In this fascinating collection of essays, an international group of scholars explores the sonic consequences of transcultural contact in the early modern period. They examine how cultural configurations of sound impacted communication, comprehension, and the categorization of people. Addressing questions of identity, difference, sound, and subjectivity in global early modernity, these authors share the conviction that the body itself is the most intimate of contact zones, and that the culturally contingent systems by which sounds made sense could be foreign to early modern listeners and to present day scholars.

Drawing on a global range of archival evidence—from New France and New Spain, to the slave ships of the Middle Passage, to China, Europe, and the Mediterranean court environment—this collection challenges the privileged position of European acoustic practices within the discipline of global-historical musicology. The discussion of Black and non-European experiences demonstrates how the production of 'the canon' in the cosmopolitan centres of colonial empires was underpinned by processes of human exploitation and extraction of resources. As such, this text is a timely response to calls within the discipline to decolonize music history and to contextualize the canonical works of the European past.

This volume is accessible to a wide and interdisciplinary audience, not only within musicology, but also to those interested in early modern global history, sound studies, race, and slavery.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.

Cover Image: 'The manner in which the Mexicans dance', in Juan de Tovar, Historia de la venida de los indios (Ms., ca. 1585), f. 58r. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, CC BY-SA 4.0.

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5. Black Atlantic Acoustemologies and the Maritime Archive

Danielle Skeehan

Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.¹

—Édouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays

In Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno — a fictionalized retelling of events that took place off the coast of Santa Maria, near Chile, on February 20, 1805 — the captain and crew of the Massachusetts-bound Bachelor’s Delight anchor their ship in the harbor of a small, uninhabited island. They soon find that they are not alone.² Observing a rather battered and

¹ Édouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse Selected Essays (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), pp. 123–124.
² In the historical original, an American sea captain, Amasa Delano, had anchored The Perseverance off Santa Maria, while restocking water supplies on a return journey from Canton. While there, a rather battered and weather-beaten Spanish merchant ship soon sailed into harbor and appeared to be in distress. Assessing the situation, Delano decided to approach The Tryal and offer his services. In Delano’s published account of what followed, he notes that ‘As soon as I got on deck, the captain, mate, people and slaves, crowded around me to relate their stories, and to make known their grievances’ (Delano, Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres (Boston: E. G. House, 1817), p. 322). Delano was on board The Tryal for the greater part of the day, and relates very little else until — at his departure — the Captain of the ship — Benito Cereno — jumps overboard and informs Delano that he had been audience to an elaborate performance carried off by the enslaved Africans on board the ship, that they had revolted, and that Cereno himself was, in fact, their captive. The events are related in three prior written accounts (as well
weather-beaten Spanish merchant ship sail into harbor, the American captain, Amasa Delano, decides to approach the vessel and offer his services. Boarding the *San Dominick*, Delano is immediately struck by the ‘the wailing ejaculations of the indiscriminate multitude’ and the ‘noisy confusion’ resonating throughout the Spanish ship: oakum pickers ‘accompanied the[ir] task with a continuous, low, monotonous, chant, droning and drilling away like so many gray-headed bag-pipers playing a funeral march’ and hatchet sharpeners ‘clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din’. Growing ‘impatient of the hubbub of voices’, Delano turns to the captain of the ship, Benito Cereno, and asks him to account for the apparent discord. As Cereno goes on to tell a tale of how sickness and maritime misadventure depleted the crew and battered the ship, the ‘cymballing of the hatchet-polishers’ continues to punctuate the narrative, and Delano — increasingly annoyed by this background ‘din’ — wonders ‘why such an interruption should be allowed, especially in that part of the ship, and in the ears of an invalid’.3

Observing the apparent lack of order on board the *San Dominick* with, in Melville’s words, his ‘blunt-thinking American eyes’, Captain Delano perhaps serves as a cautionary tale for all readers.4 By refusing to recognize the ‘noisy confusion’, ‘barbarous din’, and continuous sonic ‘interruption’ as a mode of communication, Delano fails to read — or, perhaps more accurately, to *hear* — what has actually happened on the ship: the enslaved men and women had risen up against their former captors, had taken control of the ship, and were attempting to sail to Senegal. The apparent disorder was, in fact, not disorder at all: rather it was a highly orchestrated ‘operatic’ performance that staged the relationship between free and enslaved — European and New World African — exactly as Captain Delano expected to see it.5
I begin with this brief reading of Melville’s novella because it may also offer new ways for thinking about how we, as scholars, approach the archive of Atlantic slavery. Inevitably, like Captain Delano, we view the contents of ship’s logs, captain’s journals, and account books with ‘a stranger’s eye’. In fact, the cold empiricism of these records encourages us to do just that: to read at a surface level and glean what ‘facts’ the record may disclose — facts intended by record keepers to be found. And as scholars who have explored the slave trade’s systematic documentation show, these records most often serve as evidence for the suppression and eradication of African voices, cultures, and resistance. However, ships traveling the pathways of the Middle Passage — and beyond — were anything but silent spaces, and perhaps Delano’s oversights might serve as an invitation for us to reconsider the ways we read. This, of course, is not an easy task: sound fades and only the writing remains. However, I wonder if there may be something in these records that we have failed to read — or, like Captain Delano, to hear.

This chapter reads the writing of the Middle Passage with an attention to how it characterizes the sonic conditions of ship life. Attention to Atlantic “soundscapes” — in addition to and embedded within alphabetic writing — offers an avenue through which to understand the lived experience of those who did not leave behind their own records, as well as to consider media alternative to writing through which people communicated, expressed themselves, and resisted processes of dehumanization. Because few firsthand narratives of the Middle Passage written or dictated by New World Africans survive, the experiences of men and women traversing the Atlantic has been understood as largely unrepresentable. At best, we refer to the nascent voices of people like Venture Smith, Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, and others who survived the passage and lived to tell about it. For these reasons, scholars inevitably return to the records kept by captors, and this writing seems to only confirm the unrepresentable violent, and how numerous the ‘slaves’ are (I use quotations since at this point they are ‘performing’ their enslavement).

6 Melville, The Piazza Tales, p. 120.
nature of enslaved voices and experiences: where the voices of African captives enter the written record, they are recorded as noise rather than communication. Translated as ‘murmurs’, ‘cries’, ‘complaints’, ‘shrieks’, ‘groans’, ‘bursts’, and ‘uproars’, the record renders these communications non-sensible and non-linguistic. We might even say that the discursive authority of the captor — an authority tied to the written word — relied on rendering the sounds produced by enslaved men and women as sonically incomprehensible, non-reproducible, or even silent.

In what follows, I read both along and against the grain of an archive kept by captors and listen for how the sounds of African captives punctuate, disrupt, and contest the attempts to turn people into commodities, as documented in written records. The soundscape of the Middle Passage relied on the human voice, the body, and the ship — rather than traditional musical instruments or writing technologies — to make sound and amplify messages. The ship itself, as I will elaborate below, served as gigantic, migrating, percussion instrument and, as it amplified the sounds emanating from below deck, reminded captain and crew that their ‘cargo’ was one that could think, feel, and act. Ships’ logs, journals, account books, and literary treatments of the Middle Passage — such as James Field Stanfield’s epic poem, The Guinea Voyage — translate the sounds of ship life to the page. Examining the sonic outbursts embedded within the written record, I’d like to take up Richard Cullen Rath’s challenge to ‘hear the page as well as see it’. In doing so, we can see how this writing records the conditions of the Middle Passage from two registers: the calculated master narrative at the surface of the record, and the sounds that erupt from the depths. From this perspective, the writing of the Middle Passage may, in fact, serve as an early audio recording technology. That is, as a means of

8  Richard Cullen Rath, How Early America Sounded (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. x. Rath defines soundways as ‘the paths, trajectories, transformations, mediations, practices, and techniques — in short, the ways — that people employ to interpret and express their attitudes and beliefs about sound’ (p. 2). See also Emily Thompson, The Soundscape of Modernity (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). Thompson explains that a soundscape ‘is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world. The physical aspects of a soundscape consist not only in the sounds themselves, the waves of acoustical energy permeating the atmosphere in which people live, but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, those sounds’ (p. 12).
capturing, reproducing, and visually performing on the page, to invoke Fred Moten’s work, the sounds, songs, and sonic media of the captives.\footnote{See Fred Moten, \textit{In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).}

Western Enlightenment-era thinkers favored sight as the most critical of the five senses and, in turn, understood writing as the assumed avenue through which ‘reason’ and ‘rational’ thought was transmitted. In this context, we might assume that modernity, colonialism, racial capitalism, and slavery are coterminous processes produced, in many ways, by modes of representation (such as writing) and discipline (such as incarceration) rooted in ocular technologies.\footnote{See Teresa Brennan and Jay Martin, eds., \textit{Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight} (New York: Routledge 1996).} Moreover, when we as scholars favor the written word as the primary means of understanding historical events, processes, practices, and peoples, we may also thereby privilege forms of knowledge that are centered on sight and that reproduce the technologies of white supremacy. That is, as we ‘examine’, ‘look to’, and ‘investigate’ histories, the very language we use to ‘discover’ the meanings of texts points to methodologies inherited from an Enlightenment-era empiricism that favored sight as the most critical of the five senses.\footnote{Brennan and Jay, eds., \textit{Vision in Context}.}

Enlightenment rationality and its reliance on sight and print publicity as a conduit for reason, is certainly complicit in characterizing enslaved experience as ‘unspeakable’, ‘unrepresentable’, and ‘unaccountable’. However, as scholars such as Marissa Fuentes and others have shown, sound too serves as a means of discipline and a mode through which to reproduce racial hierarchies.\footnote{See Marissa Fuentes, \textit{Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016), https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812293005} That is to say, a focus on varying registers of sound \textit{and} text allows us to understand modernity as a ‘dialectical process [...] poised between the rational and the affective, the discursive and the embodied’.\footnote{See Veit Erlmann, ‘But What of the Ethnographic Ear? Anthropology, Sound, and the Senses’, in \textit{Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity}, ed. by Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), pp. 1–20 (p. 13).}

Listening to Atlantic soundscapes reveals this dialectical struggle between reason and resonance — between writing and sound — that frames knowledge production in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.
In taking up the call of recent sound studies scholars to listen for how sound has shaped the history of human experience, this chapter seeks to destabilize a perceived dichotomy between sight and sound, text and sound making.\textsuperscript{14} Writing not only serves as a means through which to hear the past; rather, I argue that the sounds of the past — specifically the sonic media produced by peoples (captors, sailors, and captives) of the Middle Passage — may have been essential to the very formation of Western Anglophone literary traditions. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy have shown how Black Atlantic ‘countercultures’ are dependent upon music and memory, and work in ways that are antithetical to a Habermasian model that would privilege print as an avenue of ‘rational’ communication and subject formation.\textsuperscript{15} In this setting, Gilroy argues, a Black Atlantic counterculture ‘defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in a partially hidden public sphere of its own’.\textsuperscript{16} As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has argued, ‘meaning might profitably be lodged, for the enslaved, in the locations where a plantocratic sensus communis ended — in sites and sensations that were precisely not self-evident to the master class’.\textsuperscript{17} This chapter examines the

\textsuperscript{14} R. Murray Schafer’s *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Merrimac: Destiny, 1993) is one of the first works to address ‘the enculturated nature of sound [...] and the material spaces of performance that are constructed for the purpose of propagating sound’ (p. 25). See also Mark M. Smith’s essay ‘Listening to the Heard Worlds of Antebellum America’, *Journal of The Historical Society*, 1 (2000), 63–97. Smith invites early American scholars, in particular, to think about how sound can serve as an ‘index of identity’. Similarly, Richard Rath’s 2003 book-length study, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), attends to sound as a way to ‘open up parts of these worlds, not to get a glimpse of them but to listen in’ (p. 9). Most recently, *American Quarterly* published a special issue on sound studies in September 2011 (entitled ‘Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies’, edited by Kara Keeling and Josh Kun) calling for ‘an ongoing project to dismantle dominant hierarchies of knowledge production and critical thought’ (p. 446) that may allow scholars to explore how ‘sound makes us re-think our relation to power’ (Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, ‘Introduction: Listening to American Studies’, *American Quarterly*, 63.3 (2011), 445–459 (pp. 446, 450), https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2011.0037).


points where one *sensus communis* — or one register of meaning — ends and another begins, in order to consider how African sonic media functions within and transforms Anglophone writing.

The sections that follow examine: 1) the architecture of slave ships and how ‘slavery at sea’ produces both the soundscape of the Middle Passage and, as Sowande M. Mustakeem has argued, Blackness itself;\(^{18}\) 2) the ways that ‘non-literary’ manuscripts record Black sounds and how those sounds challenge the role of the record, to invoke Stephanie Smallwood’s work, in transforming captives into commodities;\(^ {19}\) 3) the ways that this soundscape might influence the evolution of eighteenth-century Western literary traditions, such as the epic, and abolitionist writing more generally.

### Architecture

Dehumanizing living conditions, the separation of families, poor quality food, and daily routines that included forced exercise, torture, rape, and medical inspection, characterized the slave ship’s culture of terror.\(^{20}\) Some captives were captured thousands of miles from the coast and did not speak the same language as other captives.\(^{21}\) On board ships, men, women, and children were often stripped of their clothing and thus of

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\(^{18}\) See Sowande M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2016), https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252040559.001.0001


\(^{20}\) Many ships, of course, listed New World African sailors — free and enslaved — in the ship’s articles. See for instance documents relating to the voyage of the slave ship *Sally* which sailed from Rhode Island in 1764. Records of the Sally venture are preserved in the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, as well as in the archives of the Rhode Island Historical Society. The records have also been digitized and are available here: http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/sally/

\(^{21}\) Ship captains purposefully purchased men and women from different regions so as to limit their capacity to communicate with each other and to thus plot insurrections. For instance, Alexander Falconbridge writes: ‘Many negroes, upon being questioned relative to the places of their nativity have asserted, that they have travelled during the revolution of several moons (their usual method of calculating time) before they have reached the places where they were purchased by the Black traders. At these fairs, which are held at uncertain periods, but generally every six weeks, several thousands are frequently exposed to sale, who had been collected from all parts of the country for a very considerable distance round’ (*An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: J. Philips, 1788), p. 12).
protection from elements, their individuality, and cultural signifiers of home. From here men, women, and children were separated and housed in different sections of the ship. As Alexander Falconbridge would recount in *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, ‘The man negroes [...] the women [and] the boys [...] are all placed in different apartments’. For all, the ocean represented the permanent, irrevocable severing of ties to home.

Falconbridge’s description of ‘apartments’ invites us to think about how the architecture of the ship — in addition to on-board practices — was designed to strip men, women, and children of ties to culture and language and to alienate them from each other. That is, the architecture of ships was an important element in what Mustakeem, in *Slavery at Sea*, identifies as a ‘human manufacturing process’. As she argues, the Middle Passage was not simply a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade; rather, it was a system that deployed racial terror in order to produce and commodify Black bodies as a coherent group. Mustakeem writes that ‘the interior holds of merchant ships served as vital sites of power sailors used to dehumanize captives, enforce dependency, inflict pain, establish authority, and prohibit any sense of control over one’s personal life in the near and far future’. In these spaces, she continues, sailors ‘relentlessly unmade bondpeople’s bodies’. The division of space within holds was equally important to this unmaking and in the simultaneous making of racial difference so essential to racial slavery as it evolved over the course of the eighteenth-century.

The spatial divisions of the slave ship and the materials used for its construction contributed to both the ‘manufacture’ of human commodities as well as, perhaps, the emergence of distinct African diasporic cultures rooted in *acoustemologies* produced within the material conditions of the ship. As Sydney Mintz and Richard Price have argued in their now classic (if controversial) study of creolization, ‘What the slaves undeniably shared at the outset was their enslavement; all — or nearly all — else had to be *created by them*’. In these conditions, as Ronald Radano points out, ‘musical practices come together more

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The ship, in this context, serves as an instrument — in both the metaphorical and literal sense — of racial terror that manufactures slaves, and as something that can be made to ‘sound’ and ‘play’ by the captives as they contest their imprisonment, forge bonds, and express themselves in ways that will carry over to and inform New World diasporic cultures.

Slaving ships were structurally transformed off the coast of Africa in order to become the kinds of instruments of terror discussed above. For instance, Samuel Gamble, the captain of the *Sandown*, records the slow process of unloading European commodities — such as cloth, powder, and guns — as the ship coasted off the shore of Upper Guinea as well as the process of refitting the ship to hold a human cargo. The 138-ton *Sandown* sailed from Liverpool in 1793 with twenty-eight crew members and most likely resembled most mid-sized ‘Guineamen’. Slave ships ranged in size from 10 to 566 tons carrying, respectively, 30 to 700 captives and maintaining a 10–1 captive/sailor ratio. The first slave ships were adapted from merchant vessels, but Guineamen like the *Sandown* would have been designed with the potential for slaving in mind. Slaving specific specifications for a ship the *Sandown’s* size would have included increasing the space between decks to roughly 4.5 feet, adding lower deck portholes to moderately improve airflow to the 250 (or more) people held in the hold, and sheathing the oak hull in copper in order to reduce wood rot and worm damage common in tropical waters. Yet despite being designed for slaving voyages, Guineamen needed to be refitted for the Middle Passage section of their trading voyage. Gamble records that ‘Most of October 1793 was spent restructuring the ship’. He continues: ‘Carpenters finish’d the Baricado Employ’d them taking down the Cabin Bulkhead’, and the following day, these same carpenters were ‘at work taking down the State Rooms and clearing the Cabin for a Women Room’.

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26 The *Sandown* lost five crew members on the voyage to Africa, five more on the coast as they prepared to take on their human cargo, and an additional sailor on the way to the West Indies.

In addition to separating men, women, and children below deck, populations on the ship were further divided by the ‘Baricado’ — a structure designed to separate the enslaved from the (primarily) free European crew when men and women were brought on deck for air and ‘exercise’. The baricado, a ten-foot-tall wall bisecting the deck at the main mast and extending several feet beyond the ship’s sides, divided the deck of the ship into two distinct spaces: one occupied by the enslaved, ‘black’ cargo, and one occupied by a mixed crew of sailors (some forced into labor themselves) who now came to understand themselves as ‘white’ and ‘free’. In many ways, the baricado — literally ‘an obstruction to passage’ — created these categories and kept them in place. In the case of an insurrection, the baricado was in place so that sailors could fire at enslaved men and women without shooting other sailors. For insurrectionary Africans, the baricado also worked to keep
sailors at a distance, and — if they ran out of ammunition — to inhibit them from retaking the ship.

William Snelgrave describes just such a revolt on board a ship called the Henry in *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade* (1734). ‘Our Ship’s Company consisted of fifty white People’, he writes before continuing to describe the revolt: ‘This Mutiny having been plotted among all the grown Negroes on board, they ran to the fore-Part of the Ship in a Body, and endeavored to force the Barricado on the Quarter-Deck; not regarding the Muskets or half-Pikes presented to them, by the white Men, through the Loop-Holes’.28 On the slave ship, divided by the baricado, the people on board the Henry recast themselves as ‘white’ and ‘Black’. That is, ships structurally and discursively transform a multiethnic group of strangers (sailors and enslaved Africans) into newly homogenized groups distinguished by skin color and levels of (un)freedom. The slave ship mechanizes the production of Blackness (and in turn whiteness) as it imagines ways of visualizing and spatially configuring different types of labor and relations to capital.

That said, if ships were spatially designed to produce racial difference, their composition — a ‘hollow place’, in Olaudah Equiano’s words, structured by wood, cloth, and copper — was designed to resonate and carry sound.29 Marcus Rediker has compared ships to drums.30 The hollow center of the ship, punctuated by portholes and access points to get below deck, would surely work to amplify sound. Like the soundboard (or top) on an acoustic guitar, the ‘top deck’ and what we might call ‘sound holes’ on a ship are important to amplifying noise produced in the hold. As the air in a guitar’s cavity resonates the vibrations of the string, the soundboard amplifies the sound. The hollow, concave body of the ship would function in similar ways to resonate the vibrations of voices and bodies, amplifying rather than diffusing sound. Wood, furthermore, has its own unique acoustical properties and produces a longer reverberation time than other materials. For these reasons, in the eighteenth-century as well as today, many theaters

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used wood paneling or acoustic tiles on the floors, walls, and ceilings to increase the ‘warmth’ of the sound.\textsuperscript{31} As the eighteenth-century English theater architect George Saunders wrote, ‘Wood is sonorous, conductive and produces a pleasing tone, and is therefore the very best material for lining a theatre; for not absorbing so much as some, and not conducting so much as others, this medium renders it peculiarly suitable to rooms for musical purposes; the little resonance it occasions being rather agreeable than injurious’.\textsuperscript{32}

While ship architecture and record books deploy a visual and spatial organization of race and freedom, sound has the capacity to travel beyond the spaces that bodies are relegated to — beyond physical compartments and barriers on board the ship, as well as the ontological categories created by logs and account books. In this sense, the material properties of ships may have led to the formation of unique forms of audio production. As Rediker has written, ‘ships forged new forms of life — new language, new means of expression, new resistance, and a new sense of community’.\textsuperscript{33} However, thinking about the ship as instrument invites us to consider how African captives used the conditions of their captivity to craft new ways of communicating outside of Anglophone literacy — how they crafted an aural sensus communis largely misheard by their captors. Making sound is a way of creating a space of cultural autonomy within the space of imprisonment and allowed enslaved people to imagine themselves differently from how the logs, records, and bills of sale imagined them.

**Amplification**

Sound does not respect boundaries, barricades, or segmentations: the entire ship is designed as a space to carry and echo voices. But what did it sound like to be on these ships travelling across vast stretches of

\textsuperscript{31} The quality people perceive as ‘warmth’ does not refer to a literal change in temperature. Rather, the affect is haptic: as ‘standing waves’ move through the air in all directions, they produce in listeners a feeling of intimacy. See Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).


\textsuperscript{33} Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, p. 265.
ocean? What were the sounds heard by sailors and prisoners alike? What sounds did they make and how were they understood by each other? Nineteenth-century U.S. authors such as Melville and Richard Henry Dana Jr. offer some clues to shipboard sonic worlds and, as I show above, often characterized ship life as one apprehended and navigated through sound. For instance, in Two Years Before the Mast (1840), Dana — embarking on his first sea journey — recounts leaving the Boston harbor as follows:

'A-a-ll ha-a-a-nds! up anchor, a-ho-oy!' In a short time, everyone was in motion, the sails loosed, the yards braced, and we began to heave up the anchor, which was our last hold upon Yankee land. I could take but little part in all these preparations. My little knowledge of a vessel was all at fault. Unintelligible orders were so rapidly given and so immediately executed; there was such a hurrying about, and such an intermingling of strange cries and stranger actions, that I was completely bewildered. There is not so helpless and pitiable an object in the world as a landsman beginning a sailor's life. At length those peculiar, long-drawn sounds, which denote that the crew are heaving the windlass, began, and in a few moments we were under weigh. The noise of the water thrown from the bows began to be heard, the vessel leaned over from the damp night breeze, and rolled with the heavy ground swell, and we had actually begun our long, long journey.\(^34\)

The inexperienced Dana describes leaving ‘Yankee land’, in part, by what he hears: ‘unintelligible orders’, the ‘intermingling of strange cries’, ‘peculiar, long-drawn sounds’, and the ‘noise of the water thrown from the bows’ tells him they had begun their long journey to California. Sound was an essential element of ship life. These sounds included elements of the natural world as ships moved through it, such as water, birds, storms; however, they also included spoken orders and resulting work, such as the ‘heaving’, ‘loosing’, or ‘bracing’ described above, often accompanied by songs or sea shanties (which I discuss in more detail below).

While the sounds described by Dana would certainly be present in the soundscape of the Middle Passage, men such as Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano describe their entrance into the sonic world of these ships in a very different language. Rather than merely unintelligible and

\(^{34}\text{Richard Henry Dana Jr., Two Years Before the Mast (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1840), p. 1.}\)
confusing, the sounds on slaving ships represent captives’ experience of pain, terror, and abjection and are intended to amplify feelings of terror and abjection among their fellow captives. For instance, Cugoano narrates: ‘when a vessel arrived to conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be heard but the rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellowmen’. Cugoano’s passage into slavery is also a passage into a Black Atlantic soundscape located in realm beyond that which ‘language can describe’. Equiano similarly describes the failure of language and words as he travelled from inland to coast and littoral and from freedom into slavery: ‘From the time I left my own nation I always found somebody that understood me till I came to the sea coast. The languages of different nations did not totally differ [...] They were therefore easily learned; and, while I was journeying thus through Africa, I acquired two or three different tongues’. At the sea coast, on the brink of being interred within the slave ship and entering forever the world of Black Atlantic slavery, the word gives way to the scream. It is here that he sees his sister and writes, ‘As soon as she saw me she gave a loud shriek, and ran into my arms — I was quite overpowered: neither of us could speak; but, for a considerable time, clung to each other in mutual embraces, unable to do any thing but weep’. Her ‘shriek’ anticipates the sounds and horror Equiano would describe later: ‘The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable’.

Cugoano’s and Equiano’s accounts of their ‘uprooting’, dispossession, and relocation within the order of Atlantic slavery resonate with (and perhaps prefigure) Glissant’s description of the distribution of sound,
noise, and silence within Black Atlantic cultures. For instance, Glissant writes:

For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. This must be understood. It seems that meaning and pitch went together for the uprooted individual, in the unrelenting silence of the world of slavery. It was the intensity of the sound that dictated meaning: the pitch of the sound conferred significance.\(^\text{40}\)

In this passage, Glissant develops a kind of genealogy of Black Atlantic acoustemology. For the enfranchised, the word is comprised of sounds which, without order, represent noise. For the disenfranchised who are denied speech, din must become its own discourse. Extreme noise — the scream, the shout, the untranslatable sound — becomes a new language, a language perhaps developed on ships as captives developed new textures of camouflaged speech and communication in registers that their captors can only hear as ‘confused’ if not ‘unpleasant’ sound.

The archive of the Middle Passage supports Glissant’s understandings of how white westerners heard an emergent Black Atlantic soundscape. The captain of the Sandown, for instance, records feet stomping on boards, hands slapping on thighs and, what seemed to him unintelligible cries.\(^\text{41}\) Similarly, Dr. Thomas Trotter, a surgeon on board the Brookes recreates the stifled voices crying out from below deck, ‘Yarra! Yarra!’ [We are sick] and ‘Kickeraboo! Kickeraboo!’ [we are dying].\(^\text{42}\) Another sailor, describing sounds as song, comments, ‘what [was] the subject of their songs [I] cannot say’.\(^\text{43}\) However, as readers of this archive, we can begin to imagine: on another ship, Joseph Hawkins, dramatizing voices and bodies in revolt, writes that enslaved men and women in the hold ‘set up a scream’, ‘shouting whenever those above did any thing that appeared likely’ to overturn the order of the ship.\(^\text{44}\)

What Glissant seems to suggest, and what is reiterated in the account of revolt above, is that the soundings of New World Africans

\(^{41}\) *A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica*, ed. Mouser.
\(^{43}\) Mr. Janerverin, interview, 1770s. Quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, p. 282.
\(^{44}\) Joseph Hawkins, *A History of a Voyage to the Coast of Africa, and Travels into the Interior of that Country; Containing Particular Descriptions of the Climate and Inhabitants, Particulars Concerning the Slave Trade* (New York: Luther Pratt, 1797).
may represent a counterclaim to political enfranchisement and may provide another model of political process — one, perhaps, that we have failed to hear because it is not necessarily located within access to an Atlantic print public sphere.\(^{45}\) As Paul Gilroy has suggested, the ‘unsayability’ of racial terror ‘can be used to challenge the privileged conception of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness’.\(^{46}\) Language and writing have only a ‘limited expressive power’ to communicate the polyphonic — or multi-sounded — experiences of the Middle Passage. Sound, in the words of Saidiya Hartman, could be said to ‘topple the hierarchy of discourse, and […] engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices’ — or, as in *Benito Cereno*, the clash of hatchets.\(^{47}\) Moreover, if din is interchangeable with discourse, an Enlightenment language of rationality might also be merely noise.

Gilroy posits ‘antiphony’ as an auditory model of political action that works in dramatically different ways than those established by Habermas. Antiphony, meaning ‘opposite voice’, often manifested itself in the call and response sonic cultures represented *in both* African political and religious practices, and in Anglo Atlantic and Black Atlantic labor practices.\(^{48}\) In many African cultures, call and response characterized a form of political, proto-democratic participation. It was utilized in a number of public situations — in debating civil and political matters as well as structuring participation in religious ceremonies. In turn, sailor’s sea shanties and many New World slave songs transfer the call and response structure to an Atlantic and New World labor setting. And as Ray Costello notes, it is ‘often hard to tell whether in some shanties we are dealing with an Africanized British tune or an actual African tune slightly Europeanized’.\(^{49}\) Citing the musicologist, Peter Van der Merwe, Costello suggests that sea shanties and New World slave songs may share a genealogy: that sailors’ sea shanties may have

\(^{45}\) For more on New World Africans’ contestation of the logic of the print public sphere, see Dillon’s ‘John Marrant Blows the French Horn’.

\(^{46}\) Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 74.


\(^{49}\) Ibid., p. 44.
been influenced primarily by the call and response songs of New World Africans, suggesting that these traditions were brought to the Americas along the routes of the Middle Passage.

Shanties thus point to the creolization and hybridity of the Atlantic soundscape as sailors learned songs from New World Africans in port cities and onboard ships, intermingled them with land-based folk songs, and altered them as they carried these songs along the routes of Atlantic slavery. These sounds, in turn, would have characterized the ‘noise’ newly enslaved Africans experienced during the Middle Passage and punctuated the memories and forms of communication they brought with them to sites of labor in the New World. What was used for political action in West Africa was reoriented to labor and camouflaged community in the New World. Melville captures how call and response was fully coopted by oceanic labor regimes by the mid-nineteenth century. In *Redburn* (1849), he writes:

*I soon got used to this singing, for the sailors never touched a rope without it. Sometimes, when no one happened to strike up, and the pulling, whatever it might be, did not seem to be getting forward very well, the mate would always say, ‘Come, men, can’t any of you sing? Sing now, and raise the dead’. And then some one of them would begin, and if every man’s arms were as much relieved as mine by the song, and he could pull as much better as I did, with such a cheering accompaniment, I am sure the song was well worth the breath expended on it. It is a great thing in a sailor to know how to sing well, for he gets a great name by it from the officers, and a good deal of popularity among his shipmates. Some sea-captains, before shipping a man, always ask him whether he can sing out at a rope.*

It was perhaps on slave ships traveling the Middle Passage that this kind of sonic structure was transferred and creolized as Irish and Anglo sailors and African captives inevitably influenced and transformed each other’s sound worlds.

A sailor on board the *Hubridas* in 1786, a Liverpool slave trader who later published an account of his adventures, seemed to recognize how Anglo captor and African captive may, in fact, share musical and sonic structures. In writing about ship life, he paid close attention to sound and captured enslaved men, women, and children engaging in call and

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response. He noted that enslaved men and women raised their voices in ‘a kind of chorus’ that resounded ‘at the close of particular sentences’. The sailor’s use of the term ‘chorus’ translates what he is hearing into Anglo-western terminology that he understands: a chorus consists of individual voices coming together to produce a collective, synchronized voice, and in theatrical traditions the chorus served as commentary on dramatic action. It is not unlike call and response: sea shanties — and other forms of call and response work songs — were known for their flexible lyrical forms and improvisation. They typically featured a shanty leader or soloist with the crew sounding the chorus as they completed tasks around the ship. On board ships, for African captives, this type of call and response communication meant that through the production of sound, men and women speaking different languages and dialects began to communicate and comment on the conditions of their captivity. And, on board the Hubridas, what began as murmurs and morphed into song before long erupted into the shouts and cries of coordinated revolt. Notably, these sounds are produced by people using the material conditions of their imprisonment — the ship — to contest the logic of their enslavement.

Notation

Gilroy’s emphasis on music and Glissant’s discussion of noise invite us to consider how New World Africans used alternative media to establish sensus communis rather than written discourse; however, as I suggested at the outset of this paper, I would also like to think about how Atlantic and New World soundscapes shaped by African captives, sailors, and others may have in turn shaped Western literary aesthetics in the early years of global modernity. That is, what if we were to understand Atlantic writing as the saturation of sound? And ask: how does sound produce the written word? How might the written word be a different but related kind of ‘notation’? And, to what extent do Anglophone writers use the sounds of Black suffering to produce white ‘literature’?

The commercial writing of the Middle Passage — ships logs, account books, journals, and sales records — was as important a technology as

the spatial architecture of the ship for producing race and (un)freedom. It was through this writing that captives from different regions, countries, and nations came to be understood as racially homogenous ‘African slaves’. Take, for instance, the record of sale produced by captain Esek Hopkins of the Sally when the ship reached Antigua in fall of 1765 (see Fig. 5.2). Like most commercial writing, the sale record establishes a critical relationship between narrative writing and numerical calculation, but in the case of human commodities it is inevitably a political and juridical document as well: it records the transfer of enslaved people from the Sally’s account book to the ledgers and account books of West Indian plantations. The sale record’s vertical lines cordon-off who is recognized as a political or juridical subject and who is not. The enslaved Africans who are described only in terms of age-range, gender, and price, are imagined to stand outside of the legal discourse of the contract — they are recognized as people with identifiable characteristics, but they exist extra-legally within the system of Caribbean slavery and their bodies disappear into the ‘net profits’ recorded on the lower right column of the document.

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52 For instance, Hopkins produces an invoice of goods loaded on the ship in Providence, keeps a log that narrates daily events on board the ship, documents financial transactions, and finally records the sale of the ships’ captives in the West Indies. Brown University has digitized all surviving documents related to the Sally’s voyage. These documents are available here: https://library.brown.edu/cds/sally/

53 Nicholas Brown and Company was a Providence merchant firm run by four brothers Nicholas, John, Joseph, and Moses Brown. Moses Brown was a prominent abolitionist and critical of his brothers’ entering into the slave trade. According to James T. Campbell, The Sally was just one of roughly one thousand Rhode Island ships to engage the African slave trade. See Campbell, ‘Navigating the Past: Brown University and the Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally, 1764–1765’, Imagining America, 4, Syracuse University, 2007, https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=ia

54 It is worth noting that enslaved men and women in the Caribbean did, of course, challenge Anglo-centric claims to textual authority in writing, and sought legal justice as well. See Nicole N. Aljoe, “‘Going to Law’: Legal Discourse and Testimony in Early West Indian Slave Narratives’, Early American Literature, 46.2 (2011), 351–381, https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2011.0013. She argues, ‘Caribbean slaves did often (and successfully) seek justice and found audiences through which to voice their cases against slaveholders and establish the injustices of plantation slavery. More broadly, slave narratives and testimonies might be understood as such recourse as well. However, by law, enslaved peoples were often denied such recourses’ (351). She specifically references The History of Mary Prince (1831), Negro Slavery as Described by a Negro: Being the Narrative of Ashton Warner, a Native of St. Vincent (1831), and A
Account books and sales records characterize the Atlantic as a discursive world generating and generated by the cool and calculating record of the exchange of goods and peoples. As Stephanie Smallwood and Ian Baucom have argued, a complex network of writing made this type of global capitalism possible, and the slave trade, in particular, was systematically reliant upon commercial discourses that included ship’s logs, insurance documents, sales records, and account books. However, a number of authors — European and New World African — responded to their respective experiences of the Middle Passage through more traditional ‘literary’ genres. In fact, we might even say that the writing of the Middle Passage participated in the production of literary styles that was characteristic of global modernity. In slave narratives, abolitionist accounts, and poetic verse describing the horrors of the passage into Atlantic slavery we see claims to liberal individualism being made through a combination of realism and sentimentalism that will also inform the genre of the eighteenth century: the novel.

Narrative of Events since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica (1837).
The emphasis on sound in Middle Passage writing serves both to establish the veracity (realism) of the account and to incite empathy (sentimentalism). For instance, the surgeon, Alexander Falconbridge, includes the following in his 1788 *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*:

Exercise being deemed necessary for the preservation of their health, they are sometimes obliged to dance, when the weather will permit their coming on deck. If they go about it reluctantly, or do not move with agility, they are flogged; a person standing by them all the time with a cat-o’-nine-tails in his hand for that purpose. Their musick, upon these occasions, consists of a drum, sometimes with only one head; and when that is worn out, they do not scruple to make use of the bottom of one of the tubs before described. The poor wretches are frequently compelled to sing also; but when they do so, their songs are generally, as may naturally be expected, melancholy lamentations of their exile from their native country.

Falconbridge served as the surgeon on four slaving voyages between 1780 and 1787 before joining the abolitionist cause. His account describes the conditions and perverse treatment of captives — the forced singing and dancing and senseless brutality — in exact detail. His descriptions of captives’ songs, however, are intended to elicit sympathy in his readers for the humanity of the men, women, and children on board by showing they not only feel but express the same feelings as Europeans and through a similar form: song. Their songs, described as ‘melancholy lamentations of their exile from their native country’, further connects the captives’ songs to Western aesthetic traditions. The OED, for instance defines melancholy as a ‘tender, sentimental, or reflective sadness; sadness giving rise to or considered as a subject for poetry, sentimental reflection, etc., or as a source of aesthetic pleasure’. This definition ties their sadness to artistic pleasure and their exile to the aesthetic practice of nostalgic contemplation. While Falconbridge routes the songs and expressions of African captives through the genres and popular sentiments recognizable to a British audience, we might also think about how he and other Anglophone writers use *African aesthetics* (as they develop in new forms on board ships) to produce *Anglophone traditions*. In this sense, the slave ship does not simply produce the

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55 See Falconbridge’s *An Account of the Slave Trade*. 
conditions and epistemologies of racial capitalism. It also influences the eighteenth-century evolution of Western literary traditions as writers attempted to transcribe the sounds of these ships to the page.

Published within a year of Falconbridge’s Account, James Field Stanfield’s* The Guinea Voyage, A Poem in Three Books* (1789), turns to epic poetry as the form through which to narrativize the voices, events, and sounds of the slave ship. Or, perhaps more accurately, Stanfield transforms the epic in ways that it can be used to tell the story of the men, women, and children on board the ship. The classic epic told the histories of extraordinary people and tied their adventures to the foundation of national histories and shared moral values. Stanfield’s poem reroutes the conventions of the epic in order to tell the history of enslaved individuals: that is, it begins in medias res with an invocation to a muse, introduces the theme, shows divine intervention, includes epithets and catalogues, and arguably uses the Middle Passage itself as the setting for the hero’s descent into the underworld. Considering the traditional use of the epic, Stanfield’s reworking invites us to consider what role the modern epic — the epic translated to the conditions of the Middle Passage — may play in shaping the national histories and mores of global modernity.

Turning to Stanfield’s verse, it becomes clear that sound was important to the ‘underworld’ voyage of slave ships of the Middle Passage. Following the traditional opening (invocation and introduction of theme), the poem quickly moves into sonic registers and musical terms:

The direful Voyage to Guinea’s sultry shore,
And Afric’s wrongs, indignant Muse! deplore.
Or will the Muse the opprobious theme disdain—
And start abhorrent from the unhallowed strain?
How blast the bard whom happier themes inspire,
Who wakes with kindred lays his melting lyre;
Whose soothing tones by sympathy impart,
Joy’s glad emotions to the feeling heart!
But mine be such dread notes as fiercely pour
The shrieks of anguish on the midnight hour!
Be mine the broken strain, the fearful sound,
That wildly winds the howling death-song round!\(^{56}\)

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Stanfield signals from the opening that his epic will serve as a departure from tradition: his theme, a Guinea Voyage, is opprobrious and unhallowed — that is, disgraceful, unconsecrated, and all-in-all, new territory for the epic to take on. In introducing this new theme, he does so through sounds: in comparison to the ‘soothing tones’ of the classical bard’s ‘melting lyre’, his ‘dread notes’ record the shrieks of anguish, broken strains, and fearful sounds of a ‘howling death-song’ amplified throughout the ship. The phrase ‘broken strain’ further establishes the sonic and cognitive dissonance characterizing the ship and his poem. While the word ‘strain’ can intend bodily or emotional injury or damage, as well as struggle or labor, in a musical piece the strain establishes the melody. That is, the melody of this piece is broken. Stanfield, however, returns regularly to the ‘strain’ of his epic poem, writing later, ‘In one long groan the feeble throng unite; / One strain of anguish wastes the lengthen’d night’. The line suggests that out of discordant voices, emerge sounds that can create a melody or ‘one strain’. That is, the sounds of the enslaved cargo transform radical unbelonging into, potentially, a form of radical resistance — a new song with a new melody unique to New World diasporic conditions.

Stanfield had experienced the Middle Passage as a crew member on several voyages before becoming an abolitionist. In addition to writing poetry, Stanfield wrote musical theatrical works for the English stage such as The Fisherman, as well as ballads such as The Wedding of Ballyporeen, and was himself a comic opera performer. In this sense, it is perhaps not surprising that he would turn to the voice and musical and aural registers. While his poem probably presents a composite of different captives he encountered, he does seem to capture some of the unrepresentable voices and experiences of the enslaved. In particular, he tells the story of a woman, Abyeda, who he notes was the ‘theme and mistress of each rural song; / Once the blithe leader of each festive scene’. On board the ship, she maintains her role as story teller and songstress:

Half-meaning fragments of recorded woe,
In wild succession break the pensive lay,

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57 Ibid., p. 27.
58 The Fisherman was performed in Scarborough in 1786 and remained unpublished. The Wedding of Ballyporeen appeared in print in Oliver’s Choice Selection of Comic Songs (Edinburgh: Oliver & Co., 1807). See Notes and Queries: A Medium of Intercommunication for Library Men, Readers, etc., 8.11 (1897).
Through the drear night and lamentable day,
Her sad afflictions lift the melting tones,
And join each cadence with according groans.

She adds her voice to the ‘vocal throng’ as someone who can retell ‘fragments’ of her own personal and perhaps an emerging, collective history of exile and diaspora that includes the Middle Passage.\(^{59}\)

That said, Stanfield was probably less intent on showing an emergent African diasporic aural aesthetic and more interested in establishing his authority and prominence as an abolitionist writer and perhaps as a literary author as well. While he certainly paints an empathetic portrait, as Saidiya Hartman has shown, this kind of affective position can be just as dangerous as sentiments motivating anti-Black racism.\(^{60}\)

Moreover, Stanfield’s use of Black voices expressing bodies and psyches in pain to create literature filtered through a canonical Western genre tied to empire and nation building seems to simply coopt these bodies and minds in new ways for the production of the West. For this reason, I’ve sought to hear the page for the ways in which Black voices might destabilize the form of the epic and reroute its meaning and purpose.

That African captives did contest their enslavement by ‘rewriting’ the white page is evident in the work of Black men and women who wrote narratives of their enslavement and in the many examples of revolt from the Middle Passage. Like sounds that resonate through ships, the story of revolt has a tendency to migrate — through letters, rumors, and newspaper articles — from port to port and ship to ship between Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. The ‘sounds’ of revolt, in other words, not only reverberate through ships but travel beyond them and infect the print culture of wider Atlantic. In the log of the Sandown, for instance, captain Gamble not only records an uprising on his own ship, but uprisings on ships throughout the Atlantic: on the Pearl on 1 January 1794, on the Yamfamara on 16 March 1794, on the Jimmy in late May 1794. The revolt on the Pearl — Captain Howard — was less fortunate. The captives on board the Pearl killed the captain, ran the ship aground near Mattacong, destroyed all the vessel’s papers, and made a feast of ten dozen fowls and eight goats in the space of thirty-six hours.


before they were recaptured by the crew on the Nancy who must have noticed the wrecked ship.\textsuperscript{61} The fact that the captives on board the Pearl destroyed the ship’s papers — logs, journals, account books — suggests that they may have recognized the role Anglophone writing and accounting played in their enslavement. Furthermore, if these records reduce men and women to abstract numbers, through their destruction, only the rumors or echoes of revolt remain — echoes that reduce Anglophone commercial writing itself to mere noise. While these are stories of unfulfilled insurrections, they produced discursive noise in port towns and in print, and perhaps circulated as counterclaims to political enfranchisement, located at the very center of the writing that seeks to define freedom and unfreedom.

At the outset of this chapter I suggested that we take up Rath’s challenge to ‘hear the page’ for histories otherwise sunk in the sea. The paper trail left behind by the slaving voyages I’ve referenced here expose a well-rehearsed paradox at the center of Atlantic modernity: commercial avenues that facilitated the distribution of Anglophone writing, knowledge, and culture, also operated as networks to exploit the labor of dislocated peoples. Capitalism’s ‘free markets’ may have paved the way for Enlightenment politics centered on notions of liberty and equality, but these same markets supported and were supported by the ‘unfreedom’ of others.\textsuperscript{62} However, by using their own bodies to make sound, enslaved Africans challenged the very notion that those bodies were no longer their own. Peter Linebaugh has argued that ‘the ship remained perhaps the most important conduit of Pan-African communication before the appearance of the long-playing

\textsuperscript{61} A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica, pp. 93–94.

\textsuperscript{62} Scholars such as Eric Williams, C. L. R. James, and Paul Gilroy have long argued that Atlantic geographies defined by slavery are at the foundational center — rather than the periphery — of an Atlantic modernity produced by global capitalism. Hilary Beckles notes, it ‘was in the Caribbean vortex of the Atlantic Basin that [...] international capitalism took its early cultural and social identity’ (785). Caribbean colonies, he continues, were enmeshed in ‘a transcontinental complex of brokers, agents, and financiers’, imported ‘indentured labor from ‘back home’ and enslaved labor from Africa’, and ‘produced crops with capital and credit from Europe, imported food and building materials from mainland colonies, and exported their commodities globally’ (778). Beckles, ‘Capitalism, Slavery, and Caribbean Modernity’, \textit{Callaloo}, 20.4 (1997), 777–789, https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.1997.0070. See also Eric William’s \textit{Capitalism and Slavery} (Raleigh: UNC Press, 1994) and C. L. R. James’ \textit{The Black Jacobins} (New York: Vintage, 1989).
record’. Both the ship and the ships’ logs may function as early ‘audio technologies’ that prefigure the long-playing record. Ships are conduits of sound — and thus memory and communication — and, as they cross back and forth across the Atlantic, function as recorders of what has been heard. In this sense, ships act as communicative devices that promote narrative and that bring cacophonous, discordant voices into a chorus. This recording is, on occasion, reproduced in maritime writing, but most often it uses human bodies as conduits. Indeed, the soundscape of the Middle Passage is embedded in the very bodies it transports. The ship itself functions as an instrument that fosters polyphonic forms of expression that carry over to cane fields and other sites of labor in the Americas. These forms not only characterize creole cultures of the Atlantic, but also level a direct challenge to the ‘order’ that was produced on board ships, reproduced in the plantation economies of the Americas, and that, in many ways, continues to structure the relationship between empire and a postcolonial Caribbean.

Contemporary Caribbean writers, such as Michelle Cliff, have taken up the project of retracing the colonial processes of expropriation and exploitation that have produced Creole cultures of the Atlantic but that are largely absent from official historiographies. Cliff situates her own writing within a larger diasporic project that is ‘retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. On a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the artforms of these our ancestors and speaking the

64 This is especially the case with sea shanties that narrate historical events, reference commercial networks, or tell stories about sailors’ lives. For instance, the song ‘Spanish Ladies’, may reference British ships docked in Spanish harbors when Spain and Britain were still allied against Revolutionary France. Moreover, the chorus — ‘we’ll rant and we’ll roar like true British sailors/we’ll rant and we’ll roar all on the salt sea’ — points to the significance of sound to an Atlantic world dominated by sailors and laborers often removed from the official record. ‘Spanish Ladies’ is referenced in the logbook of *The Nellie* in 1796, suggesting that, at least briefly, the sounds of an Atlantic soundscape entered the written record. On the emergence of an Atlantic pre-industrial proletariat, see Eric Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2001).
patois forbidden us’. In other words, Cliff calls on writers and artists to find new archives and to read the old archives in new ways. A study of sound — with its antagonistic relationship to Enlightenment-era technologies centered on sight — could generate models of reading through which we do not simply reproduce, in Cliff’s words, the systems and stratifications of disempowerment, but that instead retrace or reclaim that which has been scattered across various archives. That is, a study of sound may offer a new language of reading — a way of rehearing the record — that breaks a cycle that otherwise reproduces the cold accounting of the written record. In accounts that record the sounds of insurrection along the routes of colonial slavery, we can begin to listen for the radical breaks in which the scream, the din, and the noise will not be reduced to the visual field of Enlightenment rationality — that is, the page.

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