed instruments in African societies, it would actually be surprising if Macaw hadn’t been familiar with chordophones. To be sure, the theorbo that Ligon played had many strings and would have looked unique, but the basic construction is the same: moving the placement of fingers along the headstock changes
the pitch. Macaw is keenly aware of this, which is why he picks up the instrument to figure out how it is tuned by listening to the notes he makes by working his way up and down the fretboard. These are not the activities of an unschooled instrumentalist who is fundamentally mystified by the sound-making of an unfamiliar device; these are the gingerly, careful explorations of an artist who understands how instrument construction structures possibilities for sound-making.

It is no surprise, then, that Ligon happens upon Macaw building an instrument of his own in the plantain grove.

In a day or two after, walking in the Plantain grove ... I found this Negro (whose office it was to attend there) being the keeper of that grove, sitting on the ground, and before him a piece of large timber, upon which he had laid cross, six Billets, and having a handsaw and a hatchet by him, would cut the billets by little and little, till he had brought them to the tunes, he would fit them to; for the shorter they were, the higher the Notes, which he tried by knocking upon the ends of them with a stick, which he had in his hand. When I found him at it, I took the stick out of his hand, and tried the sound, finding the six billets to have six distinct notes, one above another, which put me in a wonder, how he of himself, should without teaching do so much. I then showed him the difference between flats and sharps, which he presently apprehended, as between Fa and Mi: and he would have cut two more billets to those tunes, but I had then no time to see it done, and so left him to his own enquiries. I say thus much to let you see that some of these people are capable of learning arts. (99-100)

When Macaw takes the theorbo and runs his fingers along a single string “stopping by degrees,” he explores it with the insight of a studied instrumentalist, not

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33 It is not clear what region in Africa Macaw came from. Although many enslaved Africans were from parts of West Africa, there were also captives from Central and even East Africa.
the fumbling of a novice “without teaching,” as Ligon puts it. Imagining Macaw to be completely devoid of intentionality in the way he is designing the instrument, Ligon attempts to persuade Macaw that his scale is missing notes. The six tones Macaw created likely correlate to a pentatonic scale whereas Ligon assumes a scale to be incomplete if it doesn’t conform to the use of sharps and flats that he is accustomed to. What’s more, Ligon incorrectly assumes that Macaw has invented this instrument in response to seeing the theorbo. Macaw is actually building an instrument common across several slave-trading regions of Africa, known by various names including “bala” or “balafo” and later as a “balafon” in the Americas.34 Balafons are wooden xylophones amplified by gourd resonators affixed to the bottom of each key. Ligon does not describe resonators on Macaw’s instrument, but he may have been designing a different type of xylophone. Or, perhaps Macaw had not yet attached the resonators when Ligon chanced to meet him in the plantain grove, or Ligon simply forgot this detail when describing the event years later. Macaw may have intentionally failed to amplify the instrument so that he could play it without drawing attention from his overseers. In Stedman’s chart of instruments, which I will discuss shortly, the “Ansokko-bania” also has “a hard board, supported on both sides like a low seat, on which are placed small blocks of different sizes, which being struck with two small sticks like a dulcimer, give different sounds”

34 This observation comes from Epstein p. 57.
A similar instrument described as a “barrafo” was also documented in Virginia in the 1770s.35

Having survived the physical assault of the Middle Passage and its rampant illness, overcrowding and gruesome living conditions, only to be held captive in an unfamiliar territory and forced to labor far away from home, Macaw appears to have been determined to hear the sounds of a particular instrument. The raw materials for construction were different in Barbados from those with which he was familiar, so he had to decide which type of timber to fell and how much. He may or may not have been taught how to build the instrument before captivity. Perhaps he is building the instrument as a commission for a friend or acquaintance. Ligon did not record these particulars, but speculating about the range of motivations inspiring Macaw’s decision to build the instrument, and the material conditions contributing to its construction is an important habit of attention opening up our interpretation of the historical moment to include the experience of the enslaved, even where it is underreported in the sources at hand.

By procuring the tools and materials to create the instrument, Macaw was writing his culture into the life of the plantation, an activity that, like Ligon’s authorship, helped to disseminate ideas across great distances. Ligon was a man of book learning, so he told his history with the pen and the printing press. When Macaw took up an axe to

35 Epstein p. 57.
fell timber and sawed away at the wood to carve keys, he was telling a story, too. He was creating the conditions of possibility for producing the sounds that he wanted to hear and dance to, and perhaps pray to -- ultimately carving musical knowledge into the body of the instrument. If we read Macaw’s instrument like a text within a text, we can begin to understand how he and his contemporaries transformed global music under the conditions of slavery.

Other seventeenth-century depictions of the balafon demonstrate how the instrument records sonic information specific to the cultural contexts in which the instrument was performed. Two seventeenth-century travelers, English prospector and explorer Richard Jobson and French sailor Francois Froger, noted the prominence of balafons along the River Gambia in their travel narratives. The region was a trading outpost of interest to both the British and the French during the time. When Jobson and Froger describe the design of the instrument, and specifically the unique sound that the resonating gourds create, they compare it to the pipe organ, an instrument with which they and their readers would have been more familiar. Jobson writes, “I would acquaint you of their most principall instrument, which is called Ballards made to stand a foot above the ground, hollow under, and hath uppon the top some seventeene wodden keyes standing like the Organ …the sound that proceeds from this instrument is worth the observing, for we can hear it a good English mile…” (136). Froger explains, “The most part of the Negroes divert themselves therein, with discoursing about the Alcoran,
or with playing on a certain Musical Instrument, which they call Balafon, … they fasten underneath ten or twelve Gourds, the different Sizes of which perform the same effect as our Organ-Pipes” (561-562). Both organ pipes and gourd resonators amplify sound while bringing a softening and breathy effect to an instrument’s tone. However organ pipes are constructed of wood or metal, and they are long cylinders, open on both ends, whereas calabash resonators are enclosed, round, and bulbous. That is to say, the effects they create do not sound exactly alike, although it is understandable why the authors leaned on the same comparison to convey the sound for European ears. Their observations help to explain why the modern orchestral marimba is constructed similarly to a traditional balafon, but with organ pipes attached beneath the keys, rather than gourd resonators.36 The design of the modern instrument recalls, in its material form, the way European ears heard African performances across the Atlantic world, even as it erases an explicitly African influence. As with all of the sounds discussed in this dissertation, the sound of the balafon and later the marimba is made legible through culturally-specific listening practices. Froger and Jobson heard the sound of an organ when they heard a balafon, and Ligon heard an incomplete scale. What Macaw heard,

36 Marimba is the name more commonly associated with xylophones in the Americas, and particularly in central America, whereas balafon is more commonly applied to African versions. However, one traveler to Congo depicts a balafon in an engraving, with the name “marimba” in 1692. It is possible that the name had already evolved in the Americas and influenced the author’s understanding of the instrument, or it may have been a more popular name for the African instrument than is generally assumed. Girolamo Merolla, Breve, e succinta relatione del viaggio nel regno di Congo (1692).
we do not know, however we do know that he chose to reproduce what he heard by constructing an instrument that would introduce new sounds to the social worlds of the plantation sphere.

Listening is a cultural phenomenon: we interpret sounds according to the ways we have learned to understand them through our life experiences. By listening to colonial travel literature with the culturally and historically specific experiences of author and subjects in mind, we can see—and hear—how performers like Macaw managed to revolutionize the soundscape of modernity under the constraints of slavery. The instruments in Gambia, Suriname, Barbados and Virginia together emblematize the circulation of musical knowledge around the Atlantic world. When enslaved people designed, constructed, and played instruments they recorded their traditions into the surface of objects, making it possible to hear particular sounds for which they yearned.

**Charting African Diasporic Instruments**

Listening is not a universalized practice, nor is it confined to the biological functions of the ear: we don’t just hear sound, we feel it, see it and touch it.37 Visual representations of instruments also contain information about the sounds of early African diasporic music. John Stedman’s travel narrative of Suriname contains an

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engraved illustration depicting eighteen African diasporic instruments. Stedman’s accompanying written descriptions further explain each instrument’s construction, playing technique, and in many cases, sonic quality. These details confirm the impression that Stedman was a careful student of musical life in Suriname. His are not the casual observations of a bystander, but rather the detailed catalogue of a fan, you might say, and one who has considerable knowledge of music in his own right. Richard and Sally Price discovered that Stedman had actually collected each of these objects along with many others during his travels. Several of them survive in a museum in the Netherlands. In the extant manuscript, which appears to have been prepared by a copyist, Stedman adds notes in his own handwriting asserting that the illustration “Musical Instruments of the African Negroes” should be added to the work, which further testifies to his personal oversight of the creation of the image.

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38 The only counterpart again comes from Sir Hans Sloane, who includes an illustration of three instruments in his works (vol 1 plate III).
39 Indeed, throughout Stedman’s journals he makes notes of different kinds of performances, from fiddle dances in wealthy plantation parlors to hosting a party to celebrate his son’s first birthday in which the “negroes dance a banjar” (p. 157 of the printed transcription of his journals).
40 As they note, many of the instruments became lost due to poor housekeeping at the archive. See Richard Price and Sally Price, “John Gabriel Stedman’s Collection of 18th-Century Artifacts from Suriname.”
Figure 4: “Musical Instruments of the African Negroes” from Stedman’s *Narrative*. Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago. (G 987.84, vol.2)

To provide information that may be useful to future researchers, and to give my readers a greater sense of the information in the chart and accompanying descriptions, I
have provided a list of the instrument names below, along with short summaries of Stedman’s annotations:

1. Qua-qua (wooden “sounding-board” struck with pieces of iron or bones)
2. Liemba-toetoe (nasal flute)
3. Ansokko-bania (xylophone like the one constructed by Macaw in Ligon’s narrative)
4. Great creole drum
5. Great Loango drum
6. Papa drum
7. Small Loango drum
8. Small creole drum
9. Coeroema (“wooden cup… covered with sheep-skin” beaten with sticks)
10. Loango-bania (sansa, mbira, or similar instrument)
11. Callebash (resonator used to amplify the loango-bania)
12. Saka-saka (gourd rattle filled with pebbles)
13. Conch (not used to accompany dancing, more of an alarm)
14. Benta (mouth bow)
15. Creole-bania (banjo)
16. Trumpet of war (used for military purposes)
17. Horn (used to call slaves to work on the plantation)
18. Loango too-too (flute)

Stedman’s memoir has long been famous for its other engravings depicting plantation scenes, especially those by William Blake. Those images, known for their provocative portrayal of plantation culture, have had a long afterlife. They are repeatedly reproduced in scholarly monographs and popular histories of slavery, alike.

The musical engraving may be less well-known, but it constitutes a significant archive of early American music.

Like Ligon, Froger, and Jobson, Stedman relies on the musical knowledge that he brought with him to South America to interpret the practices of Surinamese performers
and also to translate their music for the ears of his audience. For example, he explains that the “loango-bania” (banjo) sounds like a pianoforte, a somewhat appropriate description given that both instruments are known for their plunky quality. The author relies on comparison to describe not merely what is similar, but also what is different about the performances he heard, explaining, for example, that the African musicians of Suriname always use full or half measure, but never triple time, in their dancing music, which is not unlike that of a baker’s bunt, when he separates the flour from the bran, sounding tuckety-tuck and tuckety-tuck ad perpetuum. To this noise they dance with uncommon pleasure, and most times foot it away with great art and dexterity. (258-259)

Stedman refers to a sound familiar to his readers, but less so to us. Eighteenth century bakers processed flours in part by running wheat over a sieve, which would create a grainy rhythm as the technician works the bunt back and forth. The use of small stones or beans in the body of gourds or in kitchen pans was in fact a common way to create the kinds of textural percussive sounds Stedman creatively translates according to the culturally-specific sonic literacies of his readers. His words “tuckety-tuck” perform a syncopated rhythm that is indeed common across many African diasporic genres. When describing the “great creole drum,” he explains that it responds to the “qua-qua,” a type of “sounding-board” struck with mallets, giving “the effect of the bass-viol” (296).41

41 In the late eighteenth-century “bass-viol”s” were constructed similarly to modern day cellos, although they may have been larger in size. See Frederick R. Selch, “Bass-viol.”
Stedman attempts to translate musical practices in Suriname for his European readers, a written performance that draws attention to the gulf of information and experience between the performers and their would-be European listeners.

If we imagine instead what instruments mean to those who play them, it is clear that they signify musical possibility. Instruments make it possibly to carry out and to innovate musical traditions. Visual genres like charts, maps, and globes convey the idea that they contain significant information. By contrast, a musical instrument might seem like a lifeless thing on its own, but in the hands of a skilled practitioner, or someone whose ears are well-tuned to its capacities, it contains an abundance of information. Musical technologies make it possible to accurately reproduce the sounds that Stedman records as a “tuckety-tuck, tuckety-tuck, tuckety-tuck.” Stedman’s illustrated African instruments are displayed similarly to the botanical charts. As I discussed in the previous chapter, travel narratives were strongly associated with Enlightenment scientific discourse. This illustration draws from the visual vernacular of scientific display to implicitly argue for the significance of the instruments as cultural knowledge. Again, the tensions between Western and Eastern knowledge cultures are part of the larger story about African diasporic music being conveyed both explicitly and implicitly within travel literature.

Visual design is important to how the chart communicates information about each object’s sound. The illustrator makes further use of the viewers’ associations with
western orchestral instruments in an attempt to communicate specificities about the objects. Some of these visual comparisons are profoundly misleading. For instance, the headstock on the “creole-bania” or banjo (item fifteen) is curved like a scroll, in the fashion of a violin. The extant “creole-bania” does have a beautifully curved headstock, but not in the fashion of a scroll. The instrument in the chart also has a sharp pin extending from its base, of the sort that would be used to position a cello, or in Stedman’s day, a large viol between the legs so that it could be bowed upright, but banjos are played upon the lap. In the artistic rendering, the instruments’ features are edited to visually conform to readers’ existing familiarity with instrument design. I was initially confused by the illustrator’s choice to style all of the instruments with jutting points. Notably, the image portrays several pieces of wood with splintery edges, such as the qua-qua board and several of the drums. These instruments would not have had sharp splinters of wood at their bottom for that would make them impossible to play. Indeed, a photograph of what the Prices believe to be Stedman’s “great creole drum” shows a drum with a flat bottom.42 I believe the illustrator may have attempted to render it visually obvious that certain instruments were constructed of wood, and in the case of specific items, left hollowed out and bottomless. Like the narrative descriptions that borrow from readers’ musical familiarity to communicate novel sounds, the visual representations also use cues to indicate each instrument’s design. To the illustrator’s

credit, it is easy to imagine a far less detailed chart that would present drums that are difficult to distinguish from one another. Unlike Ligon, Stedman was apparently aware of the significant differences between particular drums in terms of sound quality and performance technique. Studying the raw materials for musical creation depicted in Stedman’s illustration is like peering at a painter’s pallet – it is not the same as seeing a finished portrait or hearing a live performance, but doing so provides clues about the spectrum of sounds put to use by Suriname’s African musicians.

Crafting instruments under slavery was difficult because time and materials were often hard to come by. David Evans tracks the way African diasporic musicians innovatively made use of American resources in order to reproduce sounds from African traditions.43 For example, he points out that the bamboo panpipes played within African-American communities in the United States are known as “quills,” likely because similar instruments are constructed using the quills of a very large species of porcupine in Africa (383). Rich Rath suggests that because of the restrictions on drumming in the U.S. South during slavery, enslaved musicians began to adapt favored percussive patterns to the fiddle, particularly through the practice of “beating straws” or “fiddlesticks” in which a second performer stands next to a fiddler and taps out a

rhythm on the headstock of the instrument using knitting needles or other sticks. Other sounds, like the distinctive buzzy resonance of some African instrumental sounds survive in modern American instruments like the steel guitar and electric guitar. Well throughout the twentieth century, many African diasporic musical traditions maintained the practice of using found objects innovatively for the purpose of crafting musical instruments. When artists are determined to hear a particular sound, they will creatively manipulate the tools at hand to effect it. The use of everyday objects like jugs, pans, wires, and washboards are common within many vernacular traditions. Like Hobart Smith, whose first instrument was the shovel his mother used to bake bread, many mid-twentieth century American blues artists describe their earliest instruments as being creatively repurposed household objects. For example, blues guitarist Big Joe Williams (b. 1903) reportedly played several homemade instruments as a child, including a cigar box guitar, a wooden bucket that he used as a drum, and a diddley bow, a type of single-string zither. Following the path of particular sounds and styles across instruments over time shows how performers seek to reproduce and improve upon the sonic vocabulary associated with their musical tastes.

44 Rath, How Early America Sounded (92-93)
46 Sounds travel across instruments in other traditions as well. For example, Irish and Scottish fiddling styles both replicate the sounds of the bagpipes.
Several types of zithers were popular during the eras of enslavement, including a mouth bow, described as a “benta” in Stedman’s chart and by a contemporary observer in Jamaica as a “bender.” Stedman describes the benta as sounding “not unlike a jew’s harp” in his descriptions, referencing the buzzing quality of the instrument. In both Jamaica and Suriname in the late eighteenth century, Africans were continuing to be imported directly from Africa, but in the case of Jamaica, because it was a highly lethal environment for plantation slaves, the slave population continued to consist primarily of survivors of the Middle Passage. By contrast, in Suriname, some enslaved people were born into multi-generational families in the colony as Stedman notes (vol 2 p 300). When describing the quarterly balls held for slaves on plantations, Stedman notes, “at these grand balls the slaves are remarkably neat, the women appearing in their best chintz petticoats, and many of the men in fine Holland trowsers.” Some of the Afro-descended musicians and dancers in Suriname were conversant in what are conventionally deemed “European” fashion, dance, and music at the same time that they continue to engage in performance styles that read as “African” to Stedman, such as playing the benta and other instruments depicted in the chart. Stedman specifically describes seeing newly imported slaves at these dances, who would participate eagerly, pointing to the co-existence of “creolized” cultural forms and the renewed presence of African languages.

and cultures in the colony. The scene that Stedman recalls, with petticoats, trousers, and bottles of rum gifted by plantation owners appears to take place in an urban setting. Certainly in city centers, enslaved people would have had greater access to commercial goods and the colonial melting pot would be particularly fluid. These diverse environments were vital to the creation and spread of early African diasporic musical forms across the Atlantic world.

In truth, there were many different forms of “Africanness” in varied societies like Suriname and Jamaica at the time just as there were many different Europeans. Notably, Stedman describes the instruments with terms like “creole,” “loango,” and “papa,” which also echo Sloane’s music titles. In Suriname alone, there were Anglophone Scotsmen like Stedman fighting wars alongside Dutch people from varying social classes and African rangers against long-established maroon societies. It is in this context it is particularly remarkable that certain instruments survived and thrived across turbulent and diverse social constructions where death, forced immigration, hard labor, class-mixing, and language barriers all collaborated to make for a wild soup of contingencies. Laurent Dubois traces the singular coalescence of one very important African diasporic instrument, the banjo; it managed to travel across these societies and cohere into a recognizable instrument.48 The less well-known, but apparently common benta emerges

in late eighteenth-century Suriname and Jamaica despite the differences between the colonies. A distinctive performance object with a spectacular sound that could be played in various ways, it, too, tells a story about interstices of the developing African-diasporic network.

William Beckford, who writes about mouth bows in Jamaica, draws the instrument into his own aesthetic vernacular.49 Like Ligon, Beckford wrote his narrative about the West Indies from prison. A lavish art collector with infamous cultural and sensual appetites, he was born the son of a wealthy Jamaican planter and London city official. Beckford is remembered now mostly for his gothic tale, *Vathek*, and his gothic estate, Fonthill Abbey, where he amassed a once rather large collection of paintings. He was well-traveled and had a continental arts education, including a brief musical study under the tutelage of Mozart himself. He wrote his account of Jamaica directly after living there for several years; upon his return he was seized by kin who ultimately won ownership of the estate and had him thrown into prison. He brings a distinctly Romantic literary fervor to his treatment of the West Indies, resulting in lyrical descriptions of Jamaican music. His treatment of the “bender” is particularly vivid:

The bender is an instrument upon which the Whydaw negroes, I believe, in particular, excel. It is made of a bent stick, the ends of which are restrained in this direction by a slip of dried grass; the upper part of which is gently

49 For more on Beckford’s West Indian activities and writing, see chapter one in Elizabeth Bohls, *Slavery and the Politics of Place: Representing the Colonial Caribbean, 1770-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
compressed between the lips, and to which the breath gives a soft and pleasing vibration; and the other end is graduated by a slender stick that beats upon the nerve, if I may so express it, and continues the natural acuteness of the sound, and thus together produce a trembling, a querulous, and a delightful harmony.

I had a watchman very near my house, whose hut was close to the entrance of a bamboo-walk of considerable length, and which was surrounded by plantain-trees and other shrubs, though the former of which the midnight winds were heard to sigh; and on the latter, the nightingales seemed to contend in strength and sweetness of song; and when they paused, the bender took up, with its wild and various modulation, the rural strain, or joined in chorus the melancholy notes that were poured around. The combined effects of these impressions upon the mind, when the body has been long confined to sickness, and when languor and resignation almost make the patient indifferent to life, can hardly be experienced, excepting by those who have been in the situation above described. (216-217)

Beckford describes a multidimensional performance in which the bender acts in concert with its environmental setting. The evening setting, along with the hut’s location next to plantain trees and shrubs mean that the wind rustles the vegetation and the nightingales add to bender player’s solo. Beckford’s description offers the specificity of place and setting, far more so than other narrative accounts that isolate instruments from the contexts in which they are played, like Stedman’s chart. However, even though Beckford accomplishes amore extensive aural portrait that depicts the relationality between distinct sounds, he fails to appreciate the situatedness of his listening perspective.

50 Soundscapes and acoustic ecology will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.
Beckford listens to the bender player as an elite slaveholder who had been suffering from illness in the tropics. He was steeped in a literary culture and arts scene that placed value on the individual’s encounter with the natural world. Discourses of the sublime prepare his ear to hear the bender in concert with a nightingale at moonlight and find it rapturous. Utterly left out of this scene is the mouth bow player himself, the “watchman” from Whydaw (Benin), who lives in a hut near Beckford’s dwelling. A visual portrait of Beckford’s narration might render the musician a small figure in the distance, not studiously sketched out. You might not be able to make out the kind of instrument in his hand within a picturesque plantation landscape. The watchman Beckford observed may very well have enjoyed the experience; perhaps a cool evening breeze whispered through the trees as dappled moonlight fell along the corner of his hut while he worked the bow between his lips, tapping out a familiar rhythm. Yet it is important to remember that we do not know how the mouth bow player experienced the moment. How might his experience been affected if he knew he had a listener, for instance? Beckford, like Stedman (as discussed in chapter one) overhears a performance from a particular vantage shaped not only by his physical position in relation to the sound, but more importantly, by his social and cultural listening subjectivity.

Although Beckford does not identify the bender player, he does mention his friend “Parsons,” an accomplished musician who Beckford imagines would embrace the instrument. He even suggests that it is a shame that Charles Burney did not include
Caramantee-flutes and benders in his tome on the history of music. Beckford believes the instruments would make beautiful additions to European genres:

The notes of the bender, might, I think, be introduced in solo parts, into some of our lighter symphonies and airs, or might perhaps have a pleasing effect, if played behind the scenes, and to fill up some of the pauses of the accompanied recitatives: and the Caramantee-flutes might, in solemn strains, particularly in choruses, be made to produce a most tender and sublime expression. (217-218)

Beckford writes the Whydaw watchman’s music tradition within the frame of his pre-existing musical knowledge, transplanting the Jamaican practice into symphonies and into Burney’s history. He fails to illuminate the structures of musical knowledge in which the bender-player operates, just as Ligon interprets the Cape Verde Lutist according to Biblical and Shakesperean references. However the mouth bow performer’s musical history continues to dwell in the sound of his instrument, which has been recorded across the centuries and across many different kinds of instrument technologies.  

Instrument technology mobilized musical acquisition and distribution in a way that I believe to be similar to what we now call “recording” by making it possible to reproduce sounds that would otherwise be irretrievable. Through an accounting of early African diasporic instruments, patterns and preferences emerge; these objects document

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techniques that were diverse, varying greatly in different periods and across regions, but also maintaining continuity, as between the “bender” player in Jamaica and the “benta” player Suriname during the same era. These are the sorts of connections that render artistic traditions legible to history, as Beckford knew well when he collected paintings, wrote about architecture and authored stories filled with references to cultural touchstones. There are traceable links between Beckford and the Italian masters he studied and the intellectual circle milieu of which he was a part. What happens to this story of artistic influence when we do the work of putting it in conversation with the performance traditions of the Jamaican bender player whom he overheard one night from his sick bed? That is not at all to say that the art forms of enslaved Africans only matter when you can sketch a crooked line between ninth-century African lutists, British theorbo players, Jamaican bender masters and Mozart, but it is to say that it is wrong to imagine that there were never any “records” documenting such possibilities. Furthermore, the abundance of African diasporic instruments evinces a substantial musical movement that had a global impact on arts and letters. By tracing performance possibilities from one instrument to another and across societies, it is possible to perceive bountiful sounds and sound systems that artists crafted in the wilds of a treacherous American plantation frontier.
Chapter Three


This chapter marks a turning point in this project, and it also represents a significant transitional moment within the literary archive of slavery. In the late eighteenth century, authors of African descent began writing and publishing in greater numbers, offering their own descriptions of musical life in slave societies. Because alphabetic literacy was so aggressively prohibited by most slave owners, the vast majority of early black authors had either earned their freedom, or never been enslaved. They were the exceptional few, and they were tasked with telling their stories for readers in Europe and North America who had not witnessed the institution so intimately. In this respect early African-American autobiographies share many properties with the colonial travel writing explored in the first two chapters. Both genres incorporate ethnographic methods that presume a predominately white reader. Furthermore, many of these narratives were written down by amanuenses who editorialized the compositions to varying degree, leading John Sekora to describe early African-diasporic writing as “black messages in white envelopes.”  

Questions of authenticity and historical accuracy in these texts continue to be debated by literary

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1 Notable exceptions include Jupiter Hammon and Phyllis Wheatley.
scholars and historians of slavery, but there is no doubt that this writing formed the seeds of the African-American literary tradition and impacted the way people understood slavery in its day and how we understand it now.

Slave narratives and the autobiographical writing that preceded them are products of literary culture, but as this chapter urges, they are also artifacts of sonic culture. The tensions between these two modalities were acutely felt by African diasporans, whose liberty and safety depended on the textual imprints of the law as well as the ability to navigate threatening social orders by developing acute sonic literacies. This chapter will explore the collision of text and sound in narratives by John Marrant (1785), Solomon Northup (1853), and Frederick Douglass (1845). Their works document the way African diasporans interpreted diverse acoustic environments and when explored together, illuminate the role of sonic performance in black survival and mobility in the plantation sphere. These memoirs elucidate the frictions between sound and text: the ways in which the two modes work together in literary authorship to create imagined sensory worlds, and also the insufficiencies of the one in bearing out the other, particularly in the fraught conditions of living while black in the early United States republic and antebellum period.
Rethinking the Talking Book

Henry Louis Gates’ seminal theory of African-American literary criticism takes its key concept “signifying” from oral performance. But Gates’ theory, and other approaches to sound in early African American letters tend to place aurality in opposition, if not subservience to literary culture. Take, for example, the “trope of the talking book,” which Gates identifies as a cornerstone of the early manifestations of the tradition. In the narrative trope, an illiterate person encounters a book for the first time and places it to their ear expecting it to speak to them. As Gates explains, the trope has roots in representations of indigenous colonial encounters, particularly in Spanish accounts the Incan conquest in Peruvian history. He traces the evolution of the trope across the autobiographies of several early black authors including James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1774), John Marrant (1785), Olaudah Equiano (1789), and John Jea (1811). While most representations of the trope by black authors cast Africans in the role of illiterate book-listener, in Marrant’s autobiography, he is the literate book owner who presents a bible to the daughter of a Cherokee leader:

At this instant the king’s eldest daughter came into the chamber, a person about 19 years of age, and stood at my right-hand. I had a Bible in my hand, which she took out of it, and having opened it, she kissed it, and seemed much delighted with it. When she had put it into my hand again, the king asked me

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4 Gates cites El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s Historia general del Perú (1617) as a possible source text (165).
what it was? and I told him, the name of my God was recorded there; and, after several questions, he bid me read it, which I did, particularly the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, in the most solemn manner I was able; and also the 26th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel; and when I pronounced the name of Jesus, the particular effect it had upon me was observed by the king. When I had finished reading, he asked me why I read those names with so much reverence? I told him, because the Being to whom those names belonged made heaven and earth, and I and he this he denied. I then pointed to the sun, and asked him who made the sun, and moon, and stars, and preserved them in their regular order? He said there was a man in their town that did it. I labored as much as I could to convince him to the contrary. His daughter took the book out of my hand a second time; she opened it, and kissed it again; her father bid her give it to me, which she did; but said, with much sorrow, the book would not speak to her. (26)

Unspoken power dynamics shape the scene’s unfolding, as the Cherokee king, his daughter, and Marrant interact with one another around the emblematic presence of the book. The king presents authority as both figure-head holding Marrant captive, and also as a parent. His dominating presence is questioned implicitly by the presence of the book, and Marrant’s understanding of the information it contains. The King asks Marrant to explain the book and importantly, why he speaks from the text “with so much reverence.” Marrant’s earthly body may be threatened by the King, but he serves another power, his Christian God, whom he believes made the sun and the stars, as recorded in the book. When the King counters Marrant’s beliefs by explaining that a “man in their town did that,” the text of Marrant’s holy book confronts the Cherokee oral tradition. The daughter’s presence disrupts the polarization between the two creation myths – one oral, the other textual – because she occupies a liminal space between the two, clearly influenced by her Cherokee way of life but also seemingly open
to Marrant’s view. She obeys her father’s command to give the book back to Marrant, but she also kisses it, and expresses sorrow that it will not speak to her. The Cherokee woman fulfills a familiar role as a bicultural bridge between indigenous and European colonial presence established by the narrativization of historical personages such as Yarico, Pocahontas, and la Malinche. For the purposes of this study, the actions of Marrant’s Indian princess challenges a traditional reading of the trope of the talking book.

On its surface, the talking book trope seems to expose the illiterate individual’s lack of access to print forms of knowledge. In such a reading, the book listener is not simply unable to process the written language contained within the book but is mystified by the very notion that information could be represented in what is a fundamentally foreign object. The conventional scene thus mocks the naïveté of illiterate would-be readers, but the symbolism of the event can be read in contradictory ways. Indeed Marrant’s indigenous princess does not simply listen to the book in vain, her first act is to kiss it lovingly, in recognition of its totemic power – an intuition that aligns with Marrant’s Christian belief that the bible is far more than simply a book. Her action shows that she is in fact able to “read” the object’s significance effectively. I argue that the trope of the talking book does not actually serve to ridicule illiteracy, nor to valorize
the power of writing. The trope of the talking book is about the worlds of sonic
knowledge that participants in aural cultures understand themselves to be operating in.
The “illiterate” book-listener does not expect books to talk because they are ignorant of
how knowledge is formed and circulated in print, but rather because they understand
all too well the power of speech and talking. They are correct in the end, books do talk –
they record language, which is fundamentally and primarily speech. The illiterate book
reader knows something about books that the literate reader takes for granted – that
they are enmeshed in sonic ways of knowing. Ultimately, I agree with Gates that the
talking book trope is crucial to understanding early black letters, precisely because it
demarcates the relationship between sonic and textual communications, and the
literacies that give them meaning.

As you will see, Marrant’s Bible and hymnal are instrumental in protecting him
in the wilderness and under captivity, but not in episodes silent reflective reading.
Rather, the books rescue him from execution when he breathes life into them by reading
scripture aloud, singing hymns and praying in both English and Cherokee. The books
have considerable utility, to be sure, but they are not powerful in and of themselves.
According to Marrant, the Bible records the name of God, an explanation that presumes a
prior oral pronunciation. Throughout Marrant’s narrative, God’s power is manifest out

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5 Tara Bynum also casts doubt on the Gates’ reading of the trope in Marrant’s narrative in “A
explores Marrant’s theological perspectives in depth.
loud, through the noise of a fearfully praying servant and a bellowing, “hallooing”
minister in the pulpit. The confession, the testimony, the hymn, even Marrant’s own
narrative of salvation are all sonic performances that are documented in script.

Marrant’s narrative is first and foremost a theological text with an evangelical
purpose. As such the sound systems he portrays are rendered in religious vernacular
that contains countless biblical allusions, with a plot that pivots around miraculous sonic
performances. Marrant would likely interpret the power of sound through his
understanding of the divine, but his narrative also teaches us how sonic performances—
and their reception—shape lived experience far more broadly. Specifically, Marrant
interprets and performs sound as a means of moving through the world. It is in this way
that his narrative relates to the works of Northup and Douglass. Each of these authors
describe the way sound systems orient experience. Their perspectives and experiences
are not at all equivalent, yet taken together they ask us to reorient our own reading
practices, so that we might hear the way sounds organized social and physical
environments in the plantation Americas. Enslaved and free African diasporans had to
interpret sound carefully in order to move within and to survive these threatening
environments. In this chapter I situate musical performance as one part of this much
larger constellation of sonic practices, all of which helped to turn the plot for early black
autobiographers.
Worlds of Sound

John Marrant’s *Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785) challenges expectations about early African-American autobiography. The memoir is a conversion narrative, Indian captivity narrative, and a sermon, rather than slave narrative. Marrant was born free, and the South Carolina world he portrays is not dominated by plantation slavery; his plot unfolds in urban settings, in Cherokee territory, and in the wilderness. Whereas the narrative centers around a distinctively regional landscape, his life was one of remarkable intercontinental travel. After his conversion, he eventually became a sailor, a soldier, and emigrated to England, where he joined the cloth as an evangelical. He was later sent to lead a congregation of black loyalists who emigrated to Nova Scotia after the U.S. Revolution. This flock eventually established the Sierra Leone colony, a further trace which locates Marrant’s writing in a transglobal Afro-Atlantic intellectual tradition of the late-eighteenth century, of which Equiano is perhaps the most recognizable voice.

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6 The book was published in England with the help of evangelical literary patron Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntington, who also funded the publication of work by Phyllis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano among others. Hasting and these authors belonged to an evangelical set in England that also involved prominent abolitionists like John Wesley.

As we consider the various worlds through which Marrant moved throughout his life, we must also consider the way sonic experience helped to locate him in those worlds as he faced diverse cultural orders and sought to carry out his ambitions, first as a professional musician, and later as a convert and minister. In the narrative, Marrant continually interprets sound in order to direct his movements, in a literal sense as he walks through various spatial terrain, and also in a figurative sense, as the plot of his life shifts again and again due to aural encounters.

In eighteenth-century Charleston—and indeed, in our own cities today—walking along a street creates the opportunity to absorb information across multiple senses. As Michel de Certeau has theorized, the act of “passing-by” as one moves through a cityscape on foot is quite a different spatial orientation to the world than looking at a map (97). This dissertation wrestles with the text-centrism Western knowledge traditions, and how that limited the production of sonic histories. These problems extend to the realm of geography, where we have inherited the cartographic logic of colonial map-makers, who reproduced a dominating perspective in the bird’s-eye orientation of their visual representations of space. However, maps are just one way of representing and interpreting space, and as Marrant’s narrative exemplifies, humans (and indeed other species) constantly use sound to direct our movements through space. Marrant’s story provides several examples that demonstrate how hearing sound orchestrates human

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activities. The course of his life is changed, not once, but twice, simply because he passes by buildings from which emitted sounds catch his attention and pique his curiosity.

The majority of the memoir takes place when he is thirteen and fourteen years old and his family is laying plans for his future employment. They want him to learn a trade, but young Marrant abandons that plan after happening by a music school and hearing sounds that beckon him to take up the performing arts. Importantly, his initial “conversion” to musicianship occurs because he hears sounds that escape the perimeter of a music school, pouring into the street where he is passing by.

Some time after I had been in Charles-Town, as I was walking one day, I passed by a school, and heard music and dancing, which took my fancy very much, and I felt a strong inclination to learn the music. (8)

After Marrant convinces his mother to allow him to train as a musician, his family pays for him to study music for eighteen months. He writes that when he arrives at the school “the teacher put the violin into my hand, which pleased me much, and, applying close, I learned very fast, not only to play, but to dance also, so that in six months I was able to play for the whole school” (8-9). A quick study, he masters both the fiddle and the French horn in a short amount of time, allowing him to begin playing professionally at local gatherings. Marrant is careful to credentialize himself as a musician: he boasts of what might be understood as a remarkable ear, and this theme of sonic excellence plays throughout the text. Becoming a professional musician enables him to earn a substantial amount of money for a young man of his stature, providing
him with a degree of independence at a young age. He reports that he used this freedom to cavort, drink and make merry with his companions. Working as an instrumentalist gave Marrant license to travel through the streets of Charleston and into a variety of social settings, an aspect of black musicianship that will be explored further in the following chapter.

As Marrant demonstrates, sounds are informative when traveling through various environments, whether in an urban space or the wilderness. Marrant’s walking body, hailed into the music school by the wonderful sounds emerging from within, exposes the vitality of sonic forms of communication that draw bystanders into diverse encounters. Rather than thumbing through a book or a newspaper, Marrant ambles down the road in order to engage in diverse worlds of experience. Indeed, his dramatic conversion to Christianity occurs in a similar way. He and a friend are walking to a gig, instruments in hand, and they pass by a meeting house where Marrant sees many people going inside. His companion explains to him “that a crazy man was hallooing there,” and Marrant becomes curious to “hear what he was hallooing about” (10-11). The hallooing man turned out to be George Whitfield, an evangelical minister from England who became famous on the Atlantic coast of North America by orating in wildly popular revivals. In both of these crucial moments in Marrant’s biography, he becomes attracted to life-changing experiences by hearing unfamiliar sounds that compel him to

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9 On George Whitfield, see Frank Lambert, “Pedlar in Divinity” (1994).
seek out new experiences. The siren of music and later Whitfield’s preaching hold sway over his choices throughout the course of his life, revealing the impact of sonic performance on everyday lives in his eighteenth-century world.

Centuries removed from Marrant’s experiences under captivity and his oratory in the church, his literary performance survives to speak to us about his story and its audible resonances. In the written text we witness Marrant’s practices of listening that beckon him into the music school and later into evangelical Christianity. We hear him wailing, praying, and singing in the wilderness to ward off fearsome beasts whom he fears will devour him in the night. We gasp at his dramatic scrape with death under captivity in the Cherokee village and marvel at his wondrous tales of survival. Throughout each of these episodes, sounds stimulate Marrant’s movement across borders, both psychological and physical, as he demonstrates the manifold ways in which the audible world structures lived experience.

As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has argued, Marrant’s memoir exposes a world of communication that operates both outside of and in collaboration with what is frequently deemed the “print public sphere.” She calls this alternative space the “performative commons,” an embodied public sphere in which cultural workers like Marrant, who may or may not be literate, assert political and cultural agency through
My approach to Marrant builds on Dillon’s insights by connecting Marrant’s multivalent sonic performances to the larger genealogy of African Diasporic sound that I trace in this dissertation. Dillon hones in on the scene of Marrant’s conversion, noting the important role his French horn plays in coordinating the episode.

Seeing the bustling about the meeting house, Marrant wants to go inside but his companion does not. The companion playfully sets up a bargain: he will accompany Marrant, but only if he promises to blow his horn inside the building. Marrant protests that he fears the crowd will beat him. Here his status as young freed black man may have increased his fear of an audience that likely included a lot of white people, although Whitfield was known for evangelizing African Americans, unlike many of the protestant ministers in the slave-holding United States. Marrant’s companion promises to defend him in an attack, and so the boys stroll inside. But in the meeting house, rather than raising his instrument, Marrant is struck dumb by Whitfield’s preaching, and after Whitfield bellows from the front of the congregation, “Prepare to meet thy God, Oh Israel,” the young musician collapses onto the floor and begins to suffer from a multiple day psycho-spiritual illness that leaves him bedridden. Four days into the episode, Whitfield visits Marrant and prays with him on his knees not once, but three times, in a rhythmic ritual they repeat until Marrant’s blight lifts. Together, minister and supplicant

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10 For Dillon’s theorization of the “performative commons” see the introduction to New World Drama (2014). For her work on sound in Marrant’s autobiography, see “John Marrant Blows the French Horn” in Early African American Print Culture (2012).
enact a spiritual performance as they bend onto their knees and speak in prayer. The first efforts to appease Marrant’s soul are ineffective, but finally, after the third iteration, he receives the joy of the Lord and gives up his wicked ways, including his being a musician. Fiddling, in particular, was cast off by many protestant converts during the era for fear that it was the devil’s instrument. Marrant turns instead to studying the scriptures, and as is made plain in their prominence later in his narrative, he shifts some of his musical energies to the practice of reading and singing hymns.

After his conversion, Marrant retreats to the countryside where his family lives, and later fully into the wilderness. Shifting from city to town only increases his reliance on sonic interpretation and performance, especially as he increasingly must use his wits to survive. Marrant’s family is confused and troubled by his behavior after the conversion, and eventually he grows so tired of their judgment that he runs away, fleeing to the frontier to be alone with God on his spiritual journey. Running away introduces Marrant to many new adventures that center around acts of sonic performance. His flight follows a pattern of “marronage” common across slave cultures in the Atlantic world, however he flees as a free person seeking spiritual liberty. As both Marrant and Northup demonstrate, practices of marronage made use of sonic spatial cartographies in which both the plantation landscape and the frontiers surrounding it could be read and navigated using aural perception. Like sailors navigating the ocean
using the night sky’s luminous constellations, individuals passing through early American settlements tuned into the sounds around them to direct their safe passage.

The term “maroon” was used to denote runaway slaves who fled captivity for the wilderness to established a free life. Many colonies, including Suriname and Jamaica, by the eighteenth-century had entire communities of maroons living in the swampy and mountainous regions, respectively, that had been in continuous existence for more than one-hundred years. Mainland North America was also home to maroon societies, often in connection with indigenous communities. For example, the name of the Creek Indian nations known as “Seminole” of Florida and Georgia derives from the Spanish word “cimarron.” The Spanish originated use of the term in reference to a breed of maroon-colored wild pigs that they would leave to populate deserted Caribbean islands. The Seminoles included a large number of marooned slaves, forming one of the United States’ most significant Afro-Indian communities.

Both Marrant and Northup practice marronage by fleeing toward the wilderness, only it is the un-enslaved Marrant who encounters a Cherokee hunter and is later held captive in the man’s village.

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12 Although there were many alliances between runaway slaves and Indigenous communities across the Americas, colonial governments often relied upon Indians to police the wilderness and return runaways. Similarly, established maroon communities also negotiated with governments, promising to return new runaways in exchange for permission to operate freely. For one example of these attempted arrangements in colonial South Carolina, see Peter Wood, *Black Majority* (53). For examples of maroons being tasked with returning runaways, see *Marly; or, A Planter’s Life in Jamaica* (2005; originally published in 1828), a novel written by an anonymous author in much the same style as many colonial travel narratives (77).
After roaming for many days without food or water and forced to sleep in trees for fear of bears and other beasts that he hears during the long and terrifying night, Marrant eventually crosses paths with a Cherokee hunter, who saves his life and then presses him into his service by threatening to return him to his family. Their strange arrangement implies the possibility that the Cherokee hunter may have initially believed that Marrant was a runaway slave and that he held him captive to try to earn money by turning him over to authorities. As they travel together for over a month hunting animals for skins, Marrant picks up the Cherokee language. When they arrive in the village many weeks later, the Cherokee King holds Marrant captive and plans to execute him. Throughout his adventures in the wilderness and in the Cherokee nation, Marrant turns to prayer and hymn singing to soothe his soul and beckon God to save him. Although he gave up life as a professional musician, Marrant employs a commanding presence on a very different stage in these scenes, demonstrating his aural acumen by creating dramatic sonic performances in prayer and song.

I prayed in English a considerable time, and about the middle of my prayer, the Lord impressed a strong desire upon my mind to turn into their language, and pray in their tongue. I did so, and with remarkable liberty, which wonderfully affected the people. One circumstance was very singular, and strikingly displays the power and grace of God. I believe the executioner was savingly converted to God. He rose from his knees, and embraced me round the middle, and was unable to speak for about five minutes; the first words he expressed, when he had utterance, were, "No man shall hurt thee till thou hast been "to the king." (23-24)
Marrant accounts for learning Cherokee during his time spent with the hunter, but his rapid-fire language acquisition—not unlike his quick study on the violin and French horn—evinces an expert ear as well as a preacher’s knack for biblical literary allusion. In the Bible, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends upon his disciples, bestowing the miraculous gift of speaking in numerous languages, which helps them spread the gospel. Marrant’s linguistic achievements here are both miraculous and studied, together preparing him to escape this fiery trial and go on to become a successful minister. Indeed, as Joanna Brooks explains, the text of his Narrative is itself a transcription derived from Marrant’s sermonizing on the subject of his own conversion—a tale that became popular among his congregants. But before Marrant’s trials under captivity were over, he would perform yet more feats of miracles wrought with the power of sound.

After wooing the executioner, Marrant gives praises to his Lord and sings “two verses of Dr. Watts Hymns,” providing readers with the lyrics to a hymn beginning “My God, the spring of all my joys, The life of my delights.” An emerging genre during the era, hymn singing, as Claudia Stokes explains, was connected with populist, ecumenical movements within Anglo-protestant evangelicalism—the very sects with which George

13 See Acts Chapter 2 in any Christian Bible.
Whitfield was strongly associated.\textsuperscript{14} Importantly, hymnody gives poetic license of religious expression to the lay poet rather than the biblical scripture. Thus it was a genre that empowered individuals in a more egalitarian approach to religious organization.

When Marrant ran into the wilderness he took just two things with him – his Bible and Dr. Watts’ hymnal--testifying to the importance with which he regarded them both. As a musician who gave up his instruments upon converting, it is no wonder that he embraced religious music fervently. In some circles, hymn singing also was viewed with suspicion – founder of Methodism John Wesley apparently was concerned that followers would be overcome by the sounds that they sung rather than the meaning of the words, fearing that hymns threatened to become popular entertainment rather than a vehicle of right worship and Christian teaching.\textsuperscript{15} Whereas fiddling was viewed as un-Christian by some, hymn singing was also beyond the border of propriety for others.

These hymn verses transcribed in Marrant’s text would have been experienced as audible to readers familiar with them. Hymn books, like the seminal one by Dr. Watts to which he refers, do not include musical notation. Although there was a common repertoire of tunes that hymn readers were likely to draw from, a performer like Marrant certainly would have added his own embellishments and may well have composed original melodies on the spot. Hymn singing was a fundamentally

\textsuperscript{14} For a discussion of hymnody in American religion see Chapter 2 in Claudia Stokes, \textit{The Altar at Home} (2014). On the importance of Dr. Watt’s hymnal, in particular, see pages 71-73.

\textsuperscript{15} John Wesley as quoted in Stokes (77).
improvisational musical practice in Marrant’s era, something that should be taken into account when we consider the spectacle of Marrant’s miraculous sonic performances under captivity.

Marrant reports that after confronting the King and pleading his case, he was spared and embraced as a favorite member of the King’s court, traveling under his protection and being welcomed into many first nations communities along the Eastern shore. Marrant begins to wear Cherokee clothing and live with various regional bands in the regions. Although his story of escape suggests that he converted the executioner, the King’s daughter, and possibly the King himself, he converts to their ways as well. Along with transatlantic evangelical movements, Marrant’s story gestures towards the broader epic connecting African and indigenous experiences in the Americas to one another. Both groups were violently subjugated during the longue durée of colonization, and both were similarly racialized in the Anglo-European imagination. Western powers lumped Indigenous and African societies into reductive wholes and considered them to be backward civilizations, particularly because of their shared lack of emphasis on written language. Indigenous and African cultures’ communication and writing systems were considered insufficient, primitive, and lacking in depth of knowledge and history. A great deal of work in indigenous studies in both Latin America and North America has identified and surveyed writing and visual systems of communication that were integral to knowledge cultures in the Americas while remaining largely misunderstood.
by and therefore inaccessible to European colonizers.\textsuperscript{16} Although Marrant’s narrative casts him in the role of the colonial missionary to some extent, as he embeds himself within a Cherokee village aiming to convert his hosts, beneath this dominant melody are undertones of a different story. As I noted previously, Marrant’s escape into the wilderness towards an Indian tribe is consistent with patterns of marronage across the Atlantic world. As a young teen, he moves within larger cultural movements including evangelical colonialism as well as the Afro-indigenous alliances contesting such efforts of domination and cultural erasure.

In his final words closing the memoir, Marrant expresses a deeply colonialist appeal for the conversion of “indian tribes” and “black nations” to Christianity, seemingly denouncing his association with the supposedly heathenish civilizations. In fact he published the tract on the eve of his own departure for Nova Scotia, where he was to serve as missionary to black loyalists and presumably renew interactions with first nations communities. The elder Marrant fully embraces his role as colonialist evangelical and yet the content of his memoir records a different tale about complex allegiances among Africans and Indigenous Americans on the colonial frontier.

I have now only to intreat the earnest prayers of all my kind Christian friends, that I may be carried safe there; kept humble, made faithful, and successful; that strangers may hear of and run to Christ; that Indian tribes may stretch out their hands to God; that the black nations may be made white in the blood of

\textsuperscript{16} See Birgit Brander Rasmussen, \textit{Queequeg’s Coffin: Indigenous Literacies and Early American Literature} (2012).
the Lamb; that vast multitudes of hard tongues, and of a strange speech, may learn the language of Canaan, and sing the song of Moses, and of the Lamb; and, anticipating the glorious prospect, may we all with fervent hearts, and willing tongues, sing hallelujah; the kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of our God, and of his Christ. Amen and Amen. (39-40)

The prayerful appeal closing Marrant’s pamphlet gestures to his experiences as a Cherokee captive and convert, as I have suggested, while also reminding readers of his blackness, a fact noted in the pamphlet’s title but not at all discussed in the narrative. The sonic metaphors return as a refrain closing the memoir as prays that the “vast multitudes of hard tongues, and of a strange speech, may learn the language of Canaan and all “sing the song of Moses” and with “willing tongues, sing hallelujah.” Marrant draws from theological and biblical metaphors, but he is also improvising and “signifying,” as Gates would put it, on his own expertise as a musical multi-linguist who enjoyed miraculous escape via sonic performance in the text. As we shall see, Solomon Northup also turns to sound to negotiate complex alliances under captivity.

The Slave Mark It

After boarding a brig headed from Richmond, Virginia to the slave markets of New Orleans, Solomon Northup and his companions in bondage were each handed a spoon and a tin cup for their meals during the long journey. This seaward voyage was Northup’s personal “middle passage,” which carried him far away from his birthplace to the terrors of plantation servitude. Unlike the vast majority of his fellow slaves, he knew how to read and write, so when he received his meager dishes for the journey, he
used a small pocket knife to etch his initials into the surface of the cup, an action that attracted the attention of his new friends. He writes that “the others immediately flocked round me, requesting me to mark theirs in a similar manner. In time, I gratified them all, of which they did not appear to be forgetful” (64). This event probably marked the first occasion upon which many of his companions saw the letters of their names in writing, a novelty that also served to enumerate a rare personal possession. He scored the initials of Robert, Eliza and her two children, Emily and Randall, Mary, David and his wife, Caroline, Lethe, Frederick, Maria, Arthur, and Henry. This relatively minor moment in Northup’s memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), emblematizes the larger significance of early black authorship.

Northup does more than simply write his companions’ names on their dishware; he documents their lives throughout his narrative, pausing at every twist and turn in his personal journey to identify and describe the people with whom he was enslaved. The details he records are accordingly different from the ethnographic descriptions of his predecessors, the travel authors that I discuss in chapters one and two. At the same time, however, he is an outsider, yet one who becomes indoctrinated into the cultural milieu of slave society during his bondage. Northup’s narrative thus provides a unique point of view because of his dual status as insider and outsider, a “double-consciousness” — as Du Bois would have it — that provides insight into multiple overlapping worlds,
including the enmeshed print and aural networks through which he communicates.\textsuperscript{17} When he scores his friends’ names into tin cups, Northup brandishes no quill, ink, slate, or even stick – but rather he wields a knife over the surface of a drinking vessel. This unusual depiction of writing speaks to the unique significance of alphabetic literacy and written documents for bondspeople. Slaves were routinely denied access to literacy at the same time that paper records like bills of sale, estate inventories, and freedom papers held power over their lives. Later, when laboring on a plantation in Louisiana, Northup’s cruel master learned that he could read and write but warned that if he ever caught him with pen and paper he would punish him with one hundred lashes (230). It took Northup nine years to be able to acquire a piece of paper in an attempt to write a letter to his family and friends in New York to alert them of his whereabouts. Once he finally obtained a sheet of paper and a potential ally to mail the letter, he plucked a feather for his pen and boiled white maple bark to make his own ink. Obtaining the privacy to write and then, in the dead of night, the light to be able to compose the missive took a great deal of effort and planning. Ultimately his plot was foiled by the man he had dared to trust with his story, and Northup had to destroy the document before his master could find it (230-235).

Just as the brig’s southward journey marks Northup’s passage into the world of slavery, his actions engraving the tin cups—and the curiosity it was for his

\textsuperscript{17} See W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of our Spiritual Strivings” in \textit{Souls of Black Folk} (1903).
companions—signifies his transition into a world dominated by sonic rather than written forms of communication. In the plantation’s slave quarters, where material possessions of all kinds—from pots and pans, beds, or clothing, and shoes—were scarce, sound was an abundant medium that had to be interpreted carefully.\footnote{For more on sounds and the plantation landscape see Shane White and Graham White, \textit{Sound and Slavery} (2005). For discussion of music on nineteenth-century U.S. plantations, see Roger D. Abrahams, \textit{Singing the Master} (1992), especially Chapter Four. Both of these studies rely heavily on the Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves, generally without interrogating the problematics of these sources. By reproducing dialect heavily within their scholarship, for example, these books reinscribe much of the style of minstrelsy, if not a distinctively white gaze, even as they gather interesting sources and information.} Northup crosses into a community wherein identity, history, and knowledge are not inscribed in documents, but rather in the realm of oral and embodied expression. Northup’s freedom papers are gone – so, too his family connections, personal history, and material goods, but he maintains a vital possession – his musical abilities. In what follows, I do not intend to suggest that slave societies were unique in their reliance on sound, but rather that the particularity of enslaved peoples’ circumstances provided specific motivations and contexts in which a unique tradition of sonic communication flourished.

\textbf{Fiddling with Freedom}

When a slave, Northup sustains his spirit by playing his fiddle, transcending his dire circumstances through aesthetic pleasure.\footnote{Portions of this section have been previously published as “Fiddling with Freedom,” on the blog \textit{Sounding Out!}. To hear the fiddle tune published in Northup’s memoir, listen to the recordings embedded in the essay.} He also performs professionally while enslaved, which affords him the opportunity to travel to nearby plantations and earn
modest sums of money that he uses to purchase basic goods. In this way and others, sonic life organizes his experiences under slavery, both directing his physical movements and providing intellectual and aesthetic escape from his material surroundings. Through his first-person narration, Northup maps out a sonic cartography of the plantation world as he details the mundane but terrorizing sounds of slavery along with the aesthetic pleasures of his fiddling. He catalogues many noises, including the horn that blows to rouse weary slaves to labor before dawn, the barking dogs chasing runaways, and the crack of the lash upon screaming victims. Northup also portrays the joyful clamoring of Christmas dances, where slaves from miles and miles around gathered to dine and frolic. The memoir concludes with a fully rendered musical composition entitled “Roaring River,” that presumably documents the sounds of the region’s popular genres.

Through Northup, we can see how before the eras of sound reproduction and broadcast, the circulation of music across North America was greatly facilitated by the forced migration of enslaved people. At the time of Northup’s capture, large numbers of mid-Atlantic slaves were being sold South to the booming plantations along the frontier of Louisiana and Texas. He brought with him a unique repertoire on his journey, and in the South he learned new music, “Roaring River,” that he later transported back to the New York publishers of his autobiography. Afro-diasporic musicians began influencing Western music centuries before Northup was born, and as he demonstrates, continued
to do so in significant ways in the Antebellum era both in spite of and because of the harsh conditions of their enslavement.

Although many aspects of Northup's biography are unusual, his status as a highly sought-after musician is emblematic of a legion of black fiddlers who dominated music scenes North and South, from ballrooms to barns, beginning as early as the late seventeenth-century, as Dena Epstein explains in her indispensable study.\(^20\) Prior to being enslaved, fiddling, "the passion of [his] youth," provides Northup with supplemental income that helps to sustain his family during periods of insufficient employment during his itinerant careers in agricultural labor and carpentry (20). Musical ability was advantageous for someone in such circumstances, though, as Northup's story shows, it did not protect him from the dangers of being black in the United States. In fact, he is captured and enslaved while touring as a circus musician. Ferried South toward the Louisiana plantations that would become his deplorable home, Northup finds his freedoms violently stripped away. But his talent as a first-rate fiddler travels with him, becoming a defining element of his experience of slavery.

Fiddles were extraordinarily popular instruments during the era. Lightweight, portable, and increasing in mass production, a single fiddle could service a large dance if need be. As such, slaves were encouraged to take up the instrument and musical ability became a valuable skill. Fiddling granted slaves an unusual degree of mobility as well as

\(^{20}\) See the section “Fiddlers” within Chapter 8 of Epstein, *Sinful Tunes.*
opportunities for economic advancement. The fact that numerous runaway slave ads note that the sought-after individuals were fiddlers or had in their possession a violin suggests that the increased mobility and access to income may have facilitated escape for some.21 Just before being sold at market to his first master, Northup and his fellow slaves are exhibited and made to dance in front of prospective buyers. A young man named Bob is playing the fiddle and Northup sizes him up, asking him if he could play the "Virginia Reel," a popular dance (79). The young man replies that he cannot so Northup takes the instrument from him, boldly showing off his more substantial repertoire and ability, much to the delight of the slave merchant. This interaction underscores how important musicianship is to Northup personally as well as how significant it was within the societies through which he was forced to move. Whether in New York State, a New Orleans slave market, or a backwoods swamp plantation, fiddling was a thoroughly popular form of entertainment, widely enjoyed by Americans, slave and free, rich and poor, native and immigrant.22

Northup expresses pride in the fame he earns in the Red River region, noting that he was known as the "Ole Bull of Bayou Boeuf," a reference to Ole Bull, a famous Norwegian violinist, who was one of the first musicians to professionally tour the United States in the 1850s (216). Because of his sought-after talents, his masters hire him

21 See Rath, How Early America Sounded (89-90).
22 For example, see April Masten, “Partners in Time: Dancers, Musicians, and Negro Jigs in Early America” in Common-Place (2013).
out regularly to play at the fashionable balls of nearby plantations as well as the Christmas dances held yearly for slaves. At one ball, he is tipped seventeen dollars, an extraordinary amount that he uses to furnish his cabin with bare necessities (196). In contrast to these relatively pleasant experiences, Northup was also forced to perform during his savage Master Epps' alcoholic binges. Northup explains that these events were held for hours in the middle of the night as Northup and his weary fellow slaves were commanded to dance with Master Epps. The dreaded affairs interrupt precious sleep and humiliate Northup and his companions. Depicted memorably in both the memoir and the 2013 film, the scenario demonstrates the way slavery degrades Northup's musicianship and his peers' dancing, turning these artistic pleasures into yet one more thing that the master purports to possess. For Master Epps, Northup is a mere musical device, a kind of proto-phonograph, full of tunes that can be made to play on command. Northup's "passion" and economic livelihood are thus converted into a mechanized musical labor commodity under Master Epps' control.
Figure 5: Musical notation from Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*

On the plantation the vicious Master Epps commands Northup to perform, but in his autobiography, Northup presents his own recording of musical life in Louisiana. Presumably an original composition or transcription, “Roaring River” marks the last page of the bound narrative. He does not discuss the piece directly in the text of the book, but he does describe the lyrics presented below the notation in a lengthy section mid-book depicting plantation music. He explains that these words were typical accompaniment to a percussion technique called patting:

The patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet, and singing” (219).

According to Northup, the lyrics that accompanied patting were often nonsensical because they were made to conform to the tonal and rhythmic pattern being patted. He offers "Harper's Creek" as suitable for the practice, which seems odd since the lyrics voice a presumably white man's desires to own a piece of land and a slave, although “patting juba” was widely documented as a performance technique unique to African diasporans. The “Harper’s Creek” lyrics likely represent a popular tune of the sort that may have been played in minstrelsy performances, thus demonstrating that even in the rural plantations that minstrelsy claimed to mimic, slaves were borrowing from the genre’s Northern compositions and re-appropriating them. Both Northup’s musical presence on the plantation and the plantation musicians’ diverse repertoire and performance styles shows the surprising degree to which vernacular music circulated.
within North America at the time. The curious lyrics are printed below the notation in such a way that suggests they might be set to the tune above, but they are ill-fitting for “Roaring River,” which is more likely a fiddle tune suitable for playing without vocal accompaniment. The book’s musical closing thus blends various performance modes, from popular vocal number (with possible origins in minstrelsy), to patting, and fiddling.

In addition to serving as auditory artifact, the sheet music’s presence in the narrative documents the way Northup’s musicality was commodified within the aesthetic economy of slavery during and after his captivity. After regaining freedom, his talents are presented for sale in the book presumably to appeal to the sort of audiences who would also have coveted the sheet music of minstrelsy, which caricatured and lampooned black performances. Popular appetites for representations of plantation culture left an imprint on Northup’s autobiography as well as other abolitionist publications. The music also serves to cement Northup’s reputation as a commanding performer and composer. In all respects, music-making—both as labor and leisure—profoundly influenced his experiences as a slave. His narrative illuminates the far-reaching impact that he and other black musicians had on their communities as well as nineteenth-century music more broadly.
Solomon Northup’s Acoustic Ecology

In *Twelve Years a Slave* Northup tunes his well-trained ears to far more than music as he demonstrates that sounds offer a means of spatial orientation for people in unfamiliar landscapes. During one revealing episode he interprets ambient noises in order to escape a brutal master who has threatened to kill him. Mr. Tibeats had long tormented Northup and in a dramatic encounter, attempts to strike him with a hatchet. Northup defends himself by beating Tibeats senseless and, fearing for the brutal punishment that was surely to come his way because of his actions, he runs into the nearby wilderness – a swamp full of terrors of its own where he is pursued by dogs bred and trained especially for the purpose of hunting runaways. Northup explains to readers that well before his own marronage he would listen to dogs howling after other runaways in the swamps adjacent to the plantation. He and his fellow slaves would follow the chase with their ears, speculating about when the dogs would reach their target, “the same as a New-York hunter stops to listen to the hounds coursing along the hillsides, and suggests to his companion that the fox will be taken at such a place” (137). By referring to hunting practices in the Northeast Northup intends to explain an unfamiliar scene to his readers, but he also points out how ingrained it is within many cultural contexts to use one’s ears in the traversing of the countryside. Bugles and drums were long associated with warfare for similar reasons, because they alerted people across great distances of the position of roving militia. The use of instruments and
howling dogs to track and pursue prey in warfare, sport, and law enforcement are all related performance techniques that employ sound outside the conventionally understood realms of musical aesthetics and speech-acts.

Northup himself uses paralingual sounds to multiple effect within this particular scene: he provides sonic signposts that create narrative structure, he stimulates his readers to imagine the spatial relationships within the swamp, and he reads the sounds he hears like a map navigating him towards safety. He writes that “every few moments I could hear the yelping of the dogs. They were gaining upon me” and “Presently I reached a thick palmetto bottom. As I fled through them they made a loud rustling noise, not loud enough, however, to drown the voices of the dogs” (137-138). Palmettos are short palms with wide and thick faces that have sharp pointy edges. Racing through them would have torn at Northup’s clothing, and the noise certainly would have been loud and jarring just as he describes. Eventually the dogs reach the stand of plants, and he hears “them crashing and plunging through the palmettoes, their loud, eager yells making the whole swamp clamorous with the sound” (138). The dogs’ “savage intonations” spur him towards a large bayou that he aims to cross so that the animals will lose track of his scent. Without the dogs howling, he may not have been able to calibrate how to maneuver – as horrifying as their constant barking must have been they provided him with crucial information about how best to manage his escape. He explains the slaves on the Louisiana plantations were expressly prevented from learning
to swim so that they could not successfully cross the nearby waters, but Northup grew up learning to swim and was able to submerge himself in the bayou to escape the dogs. Just as John Marrant interprets the audible world of Charleston in key biographical moments, Northup studies the soundscape around him to gain vital information that directs his movements.

Having escaped the dogs, Northup encounters new dangers on the other side of the bayou that compel him to announce his presence using sound and movement so as to startle the dangerous creatures in his path. He must tread forward, but “Every log and bog—every trunk of a fallen tree, over which I was compelled to step or climb, was alive with [snakes]” (139). Here the roles reverse, and Northup uses the sounds of his steps and a plunging stick to frighten the alligators and water moccasins away explaining that “The noise I made usually startled them” (139). As night falls on Northup in the swamp he paints a terrifying but beautiful portrait of the wet wilderness as moonlight pours through the Spanish moss hanging from the trees. In a powerfully evocative scene Northup’s acoustic encounter with the swamp reaches its “clamourous” climax as he startles a huge flock of birds and reflects on his human presence in the depths of the forest where other animals create incredible noise.

After midnight, however, I came to a halt. Imagination cannot picture the dreariness of the scene. The swamp was resonant with the quacking of innumerable ducks! Since the foundation of the earth, in all probability, a human footstep had never before so far penetrated the recesses of the swamp. It was not silent now—silent to a degree that rendered it oppressive.—as it was when the sun was shining in the heavens. My midnight intrusion had
awakened the feathered tribes, which seemed to throng the morass in hundreds of thousands, and their garrulous throats poured forth such multitudinous sounds—there was such a fluttering of wings—such sullen plunges in the water all around me—that I was affrighted and appalled. All the fowls of the air, and all the creeping things of the earth appeared to have assembled together in that particular place, for the purpose of filling it with clamor and confusion. Not by human dwellings—not in crowded cities alone, are the sights and sounds of life. The wildest places of the earth are full of them. Even in the heart of that dismal swamp, God had provided a refuge and a dwelling place for millions of living things. (141-142)

In the passage Northup anticipates the work of acoustic ecologists who over a century later would theorize the complex sonic relationships that ecologically sustain the natural environment and the way that human civilization interacts with and threatens those relationships through noise pollution and the destruction of habitats.24

Northup experiences the swamp as a refugee and foreigner, displaced from his native home in New York to the hostile slave society of the Southern plantation. He dwells in an environment that is disorienting in many ways: psychologically and physically he endures profound suffering because of the violence and debasement of slavery as well as the brutal whippings and exhausting labors that when combined with lack of food, sleep, and other necessities degrades his physical and mental condition. Yet he is also displaced in an unfamiliar natural landscape—the tropic zone, where even in escape he faces strange horrors. When the birds terrify him with their “garrulous throats pouring

forth” he confronts the vastness of his dislocation. He steps into the midnight swamp and wakes the birds, alarming them from slumber. In return their sirens startle him and the multi-specie encounter reveals the mutual foreignness of Northup and the birds. He recounts this experience amidst the backdrop of the plantocracy where pseudo-scientific arguments stratifying humans into species served to prop up a vicious and inhumane experiment. Northup’s reflections draw from the horrors of his larger predicament to note that human civilizations, in cities and in plantations, are hardly the only thing on the Earth to make noise and—he seems to say—to have power and meaning. The runaway slave also has the power to provoke and terrorize scores of the “feathered tribes” in the swamp, just as the baying hounds, cotton mouths, alligators, and slave masters threaten him.

Northup’s acoustic ecology is a relentlessly survivalist world, but it is also an oddly egalitarian sphere where the stratifications of human civilization slip away and the escaped slave is, if only for a time, another creature in the woods. Indeed Northup reports that

...notwithstanding the certainty of being captured, the woods and swamps are, nevertheless, continually filled with runaways. Many of them, when sick, or so worn out as to be unable to perform their tasks, escape into the swamps, willing to suffer the punishment inflicted for such offences, in order to obtain a day or two of rest. (241)

The hostile swamp provides a sabbatical for slaves and because of the many bands of successful escapees, or maroons living there, it becomes a unique territory, as Monique
Allewaert explains in her theorization of the “swamp sublime.” Allewaert shows how through the practice of marronage escaped slaves collaborated with ecological forces to assert agency in the plantation zone.25 The rubric of sound offers an additional frame through which to understand the way enslaved people like Northup navigated the border between the plantation and the swamp. For instance, Northup describes one runaway, Celeste, who successfully stole away to the swamp for an entire summer before ultimately becoming too afraid of the wild animals she heard howling at night (160-161). Eventually she feared being torn to death by the beasts more than the whip of her Master. Northup comes to know her when she approaches his cabin late one night after hearing him “play[] a low air on my violin.” They become friends, and he helps sustain her escape by keeping her supplied with food. Like Marrant and Northup, Celeste uses her ears to decipher her environment and facilitate new encounters, interpreting his violin playing as a potential opportunity for safe and propitious interaction. Significantly, it is the siren of the violin that calls her out of the swamp to Northup’s hut, and it is also the fearsome sounds of wild animals that ultimately drive her from it.

Tuning into one’s environment was of chief importance for slaves denied access to other forms of communication. For example, Northup writes that when he was

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handed the whip and tasked with overseeing his fellow slaves and his master would leave the fields, they would whisper to one another so that when the master turned his head, Northup would let his whip fly, but without actually striking his friends (226). They would yelp and wail as if they had been hit to fool Master Epps into believing that they were being duly driven to task. During his marronage, Northup eventually finds his way out of the swamp to safety by hearing the crowing of a cock—although he is not sure if it is real—that he follows towards civilization. Eventually he makes his way to his former Master Ford’s plantation, where he anticipates a safe and welcome greeting. Knowing that Tibeats has treated him badly, the comparatively gentle Fords provides Northup with a nourishing meal, but Northup writes that “neither food nor rest afforded half the pleasure as did the blessed voices speaking kindness and consolation. It was the oil and the wine which the Good Samaritan in the ‘Great Pine Woods’ was ready to pour into the wounded spirit of the slave, who came to him, stripped of his raiment and half-dead” (144-145). Like Marrant, Northup draws liberally from biblical as well as sonic metaphors in this passage to dramatize his shifting emotions as he crosses the threshold back into the bosom of the plantation. Once at rest in the temporarily safe environment of his former master’s dwelling, he falls asleep, where he dreams of sweet sounds: the voices of his children. Upon waking from the happy slumber his spirits fall as he realizes that for all he knows his children may have died in his absence. The “blessed voices” of the Fords and his children mark Northup’s re-
entrance to civilization but they also echo in his psyche, reminding him of his profound displacement. Re-affixed in the regulated world of slavery, he is still in his own personal wilderness, far from his home and the sounds he once knew and loved, and even those everyday ambient noises he likely ignored in favor of “silence” from time to time.

“Going to the Great House Farm” & Sounds of Slavery

Scholars have long been fascinated by Frederick Douglass’ discourse on music and slavery in his first autobiography. Marrant and Northup’s writing help us to better understand Douglass’ iconic representation of sonic performance and plantation life by illuminating the way that African diasporans interpreted acoustic environments and created opportunities for greater mobility through musical performance. I understand the “Great House Farm” episode in Douglass’ narrative as a riff on the broader themes of this chapter. Written in the oft-cited second chapter of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), Douglass explains a musical practice that took place on the vast Lloyd plantation on which he spent part of his youth.26 The Lloyd plantation had one central homestead as well as a handful of neighboring farms. As Douglass explains, it was a privilege and a luxury of sorts to be selected to travel from one of the neighboring outposts to the “Great House Farm” to collect the monthly allowances. The individuals

26 My citations are from the 1845 edition, as presented in the digital archive of North American Slave Narratives at Documenting the American South from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available at this url: http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html. I also cite the archive’s electronic edition of Solomon Northup’s 1853 narrative, available here: http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html
chosen for the errand accompanied their movement through the forests forming the perimeter between farms. To Douglass’ ears, their performances sound the particular horrors of enslavement.

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound, --and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:--

“I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!”

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of these song would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. (13-14)

Douglass’ indications that the singing travelers were “peculiarly enthusiastic” is similar to Stedman’s description of Surinamese boat rowers as “peculiarly animating.” Both Stedman and Douglass describe men who take pleasure in pairing musical improvisation with the performance of labor under captivity. As Northup’s memoir underscores, mobility was a precious luxury for enslaved workers, and a day’s walk
beyond the borders of one’s confinement would have afforded a relative sensation of liberty along with the potential to greet old friends and family and gather news from dispersed communities. For instance, Douglass notes that he only saw his mother four times in his life because she had been hired out to a distant plantation and had to travel twelve miles on foot each way in the dead of night to be afforded the opportunity to see her child. As both Marrant and Northup demonstrate, musical performance also was associated with mobility because professional performers were permitted to travel from gig to gig, either with permission from their owner, or as a freed black person with an identifiable, and therefore less threatening purpose, as in the case of Marrant.

The singing men whom Douglass describes are not setting out for a musical performance; they have transformed their errand into a musical genre of its own. They “compose and sing” while they walk, creating improvisations—“the thought that came up came out”—that they interweave with the chorus “I am going away to the Great House Farm! O, yea! O, yea! O!” Douglass’ exclamation points help to establish a particular rhythm and tonal shape for the lyrics. Thus he records music in a descriptive form that has a similar effect to the notation I discussed in chapter one. Douglass’ technique is to use punctuation and spacing to organize the words in such a way that they can be imaginatively heard by readers. Importantly, his description places the reader in a position of being able to listen from within the landscape as the performers
pass through the interstitial wilderness between plantation nodes. In a later passage in which he argues for the fundamental debasement of the institution of slavery he writes,

If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because “there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.” (14)

Douglass’ instructions articulate an idealized listening practice in which a doubtful anti-slavery skeptic must travel to a specific location and sit silently, which would require that individual’s stasis, so as not to produce competing sound, and particular attention to the singers’ voices— for as I explained in the introduction, silence is a matter of attention, rather than a natural phenomenon that exists outright. Douglass teaches his readers how to listen, and by listening, how to understand the world of slavery and the cultures that were produced within it and despite it, including numerous radically innovative modes of musical expression. He offers very specific instructions about where a potential listener ought to go to hear the “soul-killing effects” of slavery. By traveling deep into the piney woods and sitting still, a witness would—he seems to say—enter a physical and social environment in which sound maps out an emotional cartography that is deeply connected to the physical space. As I show in this chapter, in the world of these memoirs, the boundaries between wilderness, frontier, plantation, city, ship, and Indian village are delineated in sound, not with ink.
In the eras before noise pollution from cars, air conditioners, and other modern machines made it difficult for sounds to travel easily in the open air, yodels, hollers, and other vocalizations were important means of communicating across distances. When the men selected to travel to the Great House Farm sang, their singing advertised their activities, broadcasting their movement in such a way as to communicate to their fellow bondspeople, announcing their departure from one gate and arrival to another. Although they do not escape entirely from slavery, the performers compose fugitive songs that travel by uncontainable, atmospheric means. Sonic expression under slavery may thus be understood as a musical marronage that topples the affective order, permitting the release of what Douglass identifies as both the “highest joys and the deepest sadness.”

In his seminal writing on music and slavery, Douglass confesses that when he was a slave, he did not fully understand the “rude and apparently incoherent songs” and that it was only later that he came to appreciate the deep sorrows that motivated practices like the “Great House Farm” singing. He makes this point explicitly to counter the notion popular in his day that because slaves sang and participated in a thriving musical culture, then they must be happy. This was, of course, one of the many insidious repercussions of blackface minstrelsy, which popularized representations of slaves as happy-go-lucky songsters. Along with his characterization of musical life, Douglass describes many scenes of violence within his narrative. One such passage describing the
vicious flogging of his Aunt Hester has generated conversations among scholars about the relationship between the violence of slavery and sonic performance. Douglass explains that when he was a young child he often heard his master, Captain Anthony, whip his Aunt “to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush” (7). He recounts one particular beating that occurred when his Aunt was punished for spending the evening with a male slave, Ned (6-8). (Douglass alludes to the fact that the master sexually abused Hester and that the event was inspired by jealousy.) The event marked the first occasion during which a young Douglass witnessed the horrific violence of slavery. He previously lived at the outskirts of the plantation, where he and the other enslaved children were raised by his grandmother. During the beating, he flees in terror to a nearby closet, where he sits in silent fear for his life. There, from his listening posture in the shelter, he overhears the awful event. Fred Moten interprets Douglass’ experience as a primal event in which black radicalism and black musical aesthetics are born. Specifically, he identifies in Aunt Hester’s vocalizations a sonic quality central to the wailing, mournful tones of improvisational jazz.\textsuperscript{27} Many other traditions among the African diaspora include similar characteristic utterances that communicate physical suffering and exertion as well as embodied knowledge. Examples include the deep

\textsuperscript{27} Moten does not explicitly chart the passage of the scream across other musical genres, but his theoretical incantations revise Saidiya Hartman’s earlier work on “scenes of subjection” within the literature of slavery. See Moten, “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream” in \textit{In the Break} (2003).
“hahs!” and rhythmic guttural expressions of African American worksongs, the exclamatory and prayerful “Amens” and “hallelujah’s” of congregants in the black church, and the melismatic ornamentation of “soul” singing. This chapter locates within the expressive sounds of African diasporic culture a specific orientation to the worlds in which enslaved and free people lived and moved. Such performances bridge the seeming distinction between music and sound, two categories that I have heretofore intentionally not delineated. For music is always already sound, and sound—as the articulations of African diasporic sonic genealogies shows—is always ready to be made music.

Douglass writes about the songs of slavery because they haunt him, reminding him constantly of the inhumanity of the institution. The songs, in other words, tell a story, they have a politics, and they perform a history by activating his memory with his experiences as a child. In this way, Douglass identifies a form of authorship in sound that will also be central to the enslaved woman, Tina, whose performance I explore in the final chapter. Importantly, Douglass asserts that those who doubt the “soul-killing effects of slavery” or want to be deeper acquainted with it should go sit in the woods and “in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul.” This is, ultimately, what this dissertation also asks its readers to do— to listen carefully to the sonic expression of enslaved and free African diasporans who produced worlds of thought in sound as they negotiated life in the long eighteenth-century Americas. These
sounds are deeply connected to slavery’s horrors, as Douglass urges; and as Moten explores, they helped seed the distinctive quality of manifold performances, including, perhaps the “low sounds” of Northup’s violin and John Marrant’s pleading hymns and Cherokee prayers, which I presently will discuss. The Great House Farm singers, John Marrant, and Solomon Northup each practice a “musical marronage” that carries them across great distances, both psychological and physical. In the momentary pleasures of patting juba, preaching from the pulpit, or simply ambling from one location to another, performers wield the raw material of space, time, and one’s own living body to create sounds that escape the mortal corpus to travel over the fences cordonning the spaces of agricultural capitalism, across time to our very ears. The literary texts of Marrant, Northup, and Douglass each records the sounds of a particular past; with the aesthetic liberties afforded the written word, they transpose the musical and the mundane, allowing us to hear whispers of sonic expression that pulsed within the confines of a harrowing plantation system and at the edges of the colonial regime.

Northup and Marrant interpreted the sounds in their environment to survive circumstances that were threatening both physically and psychologically. The authors also wielded sound through musical practice, oral expression, and even in writing. Their performances buoyed their spirits and created opportunities for mobility across dangerous terrain. Together with Douglass, these memoirs teach us how to conceptualize the theories of sonic life produced within the African diaspora. In their
vivid narratives, the voice, the pen, the pocket knife, the fiddle bow, and the spirit-filled tongue are all instruments of knowledge that map out worlds of information about the soundscapes of North America during the era of slavery. The next chapter shifts to the spaces of domestic life where some female musicians recorded their autobiographies in song.
Chapter Four

Tina Speaks: Women’s History in Song

The song at the center of this chapter has traveled through the voices of multiple generations, onto the pages of bound sheet music, through the electrical signals of recording devices, across radio waves and internet cables, from the coast of Africa, to North America, and back again. This journey represents an alternative stream of historical knowledge produced in sonic performances, part of what Diana Taylor has described as a vast “repertoire” of embodied memory.¹ This chapter examines one such performance by an enslaved musician named Tina, whose song has been sung and studied for nearly two-hundred years. In what follows, I provide a written account of her story while interrogating the competing and intersecting legacies in which it participates.

Throughout this dissertation, I have considered the cultural machinery that makes historical knowledge possible. In examining documents, I have applied literary-critical methods to expose the multiple layers of information produced in a given text. Likewise I have evaluated the listening practices that shaped the way individual authors recorded sound in their writing. In telling Tina’s story I bring these critical tools to a different set of sources. Much of the information about her life and her song has been preserved in oral history and audio recordings. We might generally expect to find history in a book on a shelf, but what if we hear it in a song? And what if we don’t

understand what the words of the song mean? Is it still “history?” In this chapter I argue that—yes—Tina’s song exemplifies a form of authorship, into which thousands—maybe millions—of African diasporans recorded their existence and their stories.

Tina’s singular story is connected to much broader questions about how to recover the history of enslaved people, and particularly women, whose stories can be especially difficult to access in traditional sources. Saidiya Hartman’s work has shown that to engage with the archive of slavery, one must respect its limits and silences while also being willing to exercise what she calls “critical fabulation,” a method of narrating with and also against the archive by using imaginative and interpretive tools to fill in frustrating gaps and shift the perspective from the creator of archival documents to the women whose lives are unsatisfactorily recorded therein. She explains that it is important, however, not to fully rectify the silences of the archival document, because these absences are an important part of the story: “Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility…” (12). In the spirit of critical fabulation, this chapter attempts to construct an historical narrative, but it also sheds light on the networks of power that make it impossible to adequately narrate Tina’s story. As you will see, many aspects of her life and her musical performances remain unintelligible, because of the written archive’s embeddedness in slavery’s systemic oppression, and also because of

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Tina’s own refusal to be fully known. Hartman’s work encourages me to consider Tina within in a genealogy of “black noise” that is full of sonic creations that can neither be ignored nor fully understood. The research journey that I document here is a mournful, unpredictable, terribly beautiful concert that occasions the opportunity to listen to one woman’s life -- the song she chose to sing, and the words she refused to speak.

Through my efforts to listen to Tina’s song, I came to sing and share the music with others and I pressed my ear against the telephone. I communicated with a South African archive over email, I threaded microfilm into a machine, and I listened to a vinyl record through the interface of a computer. These communication technologies depend upon electricity, voices, paper, tape, and breath to read and hear and perceive the resonances of a story long past. Such material conditions testify to the fact that sound is not entirely ephemeral; it is preserved in ways that defy linear textuality and resist objectification. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges of telling this performer’s story has been to write it down in a way that does justice to the capaciousness of her historiographic performance. For, rather than what I write here, her history dwells in the sounds of her signature composition. By listening to the sounds’ reverberation across time and interpreting the way others have reconstituted them, we can begin to grasp the weight of her artistry.³ This chapter follows the steps I have taken to explore Tina’s song. At each juncture in the research process, I consider Tina’s song within broader contexts having to do with American popular music, represenations of enslaved women in the

³ I am influenced here by Diana Taylor’s theorization of the repertoire as a form of history performed in living performance traditions.
antebellum United States, music histories of the domestic sphere, questions of African roots, and twentieth century folkloric and ethnomusicological approaches in the United States and South Africa.

**A Curious Song**

I first encountered Tina’s music in a copy of Carl Sandburg’s *The American Songbag* (1927), a mammoth collection of folk songs compiled by the poet and orator. Sandburg’s anthology is a relic of his moment, a time when folklorists, academics, and populists like himself turned to the cultural productions of the working class in order to conjure an American past.¹ Inside the book, Sandburg presents many different genres of music, including cowboy songs, work songs from railroads and logging camps, Mexican-American melodies, and a sizeable number of pieces deriving from the African American experience. Sandburg collected some of the songs himself during his cross-country speaking tours, and other pieces were given to him by friends and colleagues.⁵ What I eventually learned to be Tina’s song is buried amidst hundreds of melodies arranged for voice and piano, and it is disguised under the disparaging title, “Jungle Mammy Song.”

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¹ Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927), 455. The pieces are primarily arranged for voice and piano, though many of the tunes could be played on a variety of instruments.

When my eyes first lighted on “Jungle Mammy Song” in the American Songbag, the title led me to assume that it would be a minstrelsy tune, perhaps a popular ditty performed by a character lampooning enslaved domestic servants. Looking more closely at the description and lyrics, however, a richer history became apparent. Sandburg draws upon the trope of the “mammy” and invokes the “jungle” as a characterization of black Africanness, but he also alludes to the experiences of a woman, a care-taker of children who sang this song in an unfamiliar language.

![Jungle Mammy Song](image)

*Figure 6: “Jungle Mammy Song” from The American Songbag*

I then noticed that this piece was possibly a rare artifact of music by an enslaved woman who had survived the Middle Passage, or who lived in a slave society maintaining strong African influences. This piece appeared not to be the creation of a minstrelsy
performer at all. I began to wonder about the original singer’s story and why the
Johnson family sang her song “year on year,” and how Sandburg may have learned it.
His explanation reads:

Margaret Johnson of Augusta, Georgia, heard her mother sing this, year on year, as the mother had learned it from singing, year on year, of a negro woman who comforted children with it. The source of its language may be French, Creole, Cherokee, or mixed. The syllables are easy for singing; so is the tune. It may be, as provisionally titled, a Jungle Mammy Song, in the sense that all mothers are primitive and earthly even though civilized and celestial. (455)

The final line of Sandburg’s headnote seems to reveal his own discomfort with the racial stereotypes he sets up in the title and description. He closes with a romantic and universalizing claim that “all mothers”—even those in the jungle, he seems to indicate—“are civilized and celestial.” His equivocating final lines performs an example of the way many white culture-bearers of his era scripted early African diasporic musical artifacts into near non-existence, even as they lauded them and reproduced them commercially. Rather than trumpeting this tune as an original, unique example of historical African American music, his framing effectively obscures the music’s historical context. At the same time, Sandburg appears to have been genuinely interested in preserving African American music. His dissonant portrayal is key to understanding a much larger story about how African-diasporic contributions to American popular music became obscured even as they were celebrated.

When blackface minstrelsy became popular in the antebellum era, white Americans were drawn into a curious fascination with representations of black expressive culture. Minstrelsy’s capitalist methods of appropriation and
commercialization lasted long after the heyday of the genre, continuing to shape the global music industry. The story of blackface minstrelsy and its offspring, such as “coon songs” and later the “race records” of the early twentieth century are fundamental to the way early black music has largely been dismissed as unrecoverable. This is because the records that do survive – sheet music, illustrations and early photographs of blackface performers, and even early anthologies of African American music like Slave Songs of the United States (1867)—all rendered African diasporic performances through the perceptual frame of white authors. It continues to be difficult to recover the performances and perspectives of African Americans who were both influencing and being influenced by the commercial engine of minstrelsy. At the beginning of my research into early Afro-Atlantic music, I considered routing my study the archive of minstrelsy. I hoped to be able to unearth from within the print ephemera and performances that survive in sheet music, illustrations, and more a deeper understanding of the black music that inspired the genre’s popularity. At the Newberry Library in Chicago, I poured over boxes of minstrelsy music from the J.F. Driscoll Collection of Historical American Sheet Music. What I surveyed reinforced the perceptions of many previous scholars – that these documents, encoded with racist imagery and fabricated “negro dialect” had far more to say about the tastes of white

7 For example, Ronald Radano dismisses the accuracy of Slave Songs for the most part because of the heavy hand of the books white editors in “Denoting Difference” and again in Lying up a Nation (2003).
Americans than the performances within Black communities during the era. These documents are decidedly commercial objects, meant to be bought and sold and sit neatly on a parlor piano, not the artifacts of musical expression networked between performers collaborating in spaces like the fish market scholar W.T. Lhamon explores, or the improvisational plantation settings that Douglass describes so memorably, as discussed in the previous chapter. I ultimately abandoned the idea of turning to the archive of minstrelsy as a primary way to engage with performances of African diasporans in the nineteenth century, although I remain, like others, certain that much of the music does bear the mark of influences by black performers, who were instrumental figures in diverse performance traditions during the era. For instance, the work of Sacks and Sacks demonstrates the influence of black string band musicians, the Snowden family, on Dan Emmett, the preeminent minstrelsy performer and composer and author of “Dixie.” Their study, and the work of artists like the Carolina Chocolate Drops, have inspired renewed interest in black artists from the nineteenth-century connected to minstrelsy and other popular genres. Although it is important always to acknowledge the racializing work of minstrelsy and the injustices that permeate the history of the popular music industry, these facts should not obscure the prolific musical innovation by African

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9 I am referring to the practice of “dancing for eels” at the Catharine Fish Market in New York City in the early nineteenth century, which was documented in several paintings and discussed at length in W.T. Lhamon. In Douglass, see Chapter II.
American artists during the era. Their performances may remain veiled in the historical record, but they can be heard in countless living songs, as I do explore in this chapter.

When song collectors and populists like Sandburg turned to African American folk culture, their investments were slightly different from minstrel composers, but they were still influenced by the stereotypes and forms of mimicry popularized by the performance genre and its long afterlife. Sandburg’s *Songbag* bridged the scholarly and popular approaches to folk music of his day, as was typical of his larger oeuvre, including, for example his immensely popular biography of Abraham Lincoln.\(^\text{11}\) When he created *The American Songbag* he had been traveling the country speaking and delivering lectures, collecting songs along the way. The anthology of music includes pieces by other important collectors of Americana, such as John Lomax, whose son Alan would step into the family tradition and contribute to one of the largest and most influential archives of vernacular North American music. Several of the pieces in the collection were arranged by Ruth Crawford Seeger, an experimental composer and academic folklorist whose family had a long-lasting impact on American music inside the academy and out. The short song at the center of my study belongs to an expansive catalog of music that made these academics and performers famous, while artists like the “jungle mammy”—as she was characterized by Sandburg—became merely minor characters in the dominant story of genres they helped to create.

The Songbag features many songs with lyrics in “negro dialect” that play to the forms lampooning black culture during his era, but on the whole the volume treats African American music with seriousness and praise. By anthologizing the songs he argued for the importance of American vernacular musical; the heft and scale of the object speaks to the seriousness with which he treated the multi-ethnic musical forms he gathered. It is telling, however, that to give weight to the music was to translate it into notation, to take it out of the logging camps and the field and place it onto the page, where it might sit on a middle class parlor’s piano, and be plucked out by performers unfamiliar with the performance styles and cultural contexts.

Sandburg was one of many folklorists who sought to preserve African American music as fears that the Great Migration was dispersing cultural traditions from the plantation south. The Works Progress Administration, for example, conducted oral histories of formerly enslaved people that document important information about the history of slavery, but also inflect racializing tropes through the use of dialect and other mediating frames.\(^\text{12}\) Although the primary aim of this chapter is to tell the story of Tina’s song, first the dominant history that obscured her performance must be unwritten. As the print artifact “Jungle Mammy Song” documents, blackface minstrelsy and the forms of cultural appropriation it gave birth to remain fundamental to the story of early

African diasporic music, precisely because those forces helped to make the legacy of performers like Tina invisible.

In order to hear the music Sandburg recorded, one must attempt to peel away his packaging and question the spare details he offers about a “negro woman” who “comforted children” with the song. Who was she and why did she sing the music? What did it sound like in her voice, and why did it make such an impression on those who heard it? Very few pieces of music composed and performed by enslaved women survive in printed form, and those that do, such as this one, are presented amid layers of mediations by the transcribers and collectors and book publishers who print such works. The repertoire composed by women in the domestic sphere while they performed the gendered labor of childcare, washing, cooking, cleaning, and sewing does not conform neatly to the page, nor have these types of performances historically been taken seriously within music history. Tina’s song signifies broader practices and entire worlds of sound created within the walls of domestic spaces and in side yards by women whose voices rang in concert with the clucking of chickens, the crying of babies, the scrape of a washboard, and the boiling pot. None of those sounds are recorded in Sandburg’s notation; so we must remind ourselves to imagine them, and what they contributed to the performance practice.

In the previous chapter I discussed the public, professional performances of enslaved and free men whose music was documented more abundantly than their female contemporaries. The gender inequalities between female and male musicians traversed racial categories during the era, and were particularly powerful in preventing
black female musicians from leaving a significant mark on the written musical archives of the era.\textsuperscript{13} Given this ostensible absence, the two stanzas in the \textit{Songbag} demanded my attention as I sought to understand a complicated source that spoke of a much larger history. Sandburg explains that a woman named Margaret Johnson learned this song from her mother, who had learned it from a “negro woman” who used it to soothe children, presumably those she was charged to care for as a domestic laborer. Here enters the detail lending itself to association with the “mammy” archetype. The fact that the singer’s status as slave or free was not denoted speaks to the way the conditions and power structures inherent to enslavement carried themselves forth in the domestic intimacies between black female workers and white families well into the Jim Crow era and beyond, a point to which I shall return shortly.

\textbf{Performance as Research Method}

Whereas the title and description routs the song through Sandburg’s editorialization, the notation provides an opportunity to diverge from his interpretation. The notation, of course, is also mediated, but by approaching the music interpretively through performance, I sought to de-center the authority of the text and privilege the sonic meanings conveyed in the song’s melody and lyrics. I learned to sing the music, sounding out the unfamiliar words as best I could. Singing the music gave me an opportunity to analyze the information in the notation, such as the piece’s rhythm and

tonal structure. Because the notes are comfortably placed within my vocal range, I found the piece to be relaxing to sing. I brought warmth to my vocal tone to reflect the song’s presumed function as “comforter.” The first two syllables, “Ah yah” feel quite like sighing to sing, but at “kee lay zee day” the melody clicks forward, with the feel of skipping feet. Gentle, but bouncy -- it is a catchy tune, as recorded by Sandburg. I’ve heard it said that lullabies are more useful for comforting those who sing them than for actually getting children to sleep, and this song is indeed pleasant to sing. As I studied the piece musically, I wondered if it might have been an original composition or a cherished anthem from the singer’s own childhood -- perhaps something she had learned it from an elder who had survived the Middle Passage. With the high rate of childhood mortality in enslaved communities, whoever sang the music likely would have known many children who died, including possibly her own. Perhaps she sang it to remember a lost child. Or, maybe she sang the song simply to distract fussy children in her charge. I speculated about the wide ranging significance that a single artifact such as this could entail: it might have been performed in mockery, to express anger, or issue tones of love, to relieve boredom through distraction, or it might simply have been sung out of well-worn habit.

As I wondered about the women who popularized the music among the Johnson family, I became frustrated by the lack of information about her, and the way that Sandburg’s framing disparaged her, and I was also frustrated by the limits of my own performance. For instance, I could hear in my own voice a frame of its own – the way that my training in classical music influenced my vocal style. I find it tremendously
difficult to learn music from notation without importing the generic conventions of classical singing. I sought to get outside of that performance vernacular and imagine other possible interpretations, inflected with different styles. As I repeatedly question the way that other interpreters transformed of early African diasporic music history, I must recognize the filters that I myself create. In response to these concerns, I shifted my research away from a method of individual textual interpretation towards a practice of listening.

In response to these frustrations with the limits of my own understanding, I decided to share the piece with the young women in a singing class I taught at a local youth arts organization. It seemed to me that if the music had not been born on the page, that it should not stay there. I explained to my students that the song was apparently a lullaby and that it was originally sung by an African American woman in Georgia, probably during the era of slavery, and it had been passed from woman to child. Though some of the students read a little music, in the class they were learning primarily by ear. I handed out copies of the lyrics, but I removed Sandburg’s description. I didn’t want the students’ interpretations to be tainted by his characterization of the music. Before learning the melody, we discussed the unusual lyrics and what the words might mean. The girls brought a light-hearted energy to these heavy research questions. Several are native Spanish speakers, and they giggled at one of the syllable combinations that sounds like a curse word in that language. They were fixated on ”bam, boo” possibly meaning something about bamboo trees. Though we had no translation, thinking through the possibilities, however far afield, allowed us to
imagine scenarios that would help us musically express the song. My students ended up singing the piece very similarly to the way I had, because they learned it from me, but they also added their own touches. Sharing the song with other musicians made it possible for me to reflect on the way that musical knowledge travels aurally. For example, the singers picked up on my tempo and the basic way that I phrased the melody, demonstrating further the specificity and efficacy with which sounds are communicated across time and space within vernacular traditions. Yet, the singers also adapted my instructions to their own voices, leaving a distinctive mark on the music and in so doing mediating the song in a unique way. They interpreted the piece as a collective of multiple voices, each striving to reproduce a learned tune within the capabilities of a distinctive vocal instrument as they bounced their musical ideas off of one another wordlessly while we worked through the tune as a group.

During the class, my research questions fell into the background of my mind as I concentrated on teaching singing skills to my students. I strove to get each of the singers to arrive at the “correct” pitches and sing the song independently. In service of these goals, I recorded their singing so that they could hear what they sounded like and learn from their mistakes. Later, when I listened to the recordings, however, I heard the students’ “errors” quite differently, as novel interpretations demonstrating the process of oral circulation in action – both its limits and advantages. For instance, the young singers are much more playful with the notes than I had been, and because the notation in Sandburg’s collection is just one person’s very subjective rendering of something they heard, it occurred to me that by failing to execute the lyrics or music perfectly, the young
women may not be any more "incorrect" than the version in the *Songbag*. After all, wouldn't a song like this have changed from woman to child, from day to day, from generation to generation? In the recordings, the girls' pitch slides downward throughout the piece, as if their voices are determined to find a more comfortable key. They reach unison on certain notes and stray and wander on others. The "rough" performance thus exemplifies music as a process, and how a single piece of music evolves as it circulates across voices and time.

The recordings are artifacts illustrating musical variation; they show how a tune can exist in various forms and still be a coherent entity. Hearing the song in a multi-vocal recording lifts the music from the page and places it into the vernacular realm, where it can be evaluated as living performance. Although I don't wish to romanticize orality over print literacy, the conditions in which we encounter music influences our understanding of it. Transforming historical transcriptions into aural performances is a powerful way to de-privilege visuality and textuality in our efforts to hear the past. Although my singing students' performance of the piece are no more historically accurate than my own, the dynamic engagement created by acts of listening and singing in real time-together as a collective offers an alternative way to explore historical phenomena and creative works. Rather than the singularity and solitude of a researcher analyzing a printed document and singing to herself without an audience, when we interact with the song across generations, among multiple people, bringing our voices and our ears into contact with the textual source, we participate in a radically different
method of interpretation that stages a scenario perhaps more akin to the originary musical mode.

My experience re-learning the song with my students changed the way I approached the musical artifact intellectually because I came to see that my inability to know the original singer’s history—her name, her circumstances, the reason she sang the song and what it sounded like—was secondary to simply taking the time to listen to her music and honor her memory by doing so. Listening to the “sonic record” of her cultural expression in the form of a vocal performance is one way to bear witness to her history. I began also to consider the possibility that my inability to fully access or understand her story might be an equitable outcome. Although Sandburg had written the song according to his own understanding, the song itself remained inaccessible on many levels, demanding careful listening, rather than assured knowing. With these thoughts in mind, I wrote an essay about “listening to the past” and the song in Sandburg’s collection for an experimental history journal online. The piece interweaves my analysis of the original text with the recordings of my tentative performances as well as those of my students.14 I reflect on my inability to uncover the story of the singer of the song, noting, "Though she remains distant and opaque to me, hidden by the silences of history and the words framing her performance in the book, her music is constantly in my ears and on my mind. ... This method of history casts me as the listener, and the

Afrodescendant woman who shared this song as author. I realize now that it is not in the performance of the piece, but in the listening, that I can learn the most.” Although I concluded the essay with an insistence on the value of listening to the historical subject, I had no idea at that time that she would continue to speak.

Tina Speaks

After resolving simply to listen to the tune and acknowledge the significant mark its original performer made upon history, I was stunned to discover that her story was still being preserved in living oral history. A few months after the essay was published, I received a short email from a woman claiming to be a descendant of the children to whom the song was sung.15 When we spoke over the phone, she told me that even now her family continues to sing the lullaby to new generations. Her mother even asked to hear the melody from her deathbed, which testifies to the song’s importance in the family’s lore. The informant had reached out to set the record straight and to protest Sandburg’s title, telling me that her family never referred to the song in such a disparaging way—they refer to it as “Tina’s Lullaby.” It seemed miraculous to discover that behind Sandburg’s print veil, there was a living record of the composer’s life, albeit incredibly complicated in its own right, as I will continue to explore. The family’s story—graciously told to me by the descendant—fills in blanks, but it also creates new mysteries and problems that would prod me forward on a journey to learn more about Tina’s tale. As I had expected, she was reportedly a survivor of the Middle Passage who

15 Interview with Margaret MacRae by phone, December 19, 2013. I am very grateful to Mrs. MacRae for reaching out to me.
had been enslaved. The family’s oral history maintains that she was purchased in Charleston by a man named Alexander Spencer in the 1850s who tasked her with caring for his daughter’s two young children. (I later discovered that these dates are incorrect and that Tina must have been purchased before 1831.)

Tina is said to have had an eleven-year-old son who died during the Atlantic crossing—yet another detail that corroborated what I heard in the melody, the resonance of a mother’s inconsolable grief. The family’s story preserves crucial details about Tina’s biography, but it offers another distorting frame, in which the enslaved performer’s legacy is narrated from the perspective of her enslavers, and her musical creation comes to us filtered through their ears and voices. I asked the informant how she and her family explain slavery to the children they sing Tina’s lullaby to. She did not have an answer. Their version of Tina’s biography lauds her, who they remember as a “tall and splendid looking woman.” But their story fails to address the fundamental violence of the circumstances that gave rise to her presence within their family history.

The fact that Tina’s enslavers’ heirs have preserved her song by singing it continuously for over eight generations speaks to the ever-present legacies of slavery in the lives of white Americans that often go unacknowledged. Many choose to ignore the

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16 Alexander Spencer died in 1831. See Summerville Cemetery (Augusta, GA: Augusta Genealogical Society, 2012). A slave named “Tena” is listed in the inventory of his estate, held at the Augusta Genealogical Society in Augusta, GA, “Inventory and appraisment of the Personal Estate of Alexander Spencer deceased – made the 12th December, 1831” held at the Augusta Genealogical Society in Augusta, Georgia. I have seen a photocopy of the manuscript inventory and I believe that it is part of Years Support-Inventory & Appraisal-Sale, Book D 1829-40, 98, also held at the AGS.

17 The descriptor “tall and splendid looking woman” is from Hugh Tracey’s article, “Tina’s Lullaby” in African Music 2.4 (1963), 99.
history of slavery and its material relevance to their daily lives, but this family has
embraced the narrative in a way that implicates them in an ongoing attempt to possess
what little cultural capital Tina held during her life in the United States. They cherish
her composition as part of their family’s legacy, but its existence speaks also to the forms
of white supremacy that produced Tina’s enslavement and later buoyed white families
economically and socially across generations in the United States and in other former
slave-holding societies.\footnote{For a seminal explanation of the material benefits of slavery experienced by white families, see Cheryl Harris’ “Whiteness as Property,” \textit{Harvard Law Review} 106.8 (1993) 1707-1791.}

The doting fondness of the Spencer heirs towards Tina’s memory participates in
much larger cultural narratives and visual representations surrounding the archetype of
the “black mammy” that Sandburg also invokes in his title. As Kimberly Wallace-
Sanders explains, the “black mammy” emerged as a recognizable cultural figure during
slavery in the U.S. South in the 1820s, becoming solidified in popular literature,
including abolitionist novels like Uncle Tom’s Cabin.\footnote{Kimberly Wallace-
Sanders, \textit{Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory} (Ann
Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).} The mammy character eventually
grew into a hugely influential cultural icon during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era
as “Lost Cause” narratives of the old, venerable south proliferated. The stereotype also
was embraced by the advertising industry that popularized characters such as “Aunt
Jemima” in the service of selling commercial goods.\footnote{For a discussion of the Mammy figure and the culinary industry, see Kyla Wazana Tompkins, \textit{Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century} (New York: New York University Press, 2012).} One of the landmark
characteristics of the mammy is that her individuality and the circumstances of her own
story become subsumed by the white family’s narrative. Unrelentingly servile, ever-present, and available, the mammy figure’s own family members are never to be seen, as in Gone With the Wind (1930), whose iconic “Mammy” is portrayed by Hattie McDaniel. As Wallace-Sanders explores, the mammy character typically is depicted to prefer the white children in her charge to her own. Describing the hallmark characteristics, she explains:

The mammy’s stereotypical attributes—her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites—all point to a long-lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia. (2)

The way Tina’s enslavers and their descendants passed along her song demonstrates that the cultural iconography of the mammy did not simply operate in the public sphere, it seeped into the way white families conducted their lives and imagined and remembered the black domestic workers with whom they were connected. Indeed, my own white Southern family has incorporated the “mammy” frame into our family history. Growing up I heard many stories about wise and loving women who had cared for elder family members, but I only learned their first names and never details about their own lives and children. Even as a child, I observed the connections between the way my family talked about black caregivers and the fictionalized Mammies I encountered in popular culture and film. In all likelihood, the cultural power of the mammy character also helped to create and sustain the Spencer descendants’ tales of Tina. The iconographic figure likely would have been a convenient vehicle for an evolving memory of a woman whose presence in the lives of children was unforgettable,
yet always shaped by the power-relations under slavery and the equally constrictive race relations that evolved in its wake. Not incidentally, the family’s remembrances center around a vocal performance that draws on the stereotypical representation of Mammy figures as having a “deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice,” as Wallace-Sanders points out.

Yet Tina’s individual story, like those of other women who have been scripted into the larger-than-life roles within the white American imaginary, fails to conform fully to the part. Such details, wherein Tina’s individuality peaks out from behind a fictional white apron and colorful scarf, invite us to speculate about her lived experience beyond the narrative crafted by her captors and surviving in the memories of their descendants. For one thing, Tina has a name, unlike many of her counterparts whose identities have been entirely erased in white-authored narratives. When Carl Sandburg published the music she sang in his collection and titled it “Jungle Mammy Song,” he erased her identity in service of a trope. The word “jungle” also speaks obliquely to the other way in which Tina’s story fails to conform to the typical storyline – she was remembered as a survivor of the Middle Passage whose Africanness remained an important part of her self-representation. Indeed, she performed her song in her native tongue, mystifying those who felt compelled to sing it but did not understand what the words meant. Tina’s song’s unintelligibility protected its true significance from those who otherwise claimed so much of her.

It was not simply in song that Tina failed to communicate with her captors; according to the family’s oral history she never learned to speak English, despite living
in the United States for a long time.\textsuperscript{21} Reportedly, she interacted with her fellow slaves and masters using gestures and her own unique methods. The Spencer descendant speculated during our conversation that by refusing to speak English, Tina seemed to say that “you may own me, but you will never own my mind.” This detail from Tina’s biography, and the fact that the family remembers it, has much to teach us about the significance of sonic expression under the condition of captivity. Tina had little control over her daily life, yet she held the key to her own communication style. Her captors could command her to do this or that—and of course, they could demand that she speak or sing or be silent—but they could not force her to know English, or to let on that she did, in any case. Like two sides of a coin, her singing survives along with the memory of her silence, teaching us that linguistic expression is far from the only way to “write” history. Sounds—and the absence of sounds—can tell a story about the past in the manner of Tina’s song, which became etched into the memories of those who heard it, perhaps because it occasioned a rare instance in which her voice rang out loud and clear.

\textbf{Tina in the Archives}

Because people living under slavery were routinely denied access to alphabetic literacy and disallowed the privileges of social institutions like marriage and citizenship, their lives were not often detailed in archival documentation such as wills and census records, except as the property of the people who held them captive. It is, therefore, a frustrating reality that research into the lives of slaves generally must be conducted

\textsuperscript{21} Margaret MacRae told me this in our telephone conversation and the detail is also noted in Hugh Tracey, “Tina’s Lullaby” \textit{African Music} 2.4 (1961) 99-101.
through a study of their enslavers. In order to unlock the mysteries of these fraught resources, one must examine the content in archives as well as the circumstances of their creation. In contrast, Tina’s song, emerging from her own intellect, sung with her vocal inflection at her chosen tempo, has been preserved in the ear and in the voice, in a performance realm that was also marked by the racial politics of slavery, but licensed a mode of expression that provided a potentially more suitable vehicle for the preservation of Tina’s composition.

However, Tina’s song and her story has left a mark upon written archives as well; it is to that record that I now turn in an effort to further explore the world in which she lived and sang. In the course of my research I have scoured the Spencer family’s public records for the barest trace of Tina’s presence in their lives. Primarily through census records, estate inventories, and marriage and death records, I have been able to corroborate much of the family’s oral history. One crucial detail, however, seems to have been incorrectly stored in their collective memory. According to the family, Tina was purchased in Charleston in the 1850s by Alexander Spencer to care for his daughter Isabella’s two children. Records show that Alexander Spencer died in 1831, meaning that it would have been impossible for him to purchase Tina in the 1850s. Isabella’s children were well grown by then, in any case. The family also claims that Tina had been born in Africa, a detail that initially seemed suspect because the international slave trade was

22 Tina’s story has been preserved primarily through maternal lines in the Spencer family whose surnames changed when they were married, making it difficult to trace her story across generations.
abolished in 1807 in the United States. However, the illegal importation of slaves continued to thrive long after it became illegal, with Charleston remaining a major slave trading hub throughout the era.\(^23\)

Alexander Spencer, born around 1756, had immigrated to the United States from Scotland. Widowed, he worked as a dry goods merchant in Augusta, Georgia, where he lived with his daughter, Isabella Spencer Bones, and her two young children. He also had a grown son, Alexander, Jr., a physician. His daughter’s husband, William Bones, died in 1830, an event that I believe may have prompted Alexander Spencer to purchase Tina, so that Isabella might have had extra help performing domestic duties and caring for children while she grieved her late husband. Alexander Spencer died not long after in 1831. What might these circumstances have meant for Tina? If she were indeed a mourning mother, as the family’s oral history maintains, it might have influenced her experience caring for children who had recently lost a father and shortly after buried a grandfather and head of household. Listening to the song that she sang, I hear the sounds of a soothing and yet lighthearted melody. The shadow of grief—her own and that of the children to whom she sang—might have imbued the song with additional emotional resonances. The contexts in which the song was performed invites us to think about Tina’s challenging role as a caretaker under slavery. She would have been tasked with distracting and calming children. Perhaps she drew from her experience

comforting her own family members. The song may have served as a bridge between her tragic circumstances and her former life in Africa or elsewhere. She may have been reminded of dear loved ones lost as she sang it, or perhaps it was simply an effective tool for working with children. These are the sort of details that we will never know.

In 1830, Alexander Spencer owned fifteen slaves, including two adult women, three adult men, and up to nine children.24 The age ranges dictated by the U.S. census lump slaves between ages ten and twenty-three together, an artifact of the fact that enslaved people were denied the status of childhood and were considered to be fully matured laborers at quite a young age. Given that the oral history suggests that Tina was a mother to a child around the age of eleven before she became enslaved, she likely would have been at least twenty-three years old in 1830, and therefore is possibly one of the adult women documented in the census. Since Tina had been born in Africa, she likely would have been trafficked through a sea port outside of the United States before being smuggled into the country and eventually sold in Charleston. It may be that she had been enslaved in the Caribbean for some time before being transported across the Gulf of Mexico to Texas, for example, and from there to New Orleans, another important slave-trading hub during the era.25 Given that her route from Africa to the Charleston slave market was probably circuitous and lengthy, it is worth considering that she may

25 Again see David Head “Slave Smuggling.” On slave smuggling across the Gulf of Mexico into Texas, see Maria Esther Hammack, “The Illegal Slave Trade in Texas, 1808-1865” Not Even Past (February 17, 2016) https://notevenpast.org/the-illegal-slave-trade-in-texas-1808-1865/ [accessed February 20, 2016].
have borne her son under slavery, and that perhaps he died during sea passage from port to port, which might explain why the rather precise age of eleven was well remembered in the family’s oral history. These details are all highly speculative, but information about Tina was recorded exactingly in the 1831 inventory of Alexander Spencer’s estate. There she is listed as his property – a woman, “Tena,” valued at five dollars. All the other slaves listed in Spencer’s estate were valued at over $100, with many valued at well more. I remain mystified by this detail and Tina’s low monetary “worth” within the estate. Was her value low because she did not speak English? Or, does the low price signal that the family did not wish to sell her and therefore set a low price that would not tempt any buyers? Whatever the case may be, the sum speaks volumes about the deficiencies of archival documents and the extent to which they re-perform the dehumanizing conditions of slavery.

The catalog of information in the Spencer’s census records and estate documents raises the subject of Tina’s connections with her fellow bondspeople. Did she live alongside the other slaves, for instance, and in what form of dwelling? She may have

26 “Inventory and appraisment of the Personal Estate of Alexander Spencer deceased – made the 12th December, 1831” held at the Augusta Genealogical Society in Augusta, Georgia.

27 Oddly Alexander Spencer’s estate may have passed to his daughter Isabella directly after his death, rather than to his elder son. There are court documents suggesting she paid $20,000 to settle his estate, but I have not seen the document first-hand, but it is housed at Augusta Genealogical Society. I have yet to untangle these transactions but they that there may have been a reason for Isabella to falsely devalue some of her possessions, either for tax purposes or because of some sort of financial arrangement with her brother. It is very unclear. Spencer’s son Alexander Jr. died in 1836 and in the inventory of his estate, also held at the Augusta Genealogical Society, lists a slave named “Tenor” who was sold for .12 cents. The low number suggests that the slave was sold to a family number for a modest sum. The similar name indicates the possibility that Tina may have been inherited by Alexander Spencer, Jr.
been tasked for caring for the enslaved children in the household as well as those of her masters. Perhaps her song became so memorable because it continued to be heard within the household as she performed it for slave children long after Thomas and Margaret grew up. It is not immediately clear to what use Alexander Spencer put the several slaves in his household. Why would a dry goods merchant living in town need so many laborers? One possibility is that because he owned slaves who were bearing children, they provided him with a capital investment, in a sinister scenario that forced enslaved parents to constantly fear for the sudden separation from their children. Among her fellow slaves, Tina would have faced this reality daily, perhaps reminded painfully of her son’s fate. It is not clear whether or not she bore children under slavery, but it is certainly a possibility. She may even have living descendants who also sing her song, either in the United States, or in Africa, or anywhere.

When comparing the depersonalized written public accounts of Tina’s life with the specificity, idiosyncrasy, and individuality of her signature song, the contrast overwhelmingly points to the significance of Tina’s Lullaby. Each differentiating note, performed in her chosen language, again and again in moments of time across centuries, creates a very real and enduring form of history. This alternative mode of preserving the past still bears the scars of slavery and racism, as the Spencer descendants’ story and Sandburg’s version attest, but when interpreted carefully with an ethic of listening that privileges Tina’s voice, the song and its story help to counterweigh the conventional archive’s ongoing erasure of enslaved people.
The Spencer family maintains that Tina eventually nursed a second generation of their ancestors, which would mean that she was not sold after Alexander Spencer’s death, but stayed with the family. Isabella, who apparently inherited a significant portion of her father’s estate, including possibly many of his slaves, went on to marry a man named John Coskery, in 1833. Tina probably continued to live in the same household after Spencer Sr.’s death and his daughter’s marriage. I have not found a record of an enslaved woman perfectly matching Tina’s probable age living with the family in later years. In 1850, Coskery owns a female slave who is 35, but Tina probably would have been much older by then. However, Coskery may have had no idea how old she was, and simply selected an incorrect age when hastily filling out the census. Isabella’s daughter, Margaret Clarissa Bones Wright, lived with her mother along with her husband David Russell Wright and infant daughter in 1850. If Tina were still alive and one of the enslaved women listed in the household, she may have taken care of this child and later her siblings, which would conform to the family’s oral history.

Tina’s story underscores that both written and oral histories provide imperfect windows into the past. The census data may look more “official,” but it relies on the fallible knowledge and honesty of the person who fills out the forms. The survey also

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30 Census records from a crucial year, 1840, cannot be found.
32 1850 United States Federal Census; Census Place: Division 73, Richmond, Georgia. Ancestry.com [accessed March 16, 2016]
imposes its own distortions by, for example, representing enslaved people with a lack of specificity characteristic of the institution’s values. The family’s oral history also contains inaccuracies, like the claim that Tina was purchased in 1850 by a man who had been long dead by then. When read and interpreted alongside one another, however, these two streams of information fill in each other’s gaps, showing for example, that Tina may have been the woman whose age was incorrectly identified in 1850 by the family. The challenges that Tina’s story presents reveal that aural and written modes of record-keeping are always in concert with one another; interpreting the past with this in mind can help scholars learn more about people whose lives have been notoriously misrepresented. Most importantly, Tina’s song—and the fact that it has been sung continuously for nearly two-hundred years in the land of her enslavement—proves that just because a written historical record doesn’t exist or doesn’t do justice to a person’s story, it does not mean, therefore, that they did not create a considerable historical legacy.

**Tina in Africa**

At some point in the 1950s, the Spencer descendants also became interested in Tina’s history, and specifically, where she had come from in Africa. They reached out to Dr. Ruth Bartholemew of Paine University, a historically black college in Augusta. Bartholemew eventually wrote to Dr. Hugh Tracey, an English-born ethnomusicologist

in South Africa, asking if he could provide any insight. Tracey was then and remains now a major figure in African music history, with a legacy similar to Alan Lomax’s in the United States. He had a radio show and released multiple albums of music in his Sounds of Africa Series, and established the International Library of African Music, as well as the journal African Music. He was initially confused by the transcribed musical notation that the family sent along with their query about Tina’s origins. He asked that the family make a recording of the song instead, and in an essay he later wrote about his research he explains:

The first transcriptions of the song on paper which she sent us had proved baffling, and so we asked Dr. Bartholemew to send us a tape recording as she said that it was still remembered and could be sung by an old lady of over eighty years, Mrs. Johnson, who was a member of the family. (99)

Tracey recognizes that Tina’s song must be analyzed in a sonic register, and indeed his entire study centers around the sound of the song itself. In addition to ultimately authoring an essay in African Music about Tina’s song, he also produced a radio program narrating Tina’s story. In the show he combines the family’s recordings with his own narration, composing an audio-essay not unlike today’s popular podcasts.

Interestingly, the transcription of Tina’s song that the family sent to Tracey is different from Sandburg’s version. When sung, the pieces also differ noticeably, which

34 This information comes from “Tina’s Lullaby” 99.
35 This radio program, also titled “Tina’s Lullaby,” was broadcast on September 10, 1957 as part of the Sound of Africa Broadcast Series 3 Eastern Cape (Transkei) in programme 2 part 1 and programme 2 part 2. These details are from the my correspondence with the archivists at the International Library of African Music at Rhodes University, where Tracey’s papers are held. I am very grateful to the staff there for their generous assistance with my research. The radio show combines Tracey’s narration with the story as told by the Johnson family on the tape they sent to him in South Africa. Much of the content is transcribed in the article version.
seems to suggest that Sandburg learned the piece from notation, rather from a family member. Perhaps another folklorist had transcribed the piece and circulated it to Sandburg; the Songbag does not discuss. Mrs. Johnson’s version has fewer notes, and her performance style includes more vocal slides and percussive accentuations that more imitative of a non-English cadence. Through my research I have determined that Mrs. Johnson, whose performance was included in Tracey’s show, was the granddaughter of Margaret Clarissa Bones Wright, the little girl that Tina cared for.36 Margaret Louisa (Jordan) Johnson, born around 1880, would have been about 80 years old when she recorded the song at Paine University.37 Mrs. Johnson would have known her grandmother well because “Maggie,” as she was known during her childhood, lived a long life, until 1909. Eighty-year-old Mrs. Johnson probably heard Tina’s Lullaby from both her mother and grandmother, meaning that the recording she sent to Tracey is just one generation removed from a first-hand witness to Tina’s performance. If Tina did live to take care of a second generation (a fact the family claims but I have been unable to substantiate), it would mean that Tina would have cared for Mrs. Johnson’s mother as well, meaning that their collective knowledge of the song was strongly influenced by Tina. The way the family sings the song now sounds remarkably similar to the performance in Tracey’s recording, and very different from Sandburg’s version, which

36 The family member speaking on the tape may be “Mrs. Clifford Stephens” or Mrs. Johnson. It is not clear from the records housed at ILAM, but Mrs. Johnson is the singer. Determining who these women are was actually difficult because they changed their names when they were married and their maiden names and first names were not documented in Tracey’s pieces. Using the brief family genealogy that Margaret MacRae provided to me over the phone, along with marriage and census records, I have been able to determine Mrs. Johnson’s identity.
suggests that the song has been passed on relatively in tact, even though it still may have been altered from the original. Although I am certain that Tina’s rendition bore important differences from the Spencer descendants’—after all, she was probably singing in her native tongue whereas the children would not have been immersed in the language of the lyrics, nor in the musical style she effected—I remain convinced that the recording bears significant resemblance to the song Tina sang and that to assume otherwise is to underestimate the ability of songs to survive.

Many people, including Tracey, seem to assume that oral transmission across generations is a poor way to preserve music. I question whether these assumptions are owing to Western culture’s long-standing reverence for textual communication over oral transmission. For Tracey’s, a disbelief in the ability of Anglo-Americans to learn African musical forms also influences his doubts about the Johnson’s transmission. Tracey writes that “…the melody of the lullaby as sung by Mrs. Johnson in a western modality (as no African mode introduced by Tina could possibly have lasted) had clearly undergone a sea-change and, in addition, the song was likely to have been anti-phonal in its original African version” (100). Why does Tracey assume that “no African mode introduced by Tina could possibly have lasted?” For Tracey, it was unthinkable that white American children could pick African tonalities. Perhaps neither of these scenarios bear out as strictly plausible, but when contrasted with one another they reveal the ways that evolving constructions of race and notions of what forms of knowledge are inheritable as opposed to transferable shape the ongoing segregation between “African” and “Western” musical forms. No matter the conditions under which Tina was enslaved in
the Americas, she would certainly have been exposed to widely different languages and musical styles during her travels, and also in urban and plantation settings. In chapter two I showed how the strict distinctions between European and African forms are influenced by the idea that African and Western musicians never encountered one another before the Columbian era. Here again, Tracey’s assumption that African musical modalities would be foreign, even within a slave society along the Atlantic coast, where Africans were newly being imported and had been living for centuries, seems to be similarly faulty. This way of thinking inadvertently furthers the racialization of African music cultures by suggesting that these forms are innately replicable by people living within African societies and impossible to maintain elsewhere, once they have been met with the apparently dominating forces of Western sonic modalities.

Tina’s song may not have sounded completely “African” to Tracey’s ears, but perhaps she composed an original tune that was influenced by the many styles she encountered during her life, both in and beyond Africa. If Tracey, born in England, can learn African music, why can’t young children who grow up hearing it from their cradles? I am sympathetic to the desire to preserve the specificity of Tina’s cultural knowledge, and it is by no means my intention to claim, for instance, that white musicians in blackface were somehow authentically performing plantation music. Rather, I question the grounds on which we assume what is allowed to have historical integrity across time, and what genres of musical performance are presumed to be teachable. Why do we assume that Western musicians know how Mozart’s compositions sounded on the harpsichord in the eighteenth century, but we worry that African and
indigenous knowledges are always in danger of going extinct? It is true, of course, that what makes cultural forms thrive is communities of people who invest in them and sustain them. In the case of African and indigenous peoples living in the Americas, their lives were often under dire threat, which did impact the preservation of diverse heritages, but it does not follow that therefore their cultures were somehow inherently more fragile or irreproducible. 38

Doubtful about the melody’s fidelity, Tracey attempted to interpret the linguistic origins of the song’s lyrics to determine Tina’s possible origins. He converted the words of the song he heard on Mrs. Johnson’s recording into phonemes, then rewrote the syllables in an attempt to remove “anglicanisms,” which he then replaced with phonemes more appropriate to “African vernaculars.” Having done that, he deduced that the song had a “Bantu East African flavour about it rather than a Sudanic, West African” (100). Tracey’s methods are not especially convincing, however I have attempted to explore his findings carefully and consider the possibility that he may have been correct. He pinpoints Tina’s origins as being from a Shona or Manyika community, near the Zambezi valley along the border between modern day Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and extending to the eastern coast of the latter country. As Tracey admits, this is somewhat surprising since the vast majority of enslaved Africans in the Americas

38 In Mintz’ and Price’s The Birth of Afro-American Culture, they argue that the challenge of preserving African cultural forms in the Americas was owing to the lack of institutional frameworks. Whereas in African societies there were prescribed societal roles and ceremonies through which musical performance, for instance, were performed, they argue that those structures were obliterated in the slavery regime, making it difficult for many practices to survive.
originated from the Western coasts and inlands; there was, however, a small, but
significant trade from East Africa, and others have argued that a specific style of
mouth-bow playing found in the Appalachian region in the United States is strongly
connected to performance styles from these same regions. Some enslaved people were
captured in the Eastern region and shipped around the Cape of Good Hope to the major
ports in the Western coast, whereas others were shipped directly to the Americas.

According to my queries in the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, a vast (but not
comprehensive) collection of data from slaving voyages, there were many ships carrying
captives to the Americas from the Eastern coasts during the era of Tina’s enslavement,
but primarily to Brazil. There were a handful of voyages that landed in Cuba and one in
Puerto Rico in 1824 and 1825 that suggest the possibility that Tina may have been
captured on such a voyage, or perhaps another that was not recorded, or traveled
secretly to British or U.S. locations. In the years just prior to the end of the legal trade,
ships containing captives from “Mosambique” were advertised in the Charleston
Courier. Tracey’s hypothesis about Tina’s origin is relatively plausible, although
questions remain. The name Tinashe is a common name in the region, which further

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39 In a discussion of mouth bow performance styles in Appalachia and other regions of the U.S.
Gerard Kubik refers to the significant trade from Mozambique to the U.S. in the early nineteenth
century (13).
40 My query included ships containing slaves from “southeast Africa and Indian Ocean islands”
between 1820-1831. For example, one ship, #368, Named Bella Dolores and captained by Antonio
Guerrero in 1824 went to Cuba. The Orphee, #2769, captained by “Jacques” also landed in Cuba
in 1825. In 1824, #2754 “Chasseur” captained by Françoise Thébaud landed in Puerto Rico. The
Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database [accessed January 15, 2016]
41 “Sale of Negroes and Wines,” Charleston Courier, July 20 1804. Similar advertisements were
made again in 1808.
underscores the possibility that “Tina” hailed from a Bantu-speaking society. My hunch is that Tina either traveled from an Eastern port to a location in the Caribbean and was trafficked from there to a port like New Orleans (as I mentioned earlier) and from there to Charleston. Alternatively, she may have been transported first to a slave trading center on the Western coast of Africa and from there to the Americas. Or, she may have been born among Mozambiquan slaves in the United States, where she learned the song. These details will remain murky, but it is worth noting the significant length of her possible journey and the fact that she may have been forced to labor elsewhere before entering the Spencer household. Enslaved women were constantly vulnerable to sexual and physical assault, meaning that Tina may have been brutalized by several owners or leased out for all manner of work before she was purchased by the Spencers. Taking care of children in the urban domestic space of a merchant’s home was probably more comfortable work than the exhausting labor on plantations. Yet, as the memoirs of enslaved women such as Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince, and the scholarship of historians such as Thavolia Glymph show, domestic servitude was anything but immune to violence.

In addition to its value as a rare musical record, “Tina’s Lullaby” is an artifact of the experience of enslaved women forced to labor as domestic servants. The sounds of

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42 I’m very grateful to Tsitsi Jaji for pointing this out to me. I am also thankful to the librarian Tina at the Augusta Public library, and her assistant, (also named Tina!), for directing me to the Augusta Genealogical Society and for reminding me of Tina’s insistence.

her song make it possible to reflect on these singular experiences in a register that asks us to listen to the spaces in which women work. Her song is like a soundtrack without a movie – a sonic experience that provides an opportunity to imagine the myriad possible pasts that she faced and endured. Although we do not know the particulars of the story, we do know that through all that she endured, she returned to this tune, out of desperation, joy, love, mourning, remembrance, boredom, anger, or any combination thereof. Historically marginalized figures like enslaved domestic laborers are all too often denied emotional complexity, but historians have done much to rectify this in recent years. For instance, Annette Gordon-Reed’s study of the Hemingses of Monticello works to shift the narrative surrounding Thomas Jefferson’s sexual relationship with his slave, Sally Hemmings. More recently, in Finding Charity’s Folk, Jessica Millward traces the history of one enslaved woman, Charity Folks, as she negotiates freedom, to draw a larger portrait of African American women in Maryland during the era of slavery. Gordon-Reed’s and Millward’s work and that of many other innovative scholars imaginatively re-interpret the written archive of slavery. Their research shows that although women were ignored and misrepresented in the dry catalogs of plantation owners, slave ship manifests, and court cases, their lives left deep marks that can be traced. Tina’s lullaby, as an artifact preserved not in the linear textuality of documents, nor in dusty cracks of physical spaces, but rather in the performing body, serves as an emblem of the worlds of meaning and vast histories enacted by those whom the archives purported to erase.
Tina’s lullaby ultimately traveled all the way across the Atlantic Ocean, back to Africa, in a poignant return that raises new questions about how to interpret her history. Throughout the literary records of Atlantic slavery, observers like the travel writers I discuss in the first and second chapters routinely report that enslaved Africans believed that they would return to their homeland after they died, a core vision that has been symbolized in many African diasporic aesthetic traditions. More than one hundred years after Tina’s horrific Atlantic crossing, the melody she sang traveled back across the Atlantic, completing the return journey on Tina’s behalf.

The documentary film, *The Language You Cry In*, tells a similar story about a Gullah family in Georgia who sought to locate the origins of a song they loved. A cross-generational collaboration between scholars and the family of Amelia Dawley, the film traces a particular song to Sierra Leone. The music was initially studied in the 1930s by Lorenzo Turner, a pioneering researcher who explored the African aspects of Gullah language and culture along the islands of coastal Georgia and South Carolina. He made a recording of Amelia Dawley singing the song that he surmised to be in an African language. The film documents the quest initiated years later by ethnomusicologists and Dawley’s family members to locate the music’s origins. The film shows the family traveling to Sierra Leone to meet the members of a clan with whom they likely share ancestors. In an observation that gives the film its title, the elder leader of the

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44 Some masters exploited this belief by threatening to cut off the limbs of unruly slaves, because it was their impression that enslaved people believed that they would not be able to return home if their earthly bodies were not intact in death. Need citation here.

45 *The Language You Cry In*, Directed by Angel Serrano and Alvaro Toepka (California Newsreel, 1998).
community, Nabi Jah, explains why he believes the song survived in America: “You can speak another language, you can live in an other culture, but to cry over your dead, you always go back to your mother tongue – the language you cry in.”\textsuperscript{46} Amelia Dawleys’ song, as interpreted by Jah, is a mourning cry that bears the legacy of all the love and intimate bonds that the Dawley ancestor lost when she was torn away from home under slavery and witnessed her love ones “crossing the water” into death. The memory and guidance of the ancestors—of great spiritual significance across many African and African diasporic societies—became ritualized in the song’s enduring strain. The Dawleys’ ancestral song and Tina’s lullaby also share similarities with a passage of music in W.E.B. Du Bois’ \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} (1903).\textsuperscript{47} In addition to notation and lyrics, he explains his family’s oral history of the music:

My grandfather’s grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees… The child sang it to his children and they to their children’s children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music. (254-255)

Du Bois’ family’s song, the Dawley’s melody and Tina’s lullaby, together document women’s practice of maintaining spiritual and familial bonds under slavery.

As ties between mother and children were so often forcibly broken by masters

\textsuperscript{46} Nabi Jah’s remarks begin at about 50:00 in the film.
\textsuperscript{47} Throughout \textit{Souls}, each chapter begins with an excerpt of musical notation drawn from an African American spiritual. The final chapter, from whence this excerpt comes, “On Sorrow Songs,” is devoted entirely to the discussion of music and its central importance to black American history and culture.
determined to isolate mothers from their own domestic obligations and pleasures, these three women—Tina, Amelia Dawley’s elder, and Du Bois’ great-great-grandmother—likely would have been anxious to pass along what little they could to their children. The music they created serves to preserve ties to an ancestral home, while also memorializing the kinship and intimate moments shared between loved ones in the mundane yet challenging activities of child-rearing, especially under the harsh conditions of slavery. Scored into the minds of youngsters who eventually grow old, the songs become a portal to a past full of voices long gone and far away, whose voices are recorded in the music.

Spurred by the scholarship of trailblazers like Turner and Du Bois, in the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists and cultural historians began to study the “roots” of African diasporic cultural forms in large numbers. An important figure in this effort, Melville Herskovitz, wrote specifically about Haiti and Suriname, producing a body of work that identified distinctive African cultural forms within the diaspora. The combined efforts of many such scholars ultimately worked to counter the widespread perceptions among many Anglo-American historians that African Americans and Africans didn’t have a history to tell.48 Beyond the academic realm, in the political and popular spheres, black nationalist and pan-Africanist activists brought Africa into

conversation with African American history.\(^49\) By the late 1950s and early 1960s when the Spencer descendants contacted Hugh Tracey, something seems to have shifted in the popular consciousness that compelled a white Southern family to seek out information about their ancestors’ slave’s African roots. Whereas in Sandburg’s framing of Tina’s song, Tina’s Africanness and enslavement were coded in the term “jungle mammy,” the Cold War era brought with it a changing interpretations of blackness in America and its historic ties to Africa, which would continue to evolve as the Black Panther Movement and black nationalism of late sixties and seventies shifted national conversations further still. Eventually anthropologists would grow skeptical about efforts to validate African diasporic cultural forms by linking them to African cultures on the grounds that such assumptions ignore the fact that both Africans and African diasporic cultures evolve and change over time. The African roots theories, some claimed, cast Afrodescendants and Africans as being essentially frozen in time – allowed a past, but not the right to futurity, progress, and change.\(^50\) Although the argument for African cultural retentions and the resulting backlash has cooled somewhat, it continues to have the unfortunate effect of dissuading historical work on early African-diasporic music. While many cultural

\(^{49}\) A very popular novel and later film, *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948), for instance, drew the attention of many Americans to the fight for racial justice in South Africa at the same time that the U.S. civil rights movement was gaining momentum.

\(^{50}\) These debates had very much to do with Sindey Mintz’s and Richard Price’s theories of “creolization,” which offered the idea that rather than African retentions in the Americas, slave societies gave birth to entirely new cultural forms. For a reflection on these debates and the way they continue to shape the field of African diaspora studies, see Kenneth Bilby, “African American Memory at the Crossroads: Grounding the Miraculous with Tooy” *Small Axe* 13.2 (2009) 185-199. See also Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon, 1992; originally published in 1976).
historians continue to explore early African culture in the Americas, anthropologists and
ethnomusicologists generally concern themselves with living social forms and seem to
hesitate to draw connections to prior generations.

Tracey’s research into Tina’s story was shaped by the scholarly trends of his day,
and therefore he took it for granted that the words in Tina’s song could be relatively
easily mapped onto contemporary language traditions in Africa. However, he ultimately
hesitates to conclude that his translation of her song could be considered truly accurate.
After converting what he considered to be the anglicized lyrics of Mrs. Johnson to
syllables more accurate to the Bantu languages he detected in the sounds, he consulted
with native speakers and eventually proposes this English translation of Tina’s lullaby,
along with an explanatory note about the scenario the song portrays:

Yes, I ran quickly to his father, the Chief.
Indeed, I have sent a messenger. 
Where shall I go straightaway? 
then I will go straightaway.

A small child has been sent by his Tenzi, the headman of the village, and no
doubt, a senior relative or Bambo, to take a message to some nearby village and
the child who conveyed the Tenzi’s instructions now asks for another mission.
As a child’s verse this would be in keeping with many a folk song of the region.
(100)

Like Tina’s own story, Tracey’s lyrics depict movement and travel as well as the
habits of children – the very demographic to whom Tina originally sang the song. Yet,
these thematic overlaps, and Tracey’s lyrics are extremely tenuous. Some years later, an
individual familiar with Tracey’s work on “Tina’s Lullaby” wrote to the African Mail, a
leftist newspaper from Lusaka, Zambia, to say that he disagreed with Tracey’s
interpretations and that they believe Tina to be from Nyasaland.\footnote{I have not been able to locate Kasiwira’s original text in African Mail, but a “press cutting” was published in Tracey’s journal, African Music. W. Kasawira, “Notes and News” African Music 3.2 (1963) 50-54. I have explored issues of the newspaper, which was a politically leftist, pan-Africanist and black Nationalist newspaper from what was then still colonial Rhodesia but soon after became independent. Apparently the newspaper ran a feature on Tina’s Lullaby featuring Tracey’s research.} W. Kasawira, of Kasungu in Malawi explains that they spoke to “an old woman” from Nyasaland who suggested alternate lyrics:

\begin{verbatim}
Eya tarumba bamboo wace Dazi
Yai ndiye kuti mai muranda
Ndikhale kuti kwari O!
Ndikhale Kuti mai oye.
\end{verbatim}

Be praised father of Dazi (name);
I can go nowhere, mother,
poor I am where can I stay? Perhaps if can – where can I stay, mother?
Nowhere.

Whereas Tracey’s translation depicts a fairly mundane message about a short errand, Kasawira’s proposed lyrics are far more haunting. The sorrowful set of phrases, which are spoken by a child to their mother, express an emotional disorientation resulting from being forced to travel not simply to a nearby village, but to journey somewhere with no place to rest. The child’s circumstance seems to echo the experience of an enslaved captive, who has been shunted across the ocean without knowing where she might ever lay her head again. Kasawira’s lyrics are as unverifiable as Tracey’s, but they nonetheless convey an emotive response to the condition of dislocation, and the pleading sorrows of a child to their mother. The brief excerpt I found referencing Kasawira’s commentary does not explain the individual’s interaction with the “old
woman” from Nyasaland who supposedly shared the lyrics. I do not know who she was or what her relationship was to Kasawira. Nevertheless, the letter documents an interest in Tina’s song from within the region of her possible homeland, and a concerted effort on behalf of Tracey’s listeners and readers to interpret her song carefully, and to music consider its meaning and the histories it records.

The Nyasa woman’s alternate lyrics illuminate the enduring historical methodologies of female singers such as herself, Tina, Du Bois’ great-great grandmother, and the Dawleys’ maternal ancestor. Women across Africa and in the Americas sing their songs “year on year” to teach those children who will listen, etching memories into the voices of many as they preserve histories that the written archives ignore and therefore purport to silence. As Tina’s Lullaby demonstrates, these songs do not need to be fully understood to matter, they merely need to be sung and to be heard. Tina’s performance thus teaches us how to listen to the abundant sounds reverberating within the hollow gaps in the archive of slavery.
Epilogue

Throughout this dissertation, I have listened to the audible resonances in written texts, from musical notation, to narrative passages, and illustrations. My objective has been to show that these sources preserve sound and that to hear these sounds we must shift our attention to auditory qualities, with an informed awareness of the listening practices that shape the reproduction of sounds in language. This method of analysis illuminates the musical practices of early African diasporans in the Atlantic world, making performances presumed to be lost legible to history once again. One of the more implicit arguments of this dissertation is that musical performance is a site of knowledge production. Indeed, this research project has been deeply influenced by my own experiences as a performer.

In the years just before my doctoral education began I experienced a significant shift in my musical practice, one that has shaped the underlying questions of this research project. I had been schooled from a young age in the classical tradition, which emphasizes the authority of the textual score. Over the years my music teachers had explicitly discouraged me from using my ears to learn music. For instance, a voice coach argued that if I relied on hearing to imitate a certain sound, I would develop poor vocal technique, damage my voice, and limit its potential to develop into a more robust instrument. Years later, after abandoning my ambitions to become a professional classical singer, I found myself in a very different music scene, one that placed value on ear-training, and eschewed notated music. I had begun to play bluegrass fiddle, which I learned mostly by ear, with the support of mentors and peers in the community. Within
the context of this vernacular tradition, I heard a different argument – that to learn a
tune from a notated score was ineffective, and a bit like cheating. My new teachers
urged that to learn a song well one must learn it by ear. Indeed, I found that when I
learned new tunes aurally, I was better equipped to improvise solos, an important
element of the genre that is central to the jam settings in which I frequently found
myself.

While in the classical tradition I had been taught the authority of the score, in
bluegrass, I learned the value of the ear. My musical experiences have taught me that
both text-centric and ear-centric musical literacies are bountifully generative of musical
expression and experience. There is no strict divide between the two approaches, and as
I discuss in chapter one, especially not during the era of slavery. Classical musicians use
their ears all the time, and vernacular performers read scores. However, my personal
experiences shifting across genres impressed upon me the salience of sound. I began to
think about musical performance as an embodied form of knowledge as significant and
coherent as anything one might produce in a book, or indeed, a dissertation. This
shifting belief allowed me to think about the archive of early black music as a vast one.
For if music can be communicated and preserved through vernacular transmission, then
this process could be evaluated historically.

If it is obvious that enslaved musicians and their descendants
transformed global music, why is it challenging to tell that history? This dissertation has
sought to show that there are bountiful records of this story in the literary archive of
slavery, from colonial travel writing to slave narratives, and notated song. Indeed, there
is far more material than I have begun to deal with here. By titling this project “Sonic Records,” I mean to put forward two seemingly oppositional arguments: 1) written records are audible, and 2) sounds are themselves records. It is this latter point that the dissertation has most struggled to assert. For I wish to explain something that the knowledge traditions of the Western academy would suggest impossible – that sounds are artifacts of history, that they can be interpreted just as any written word or image can be interpreted. In a way, we already know this, and indeed many scholars of sonic history have argued this, and yet many traditions and their stories seem to continually slip out of grasp. This is why Western knowledge traditions must be decolonized, for they came to be through the imperialist and capitalist processes that subjugated Africans to Europeans on the American continent in the first place. That is to say that the history of early black music is invisible not because it is inaudible, but because of a failure of interpretation and understanding. Written genres and academic questions demand a certain kind of proof, of explanation, of meaning. I have endeavored to accomplish in writing something that may be achieved much more simply in sound. Indeed throughout the researching and writing of this dissertation my performance practice has helped me to understand the music discussed here.

For instance, when I collaborated with a composer and historian on the creation of Musical Passage, the site that tells the story of Hans Sloane’s notated music from his 1707 Jamaican travel narrative, I had the opportunity to learn things about early Afro-Atlantic music that I already knew, but did not understand until I had to make decisions about how to sing the vocal music in “Angola.” When composer Dave Garner shared
recordings of his interpretations of the songs, I discovered that I had many opinions about what percussion instrument might be appropriate accompaniment to the melody in “Koromanti.” The struggle to perform and to imagine the music brought out new questions and hidden understandings that argumentative academic writing had failed to render. Prosaic writing, literary production, and sonic performance are all knowledge practices, but they are not at all the same. This dissertation is, more than anything else, an attempt to bring these various modalities into harmony, to improvise one against the other, and to develop a method of discovery that brings what we know from the textual record into vibrant collaboration with what we know from the sonic record. The inspiration for this work is to reimagine what history is and who gets to have it. History is not an empirical truth about the past; it is always a product of cultural memory, and therefore something that we influence through our own ideologies, investments, and training. History is something that happens in the present when we look back over our shoulders to try to understand how things came to be as they are. When we turn our heads, we also must tilt our ear, to consider all the worlds of information that come to us through the production of sound, lest we silence the archive of early Afro-Atlantic experience once again.
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Biography

Mary Caton Lingold was born October 20, 1981 in Marshall, Texas. She graduated with a B.A. in English and minors in Spanish and Women’s Studies from Trinity University in 2004. She received an M.A. in English from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2010 and holds a graduate certificate in African and African American Studies from Duke University. She is the recipient of a William Reese Company Fellowship from the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota and was a participant in an NEH Institute at the Newberry Library in 2013. She is currently a graduate intern at the Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University. She is also the founder and director of The Sonic Dictionary, and her co-edited collection Digital Sound Studies: A Provocation is forthcoming with Duke University Press.