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## **The word and the sound:**

*listening to the sonic colour-line in Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative*

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## Abstract

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*'The Word and the Sound' examines the violence in Frederick Douglass's iconic **Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass** (1845) as an aural experience — not just a visual spectacle — arguing that the text is key to understanding the relationship between listening, race and antebellum slavery. Douglass's representations of divergent listening practices show how they shape (and are shaped by) race, revealing the aural edge of the ostensibly visual culture of white supremacy, or the 'sonic colour-line'. This essay draws from archival material such as speech manuals and travel writing, to document the sonic colour-line, particularly the dominant association of nonverbal sound with the presumed irrationality of racial others. The subsequent sections close read key aural passages in the **Narrative** to amplify how Douglass exposes, manipulates and subverts the sonic colour-line, challenging his white readership to listen differently, even as he remains sceptical of their ability to do so.*

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## The word and the sound: listening to the sonic colour-line in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*

The iconic passage in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), where Frederick Douglass details the beating of his Aunt Hester by his master Captain Anthony, has long been identified as a 'primal scene' in African American letters (Person, 1995; Bergner, 1998; Hartman, 1998; Wallace, 2002; Moten, 2003; Abdur-Rahman, 2006; Chaney, 2008; Weheliye, 2008).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, despite the fact that 'primal scene' is at heart a term describing an act of overhearing, scholars have understood the beating of Hester as a "visual spectacle" (Rabinowitz, 2002) that renders Douglass an "eye-witness" (DeLombard, 2001) and readers "voyeurs" (Hartman, 1997). Certainly, Douglass's references to Hester's abuse as an "exhibition," and a "spectacle" to be "seen" and "beheld" have cued scholars towards its visuality, but they do not entirely account for the long critical silence regarding its sonic dimensions, particularly the potent aural image that opens, closes and interrupts Douglass's textual remembrance of this scene: Aunt Hester's "heart-rending shrieks" (2009, p. 20).

Concurrent with and essential to the rise of sound studies, scholars such as Fred Moten and Elisabeth Alexander have challenged the performative axiom that modernity has given itself over almost completely to the eye (Berger, 1977; Foucault, 1977; Crary, 1990; Jay, 1996; Schafer, 1994; Connor, 1997; Bailey, 1998; Kahn, 1999; Lepert, 2004) by amplifying the phonography of Aunt Hester's screams through and beyond the visuality of the written word. Moten (2003) theorised Douglass's representations as "terribly beautiful music" whose im/possible commingling of terror and pleasure "open[ed] the way into the knowledge of slavery and the knowledge

of freedom” (pp. 21, 22). For Moten, Aunt Hester’s scream is both ontological and epistemological, a “radically exterior aural,” resistant to and disruptive of the Enlightenment’s “overdetermined politics of looking” (pp. 6, 191). Alexander also interpreted Hester’s screams as an important site of knowledge in ‘Can you be BLACK and LOOK at this?’ (1999), as the force that (re)births Douglass into a crucial acknowledgement of himself as “vulnerable and black,” the condition of his enslavement but also the foundation of his resistance (p. 96). To explain how “hearing, too, is central to witnessing,” Alexander contrasts Douglass’s audio-visual representation of Hester’s abuse with the 1991 footage of the beating of black motorist Rodney King by four LAPD officers that was deliberately “stripped of a soundtrack” before being shown to the all-white jury (p. 98). ‘Unairing’ Hester’s screams from the muted words of Douglass’s *Narrative* enabled Moten and Alexander to trace the genealogy of an alternate sonic epistemology, what David Messmer (2007) called Douglass’s “alternative discourse” within the visually-driven, writing-dependent white power structure (p. 7).<sup>2</sup>

My essay ‘The Word and The Sound’ broadens and challenges this work by re-contextualising Hester’s scream within the socio-historical constraints that stripped Douglass’s *Narrative* from its soundtrack — the sound from the word — creating the conditions of/for the sonic resistance that Moten, Alexander and Messmer detail. Hidden in plain sight, Douglass’s textual representation of Aunt Hester’s shrieks amplifies the centrality of race and gender to the marginalisation of sonic epistemologies in the nineteenth century. It shows that listening, too, was enmeshed in the processes of subjection usually ascribed to the visual realm. I depart from a focus on the sound of Hester’s scream to interrogate if and how Douglass’s aural imagery was heard (and by whom), arguing that Douglass’s *Narrative* asks, to riff on Alexander, “Can you be WHITE and (really) LISTEN to this?” or, alternatively, “Are you white because of HOW you listen to this?”<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis Douglass places on divergent listening practices shows how they shape (and are shaped by) race, exposing and resisting the aural edge of the ostensibly visual culture of white supremacy, what I have termed the “sonic colour-line” (Stoever-Ackerman, 2010). Operating in the shadow of vision’s cultural dominance, the sonic colour-line describes how race is mediated through aural signifiers as well as visual ones. The shift towards visual and written modes of knowledge increasingly marginalised sound as emotional, unstable and unpredictable — qualities long associated with blackness (and femaleness) — even as sound continued to perform significant labour for the dominant culture. Managing sound’s less savory qualities while categorising increasingly unruly bodies on both sides of the Mason Dixon line, the sonic colour-line grounded racial identity in biology, but at the level of the unseen. Arising alongside America’s burgeoning bourgeoisie, the sonic colour-line provided an unspoken “racial etiquette” (Omi and Winant, 1994) that distinguished

broadly between white ‘sound’ and black ‘gibberish’ and disciplined an array of aural behaviour: accents in speech, musical taste, public displays of emotion, vocal tones and desirable volume levels. In particular, nonverbal sounds such as Hester’s scream were marked as antithetical and dangerous to the stable logic produced by and through written language.

I begin by tracing the sonic colour-line at the time of Douglass’s *Narrative*, drawing from archival material, such as speech manuals, journals and travel writing, to show the dominant association of sound with emotion and the connection between nonverbal sound and the presumed irrationality of women and racial others. The subsequent section examines passages, where Douglass manipulates and subverts the sonic colour-line, using images of nonverbal sound to mark the irrationality of slave masters (rather than slaves). Then, I listen anew to the Aunt Hester passage, amplifying how it challenges dominant ideas about sound by provoking readers to contrast Douglass’s wilfully sensitive aural practice with the fetishistic and calloused ears of his white master and locate themselves accordingly.<sup>4</sup> By narrating how masters and slaves worked from strikingly different assumptions and interpretations of the same sounds, I argue that Douglass represents listening as a contextual, embodied and divergent form of literacy, critical to the lives of masters as well as slaves. The closing section links Hester’s scream with another iconic nonverbal sound: the slave songs Douglass hears on the way to the Great House Farm. Taken together, these passages reveal how Douglass’s *Narrative* unites written and aural literacies — evoking sound’s emotive power through the written word and housing agency and meaning in nonverbal sounds — while remaining sceptical of his white readership’s ability to listen through the sonic colour-line.

## Sound logic and the sonic colour-line

A speaker on the Northern abolitionist circuit, Douglass would have been aware of dominant American social mores associating sound with feeling. Deemed ephemeral and uncontrollable next to vision’s increasingly steady gaze, the auditory sense was thought to be a wellspring of emotional truth, rather than an engine of knowledge. For example, because abolitionists felt slave masters were “mad bull[s]” out of reason’s reach, they often used sound as a tactic to challenge their “insanity” (Smith, 2001, p. 174). Abolitionists permeated anti-slavery articles with aural images of cracking whips and wailing slaves, even clanking slave chains at meetings in an attempt to re-create slavery’s soundscape for their audiences (ibid., p. 175). If the dominant culture perceived logic as properly formed through visual information, the ears were considered the direct route to the heart.

Especially pertinent to Douglass’s use of aural imagery in the *Narrative*, Caleb Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator* (1797) was a nationally popular primer that helped

define social standards for sound throughout the nineteenth century. Douglass first purchased the *Orator* at age 12, after illicitly learning to read; “every opportunity I got,” he recalled, “I used to read this book” (p. 50).<sup>5</sup> While largely a collection of famous speeches, the *Orator* opens with “General Instructions on Speaking,” a section confirming the rationale behind abolitionists’ use of sound as emotional appeal while discouraging its deployment as unseemly. Bingham stated,

[T]he influence of sounds, either to raise or allay our passions is evident from music. And certainly the harmony of a fine discourse, well and gracefully pronounced, is as capable of moving us, if not in a way so violent and ecstatic, yet not less powerful, and more agreeable to our rational faculties. (pp. 13-14)

By depicting the ‘influence of sounds’ as separable from their meaning as ‘fine discourse’, the *Orator* firmly knits aurality to ‘passion’, rather than the ‘rational faculties’.

This passage captures the volatile relationship between sound and reason in nineteenth-century American culture as well as its racialised parameters. Because sound can rather unpredictably “raise or allay” emotion, it necessitated a grammar capable of quelling its potential for excess, bringing it in line with white bourgeois ideals of “harmony,” itself a culturally-specific sonic symbol of order, a musical “conciliator of sounds” (Attali, 1985, p. 61). Bingham’s use of ‘ecstatic’ is especially telling; its etymology stems from a Greek root meaning ‘to put out of place’, connoting sound’s ability to unseat rationality. It also alludes to the sonic colour-line, as antebellum whites often used ‘ecstatic’ to describe what they considered the irrationality and excessive emotionality of black speech, music and worship.<sup>6</sup> Rejecting the “violent and ecstatic,” Bingham pronounced, “a calm and sedate voice is generally best; as a moderate sound is more pleasing to the ear, especially when clear and distinct” (1797, p. 14). Championing the sound of restraint, a cultural construct associated with whiteness and intellect in the post-Enlightenment mind-body split, *The Columbian Orator* harmonises a modulated ‘clear’ sound with dominant notions of verbal clarity.

Blackness, on the other hand, was identified almost entirely with the emotional and the bodily, a process not just “visibly grounded” (Barrett, 1995, p. 318; emphasis in original), but aurally imagined via the sonic colour-line. Stereotypical descriptions of black sounds permeated white antebellum writing, such as this description of “negroes talking together” from the biography-cum-travelogue *Jenny Lind in America* (1851): “As you passed them you heard the name of the lubly and good creature ‘Jenny Lind’”, mumbled above the general murmur which was grumbled forth by their peculiarly euphonious voices” (Rosenberg, p. 170). The onomatopoeic pile-up ‘mumbled’, ‘murmur’ and ‘grumbled’ characterises black speech as muddled and inaudible. The white listener depicts only a phrase as expressible in written words,

and even here visual dialect others ‘lubly’ as correlative of standard English. Focusing on nonverbal elements, this passage constructs the sound of black difference as attractively ‘euphonious’, unsettlingly ‘peculiar’ and far from white sonic norms.

In nineteenth-century America’s increasingly print-oriented culture, sounds unable to be pinned down to a written, standardised vocabulary created discomfort, which whites resolved by representing nonverbal sound as the instinctual, emotive province of racialised Others. Similar to the dominant dismissal of slave songs because they did not conform to the visual language of European notation, sounds like screams, grunts, groans and wails were considered signs of “possession, otherness, and wildness” existing “prior to rationality” (Rath, 2005, pp. 143, 124). For example, an 1845 missive by a South Carolina plantation minister insisted whites needed to show slaves “how to worship God in a form of sound words instead of listening to the senseless, if not erroneous effusions of an ignorant negro” (Glennie, p. 36). Whites imagined their speech as clear, reasoned ‘sound words’, more pleasing to their god’s ears than the contrasting ‘erroneous effusions’ of black worship. Charles Sealsfield’s *Life in the New World, or Sketches of American Society* (1844) uses representations of nonverbal sounds to liken black slaves to animals:

old and young pigs grunt, picanninies scream, old Sibyl and Calypso scold, and all commence their rigamarole to enjoy the coming day — to scream, to prattle, to sing and to leap — a confused mass, two-footed and four-footed, feathered and unfeathered creatures. (p. 138)

The white listener reduces black speech to nonverbal ‘prattle’, an infantilising word suggesting inarticulateness and frivolity. The listener indiscriminately folds the sound of screams into the incoherent ‘rigamarole’, treating them as an aural sign of blackness rather than cries for help. The only two named speakers are black women, who ‘scold’ — a dismissive, gendered term — rather than talk. This passage constructs a sonic colour-line between verbal and nonverbal sound that limits slaves, particularly women, to the status of ‘creatures’; although slaves were visually distinct from the ‘four-footed’ and the ‘feathered’, the sonic colour-line enabled whites to consider them part of the animalistic ‘mass’ on the plantation nonetheless.

In separating ‘blackness’ and femaleness from the human, the nonverbal dimension of the sonic colour-line amplifies the already hefty stakes of Douglass’s *Narrative* at the level of self-representation. If Douglass “can only arrive at a sense of being through language” in a print-driven, white supremacist culture, there is little to no room for sonic epistemologies (Baker, 1985, p. 249). Yet, as an abolitionist, valued for having “heard clearly (and authentically) the ring of the slave whip and the ‘clank’ of slaves’ chains” (Smith, 2004, p. 175), Douglass was also expected to perform aural blackness for his white Northern readership, which included employing emotional forms of address and conventional descriptions of slavery’s nonverbal



sounds: screams of pain, howls for mercy and songs of sorrow. Representing slavery through nonverbal aural imagery threatened the dominant relationship between 'clear' sound and sound logic, while risking Douglass's humanity as defined by white society. In fact, Douglass's vexation over performing existent aural stereotypes of blackness may account for the modulation of voice critics have heard in the *Narrative*, especially when compared to the fiery prose of white abolitionist writing and of Douglass's own speeches (Ganter, 2003, p. 544). Having no other way to argue with whites than to engage their written words and the values placed on them, Douglass struggled to reconcile the constraining cultural conventions of *The Columbian Orator* with a reevaluation of nonverbal sound that challenges the sonic boundaries of 'blackness'.

### **“If Not in the Word”:**

#### **Douglass and nonverbal epistemology**

One of the ways Douglass challenges the sonic colour-line is by inverting the association of nonverbal sound with blackness. At the end of the *Narrative*, for example, he parodies the popular Southern hymn, 'Our Heavenly Union', altering the lyrics to expose hypocritical white Southern preachers via nonverbal imagery, attacking those who claim to be upstanding Christians by exposing them as “roaring, ranting, sleek man-thie[ves]” who “roar and scold, and whip, and sting” (p. 118). Far from the “sound words” idealised by his white contemporaries, Douglass's scathing satire of Southern sermonising suggests the preachers' inhumanity and the meaninglessness of their words, as they so obviously “teach the right and do the wrong” (p. 118). Though they may use sound to mask their hypocrisy — no one prays “earlier, later, louder, and longer” than slave-driving reverends, the cruellest masters in Douglass's *Narrative* (p. 83) — nonverbal tones ultimately betray their true identities. Southern preachers devilishly “bleat and baa, dona like goats;” intimidate the weak with a “roar like a Bashan bull” and sound off stubbornly like “braying ass[es], of mischief full” (pp. 117, 118).

The parody is symptomatic of Douglass's general technique of allowing slaveholders and overseers few transcribed words in the *Narrative*, let alone “sound” ones. Douglass instead reduces their words to an indistinguishable stream of obscenity.<sup>7</sup> Despite their genteel titles, Captain Anthony, Mr. Plummer and Mr. Severe are all “profane swearers,” an aural image belying the politeness and refinement associated with elite Southerners (and their accents) in the mid-nineteenth century (pp. 20, 25). True to his name, Severe is so obscene that he literally curses himself to death. His last words were not words at all, but “groans, bitter curses, and horrid oaths” (p. 26).<sup>8</sup> The slaves consider his replacement, Mr. Hopkins, a “good overseer,” because he was “less cruel, less profane and made less noise than Mr. Severe,” although Doug-

lass's syntax still marks him as all three (p. 26). Like Severe and Hopkins, Mr. Gore's cruelty is also characterised nonverbally; he "spoke but to command" with a "sharp shrill voice" that "produced horror and trembling in [the] ranks" of his slaves. The crack of the whip and the sting of its lash were his primary modes of communication: "he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well" (p. 34). Contrary to antebellum idealisations of the visual and logical power of the word, Douglass portrays emotive, nonverbal sound as part of white identity construction.<sup>9</sup>

### **"No words, no tears, no prayers": listening to Aunt Hester's scream**

In addition to associating nonverbal sound cues with slave masters, Douglass challenges the sonic colour-line in the Aunt Hester passage by revaluing the scream, a nonverbal sound associated with blackness. Locating Hester's screams prominently at the beginning and the end of the scene — they both "awaken" him and linger "long after the bloody transaction was over" (p. 22) — Douglass positions them as sounds to be listened to for meaning, rather than dismissed as background noise. They even interrupt the stream of visual images Douglass presents, both sonically and syntactically: "he [Captain Anthony] commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm red blood (amid heart rending shrieks from her, and horrible oaths from him) came dripping to the floor" (p. 22). The parenthetical interjection amplifies the resistant role of Hester's screams, as she tries unceasingly to interrupt the slave master's relentless whip. More than just involuntary cries of pain, "screams when one was whipped or sold, for example, reminded masters of slaves' humanity ... inanimate objects, they told whip-happy masters, were dumb and silent" (Smith, 2001, p. 78). Douglass's placement of Hester's screams emphasises them as her own, and not merely uncontrollable nonverbal sounds produced by Anthony's whip.

Given the association of nonverbal sound with blackness and animalism, even the suggestion of meaning and (limited) agency, in Hester's screams is important, and it has often gone unheard in critical conversation. Harryette Mullen argues that Douglass's choice to leave Hester's speech out of the *Narrative* effectively silences her and highlights the "inability of her voice to affect the slave master who beats her" (p. 252). In an exploration of Douglass as an "eyewitness" who moves "from the visual to the verbal," Jeannine DeLombard claims the "pervasive silence of the plantation is broken only by the *inarticulate* screams of tortured slaves" (p. 258; emphasis added). Even Messmer, who is otherwise attuned to the *Narrative's* auralty, represents Hester's screams as "inarticulate sound" produced by Captain Anthony that "perpetuates the racist concept that slaves were discursively inferior" (p. 15). While



united in their concern for the limits of Douglass's representation of Hester, these critics inadvertently silence her by disallowing the possibility that her screams hold any agency or meaning beyond the instinctual. Hester's scream is an absence only if the substance of her voice is reduced solely to the word. In explicitly challenging the gender hierarchies in this passage, critics implicitly concede to the dominant social codes separating the logical (white, masculine) word from the emotional (black, feminine) sound and sound from knowledge production. But no sound is intrinsically 'inarticulate'; this label is produced by socially and historically contingent aural value systems such as the sonic colour-line.

Douglass shows the effect of the sonic colour-line on white listening practices by representing the master's reaction to Hester's scream, which oscillates between a titillating sensitivity to 'noise' and a wilful un-hearing of sound. At first, the master's ear is hungrily attuned to Hester's shriek; Captain Anthony imagines himself producing this sound through her body for his sexual and psychological consumption: "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest" (p. 21). Hester's screams are his aural fetish for power and sexual violence, standing in for the pleasurable moans of sexual activity she has denied him while manifesting his control over her at the level of the unseen. To amplify his control, Anthony blocks out anything else Hester has to say: "no words, no tears, no prayers from his gory victim, seemed to move his heart from its iron purpose" (ibid.). The repetitive syntax of the sentence mimics his "iron" ear, which hears only a flattened and repetitive "no ... no ... no" in the place of Hester's flood of "words ... tears ... [and] prayers," echoing Hester's refusals (ibid.). While this line has been read as evidence of the inability of Hester's words to impact the master (Mullen, 1992), the fact that Captain Anthony remains unmoved by Hester's pleas says nothing about their eloquence or articulateness, but speaks volumes about the narratives that white men constructed to absorb and contain the power of such sounds as "necessary noises" (Smith, 2001, p. 75). By evoking Hester's words rather than representing them verbatim, Douglass mimics the process by which the master's ear translates human sound to black noise, satirising the belief that sound is a direct, universal emotional pathway while challenging his white Northern readers to hear more than absence between those lines.<sup>10</sup> However, as much as the image is about control, it is also about Hester's aural resistance and the methods Anthony uses to suppress it. As Jon Cruz finds, "Far too many of the accounts of owners and overseers that describe black noise also contain a deeper unraveling of noise — an unraveling toward the irrepressible acknowledgement of meaningful emotions" (1999, p. 49). Although "he would whip her to make her scream," once the sound of Hester's screams escaped his desire — becoming too loud, too pained, too emotive — Captain Anthony would "whip her to make her hush," smothering her voice and the "irrepressible acknowledgement" of her humanity that it briefly evoked (p. 21).

In contrast, Douglass interprets Hester's screams very differently. Unable to buffer his ears from her pain — an aural metaphor for rape and a metonym for slavery itself — the young Douglass is both subject to sound and a subject produced by it. The screams “awake[n] [him] at the dawn of day” (p. 20), imagery that satirises (and racialises) the visual iconography of the European Enlightenment — let there be light — subtly reminding readers that the dawn of the ‘Age of Reason’ was concurrent with (and dependent upon) slavery. In Douglass's schema, it is not light and sight that produce the knowledge necessary for the survival of enslaved subjects, but rather sound and darkness. He finally becomes “so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight [of Anthony whipping Hester], that [he] hid himself in a closet and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over” (p. 22). The familiar sight of Anthony whipping the prostrate Hester is terror-inducing both for its violence and the totality of its domination. Only in the darkness of the closet, with the bloody tableau removed from his immediate sight, can Douglass hear alternatives in the layered, indeterminate sound of Hester's scream, helping him to construct the “armor which can take him out of the closet in which he has hidden but which he must inevitably leave” (Alexander, 1999, p. 83). Paradoxically, Douglass's armour comes not from hardening his ears as his master has done — the racialised muffling mechanisms of Anthony's ‘iron heart’ are both unavailable to him and ethically repugnant — but by retaining a radical openness to Hester's cries despite their psychological and emotional toll. Mobilising a limited agency within the confines of enforced listening, Douglass fights the logic of slavery that transforms spectacular violence into routine occurrence. He does not become habituated to Hester's abuse despite noting that he has “often been awakened” by her screams; they remain acutely “heart-rending” (a term Douglass uses twice) every time he hears them (pp. 20, 22). In the ethical framework of the *Narrative*, listening practices are synonymous with involvement; while Douglass removes himself from the sight, he remains in the intimate position of the eavesdropper. Despite being young, terrified and subordinated, he charges his six-year-old self with an ethics of listening that leaves him both “witness and participant” in Hester's torture (p. 21). While his enslavement means he cannot avoid being assailed with the sounds of white power, Douglass makes a conscious choice to use his ears to remain open and involved in the face of slavery's social death.

The brand of sensitive, “bone-deep listening” (Moten, 2003, p. 85) Douglass represents in the Aunt Hester scene resists the sonic colour-line by challenging existent stereotypes about black listening practices. Believed not to possess any of the subjective agency associated with ‘listening’ in the dominant culture — the term having descended from the same Germanic root as ‘lust’ (to desire) and ‘list’ (to choose) — slaves were to respond immediately and uniformly to the sounds that they heard on the plantation, such as the driver's morning summons: “all must rise,

and be off to the field, there must be no halting; everyone must be at his or her post [...] no age nor sex finds any favor” (Douglass, 2009, p. 25). Under the threat of the lash, slaves had to visibly perform the subordinate listening practices that both constructed and confirmed the allegedly natural power relationships of slavery: “When he [Colonel Lloyd] spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble; and such was literally the case” (p. 31). Importantly, Douglass’s first act of resistance against the slave breaker Covey is to refuse to listen to him in this manner, “mak[ing] him no answer and stand[ing] with [his] clothes on” after Covey orders them removed (p. 68). The stakes of refusing to listen as a slave were deadly; the *Narrative* bears witness for Demby, a man shot in the face by Gore for ignoring his orders to come out of a pond. Gore justifies Demby’s murder by telling the master his insubordinate listening “se[t] a dangerous example to the other slaves ... that would finally lead to the total subversion of all rule and order upon the plantation” (p. 36). Some whites considered black listening practices fundamental enough to the ‘rule and order’ of slavery to kill over, even as Gore’s murderous act protests too much about the allegedly biological nature of black ears.

By opening his *Narrative* with a description of the multiple meanings he makes from a sound suppressed by whites as racialised noise, Douglass resists expected racial performances of listening. Following Aunt Hester’s scream through his ears proves that his “most effective discursive resistance to slavery while a slave depends upon his aural abilities rather than his skills as a literate subject” (Messmer, 2007, p. 6), while broadening the limited understanding of “aural abilities” as related only to making (musical) sound and not the constitutive aural literacy that shapes its production and interpretation. By removing Douglass the boy from the visual spectacle and placing him inside the darkened closet, Douglass the writer calls attention to listening as an aural ability that challenges the seen and navigates the unseen.

### “... In the Sound”: listening to slaves sing

The aural imagery of Hester’s scream leaves echoes, reverberations and traces that bleed throughout the *Narrative*. Most immediately, they permeate the forest where the “wild notes” of the slave songs are struck and heard on the way to the Great House Farm, cultural expressions whose latent meanings are also rendered “if not in the word, in the sound” (p. 20).<sup>11</sup> By merging Hester’s scream with his recollection of the slaves’ songs (Moten, 2003; Stoever, 2007; Messmer, 2007), Douglass again recasts his vulnerability to sound as a wilful openness to it. While a qualitatively different aural image, he implies the tones of slaves singing are as much a marker of the “soul-killing effects of slavery” as Hester’s shrieks (p. 28). For Douglass, hearing the slaves sing was another aural transaction marking the physical, emotional and intellectual knowledge wrought by racial terror.

Unlike his childhood memory of the scream, the sounds of the slave songs Douglass exhumes are unable to remain in the past, creating a dissonant aural effect. He frequently slips into present tense, acknowledging that “while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek” (p. 28). As he writes, Douglass hears the slave songs through doubled ears: he remembers prior listenings as a slave while simultaneously experiencing them anew through his fugitive status. While his dual (and simultaneous) listening practice is dissonant — the immediate experience “within the circle” of slaves seems different from the “deep meaning” he charges “those without might see and hear” (p. 27) — it also enables him to bridge his written and aural literacies.

Douglass highlights his ability to maintain a dual and simultaneous listening practice — slave and free, intellectual and emotional, within the circle and without it — while pointing out the divergent (and strikingly singular) listening experience across the sonic colour-line, which reduces the complexity of slave singing to one form of noise or another. The proximity of the slave song passage with the Aunt Hester scene connects the erotic sensitivity and obdurate tuning out of the Southern master’s ear with the inability of many white Northerners to hear slave songs as anything but a plantation fantasy à la the minstrel show and/or as musical gibberish “consult[ing] neither time nor tune” of European art music (p. 27). While the “mere hearing” of the slave songs should be enough to “impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery,” especially according to dominant norms about sound’s emotional impact, he realises Northern ears were already primed by minstrelsy to hear “the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness” (p. 27). Challenging the universality of musical value, Douglass notes that slave songs were misunderstood and dismissed as “apparently incoherent,” “unmeaning jargon” by cultural outsiders trained to consider sound as superfluous or secondary to meaning (pp. 27, 28).

In addition to modelling his own listening practices, Douglass directly challenges his white readership to listen beyond their racialised expectations and desires. He hails his readers as listeners, entreating them to hear the songs’ “every tone [as] a testimony against slavery” (p. 27), characterising the singing as the slaves’ active sonic resistance to a system denying them personhood. Unlike dominant modes of written expression, the aural literacies of slaves privileged a word’s sound as much as its content, if not more, due to sound’s power to operate as a double-voiced discourse<sup>12</sup> unquestionably “full of meaning” to those “within the circle” of slavery (p. 27). Douglass educates his white Northern readership in detecting the ironic interplay at work in the songs — “[slaves] would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone and the most rapturous in the most pathetic” (p. 28) — while charging that

If anyone 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 deep in the pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul. (ibid.)

This passage inverts the imagery of the Aunt Hester scene by challenging Douglass's contemporary readers to subject themselves to slavery's devastating sonic effects. Douglass urges them to do more than fancy themselves in peril along with him in the closet or imagine the slave songs at a safe remove through his remembrances at the writing desk. Rather Douglass insists they must somehow experience the sounds in their own bodies, as *themselves*, yet 'silencing' their preconceived notions in order to 'analyze' black sound on its own terms, no matter how uncomfortable and 'soul-killing' it may be for white listeners to hear their own culpability resonating 'through the chambers' of their hearts, minds and souls. For Douglass, listening is not an unconscious, universal act, but an embodied aural literacy: an intellectual, physical and emotional openness to sound as a site of meaning and ethical involvement. When listening, Douglass intimates, one always has some skin in the game.

### **“Cast away on a desolate island”: listening to/through race**

Douglass's listening instruction charges his white readers with an ethical responsibility to hear African American cultural production with alternate assumptions about value, agency and meaning, particularly regarding the relationship between the written word and nonverbal sound.

However, as Carla Kaplan has found, African American literature “often seeks to dramatize its *lack of listeners*” and the impossibility of reaching competent, let alone ideal, readers (1995, p. 118). In fact, Douglass closes the slave song passage not with his call to listening, but by comparing slave singing to the “singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island,” an aural image likening enslavement to the extreme isolation of being perpetually without a listener or interpretive community with which to share meaning (p. 28). Even as Douglass's work makes an impassioned appeal to the power of sound for legal, political, literary and ontological representation, he connects the dehumanising physical violence of Hester's beatings to the deleterious interpretive violence performed by white listeners who ignore, misunderstand, dismiss and/or (mis)interpret black cultural production for their own ends. Exceedingly aware that sound is always already enmeshed in the sonic colour-line, Douglass's use of aural imagery is not a sentimental appeal to truth, rather a challenge to dominant notions of truth produced and disseminated through the ear.

Douglass both manipulates and resists the sonic colour-line in his *Narrative*, denaturalising racialised listening practices and exposing them as one of slavery's habituating violences. This is an especially important finding in light of the ten-

dency within sound studies to foreground listening as a site of democratic inclusion and cultural merging (Lipsitz, 1997; Connor, 1997; Bull and Back, 2003; Kun, 2006), especially when cast against vision's allegedly distanced and unidirectional gaze. However, while rethinking the overdetermined relationship between vision and Western culture is both difficult and necessary, sound studies scholars must also acknowledge the interrelationship of sonic and visual practices, particularly the ways in which power relationships usually ascribed to visuality also shape (and are shaped by) listening. While "sound connects us in ways that vision does not" (Bull and Back, 6), Douglass's many representations of aural terror attest that these connections are not always positively charged or egalitarian in nature and outcome. They also reveal listening as a key medium for racial discourse, one that has been entangled with vision since the formation of modern ideas of race in the mid-nineteenth century. By providing an early genealogy of the sonic colour-line, Douglass's *Narrative* challenges scholars of sound and race to hear each other, joining in common labour to articulate the intimate relationship between auditory perception and white hegemony while amplifying the ways in which black people have challenged, subverted and shifted dominant listening practices.

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## Notes

1. This literature review is suggestive rather than exhaustive: Aunt Hester's experience has been identified as crucial to understanding slave subjectivity (Hartman, 1997), slavery's inscription on the body (Barrett, 1995; Reid-Pharr: 1999; Cheney, 2008), the sexual(ised) dynamics of slavery's violence (Bergner, 1998; Abdur-Rahman, 2006), antebellum constructions of black womanhood (Franchot, 1990; McDowell, 1992; Reid-Pharr, 1999) and black masculinity (Franchot, 1990; Person, 1995; Reid-Pharr, 1996; Bergner, 1998; Wallace, 2002; Ikard, 2007; Cheney, 2007), the difficulties of 'bearing witness' (Wald, 1996; DeLombard, 2007; Weheliye, 2008) and the limits of empathy (Hartman; 1997). Critics deem this a 'primal scene', because it intertwines knowledge with traumatic sex/violence (Moten, 2003), enacts a spectacular representation of African American bodies (Hartman, 1997) and functions as a moment of conversion (McBride, 2001); however, these critics do not directly implicate listening in this process.
2. I borrow the term 'unair' from Bruce R. Smith (2004).
3. In music study, aural imagery is linked to 'inner hearing' – the ability to look at a musical score and hear it sound in one's mind. I use aural imagery to describe literary representations of sound that activate our 'inner hearing' as our eyes move across the page.
4. Robert Stepto argues that Douglass – and many subsequent African American authors – attempted to reform their white readers, representing both good and bad reading practices and encouraging a readership they distrusted to transform themselves in accordance with



- the models (1986, p. 312). Jon Cruz (1999) describes Douglass's call for a new kind of hearing (for whites) as "ethnosympathy," an "interpretative ethos of pathos" (3).
5. His well-worn copy remains on view at the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington D.C. For a review of previous discussions of *The Columbian Orator* in regards to conservative white republicanism and the development of Douglass's thought, see Ganter (2003). Douglass scholars primarily focus on *The Columbian Orator's* content — especially "Dialogue Between a Master and a Slave" and "Speech in the Irish Parliament" — overlooking the speaking instructions.
  6. See Karl Ottfried Müller's symptomatic description in *Introduction to a Scientific System of Mythology* (1844): "note [...] the *ecstatic* dance, the wild *charivari* of unharmonious music, the frantic gesticulations, with which the negro nations worship their gods" (p. 222, first emphasis added).
  7. When Douglass does quote his masters, he portrays their vocabulary as limited and crude, especially in contrast to his own, and he peppers their obscenities with errors: "Now you d-----d b---h, I'll *learn* you how to disobey my orders!" screams Captain Anthony at Hester (p. 22, emphasis added). Ganter points out the frequency with which Douglass's master Captain Auld coarsely uses "nigger" in his wife's presence (2003, p. 545).
  8. As Diana Fuss has shown, last words were an important sound in antebellum culture, valued for "spiritual, social, and familial functions," making Douglass's depiction of Severe especially damning (2009, p. 878).
  9. In refuting the association of nonverbal sound with blackness, Douglass is careful not to simply reattach it as an intrinsic characteristic of whiteness. Rather Douglass uses nonverbal imagery to denaturalise the slave masters' power, disclosing the habitual processes by which whites assumed and performed it. For example, he describes how slave masters have a recognisably "*usual manner of speaking* to colored people on the public highways of the South" (p. 31, emphasis added).
  10. My reading of Douglass's narrative strategy is bolstered by Dwight McBride's discussion of the "self-consciousness with which [Douglass] understands, profiles, and addresses the reader" in the *Narrative* (2001, p. 158) as well as Douglass's revision in *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855), where he explains Hester's situation in more detail and her beating in much less. In the retelling, Douglass quotes Hester, which Mullen does not mention: "Each blow, vigorously laid on, brought screams as well as blood. '*Have mercy; Oh! have mercy*' she cried; '*I won't do so no more*'" (2003, p. 38).
  11. Moten argues that it is not coincidence that prompts Douglass to analyse the slave songs just a few pages after detailing Hester's brutalisation. Whereas Hartman (1997) views these passages as discrete entities — one as ultimate debasement and the other as potentially insurgent — Moten sees them as "passionate utterance and response" (2003, p. 21).
  12. Mikhail Bakhtin describes double-voiced discourse as speech that "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions" (1981, p. 324). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. signifies on Bakhtin (1988, pp. 110-113), using the concept of double-voicedness to describe how African American cultural producers "created their own vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms" (p. xxiv).

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