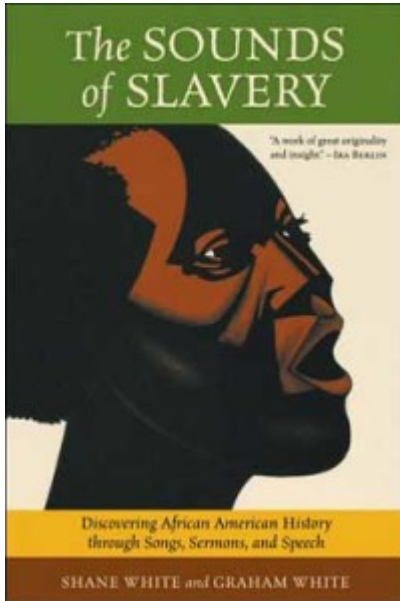


Listening to the Evidence of the African American Slave Experience



Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005. 242 pp., cloth, \$29.95.

In this captivating and persuasive book, Shane White and Graham White explore the aural dimension of the African American slave experience. To gain leverage on a topic that poses considerable challenges to the would-be researcher, the authors mine an impressive array of sources including colonial and antebellum newspapers, diaries kept by white Southerners, the travel writing of white visitors to slaveholding regions, slave memoirs, interviews conducted with former slaves, and early postbellum efforts to publish the music sung by African American slaves. The authors also include in their analysis a discussion of the sounds of African American singers, preachers, and storytellers recorded in the 1930s and housed in the Archive of Folk Culture in the Library of Congress. Remarkably, the authors have managed to include in *The Sounds of Slavery* a compact disc with eighteen of the tracks discussed in the book. As readers make their way through the authors' argument, they can therefore listen directly to African American voices and enjoy an unusual opportunity not only to assess the authors' treatment of primary sources but also to appreciate in full force the dramatic and moving tones of a culture built in the shadows of slavery. As the authors so aptly suggest, these tracks "bring us about as close as we are ever going to get to hearing some of the familiar—and to whites often 'weird' and 'unforgettable'—sounds of slavery" (xxii).

The opening chapter of the book conveys the depths of suffering experienced by

African American slaves who consistently struggled to maintain their own sense of humanity. The oppression of the slave system could be heard across the landscape in the form of plantations' bells that instructed slaves to begin their long workdays in the fields and, more poignantly, in the tormented cries of slaves whose families and communities were torn apart by the sale of loved ones and the piteous screams of slaves whipped for their alleged transgressions. That the terrible power of the white master class was applied through the dimension of sound is a realization that enables the modern student of slavery to more fully appreciate the horrors of the institution of slavery, a system of oppression that whites policed with the crack of the lash, the sounding of the bell, and unleashing of hounds whose barks communicated to the slaves that one of their number was very likely about to be dragged back into immediate white control and subjected to brutal corporal punishment. And yet, as much as the authors unflinchingly chronicle the hideous aural dimensions of American slavery, they weave into their work the contrapuntal theme of African American resilience and creativity. Belying the title of the first chapter, "All we knowed was go and come by de bells and horns," is the wealth of evidence offered throughout this book that slaves managed to create a coherent black culture predicated on their resistance to white authority and their commitment to values and aesthetics that were removed from the European and white American tradition.

In ritualized celebrations such as the Pinkster holiday that emerged in the New York region and the Jonkonnu festival celebrated in North Carolina, the singing and joyful sounding of African American voices worked in tandem with the instruments and drums wielded by black musicians to create a sensory experience that clearly belonged to the slaves themselves. White witnesses to these performances sometimes marveled at them and sometimes bemoaned what they deemed the alien noises emanating from the African American participants, but in either case, whites were acknowledging that they stood outside the cultural space forged through African American sounds. Indeed, even when the slaves gathered in mourning as opposed to celebration, their funeral hymns and sermons left no doubt that in moments of grief as well as exultation, an African American aural aesthetic would serve as the arbiter of the communal experience.

The slaves' achievement in forging their own ways of singing, speaking, and, by extension, listening offered them a counterweight to the mastery of their white owners. Slaves' field calls, for example, enabled African Americans to communicate freely with each other even when they remained within eye- and earshot of white authority figures. Slaves could holler their frustrations and outrage over their enslaved status or warn their coworkers that the overseer was approaching because they expressed themselves in terms and rhythms outside the realm of white comprehension. Not surprisingly, white listeners failed to appreciate the complexity of African American vocal techniques, which reflected and reinterpreted particular African musical traits such as the use of falsetto, yodeling, and a sensitivity to tonal variation—techniques that this book's audience can listen to in a number of the tracks included on the CD.

One of the most fascinating themes running through *The Sounds of Slavery* is the extent to which whites took note of (and some satisfaction in) the cultural boundaries that blocked them from understanding African American sounds even while they simultaneously complained about these boundaries and sought to compel African Americans to obey white conventions for language and music. The ambiguous nature of white audience's response to African American sounds was perhaps most apparent in the setting of Christian worship. For white Christian authorities, the liturgy was understood as something to be respected and obeyed as a ritualized enactment of Christian fealty to godly authority. Slaves, by contrast, exercised a very different understanding of liturgy, viewing it as an opportunity for improvisation and creativity that was understood to be in keeping with a state of divine inspiration. Through the employment of musical conventions such as "sampling" and the expansion of song lyrics achieved through the restatement of particular words and phrases ("parallel statement"), African American worshippers were carefully responding and interacting with each other exactly because each individual was free to shape the collective sound (62-63).

In the second half of the book, the authors take many of the themes explicated in their exploration of the African American musical tradition and use them to explore black language and black preaching. By the time that Shane White and Graham White introduce the reader to the preaching of a twentieth-century Texan, the Reverend Sin-Killer Griffin, they are able to frame his sermon in the context of the well-defined conventions structuring African American speech. Although whites frequently dismissed men such as Griffin as unsophisticated and undisciplined, the authors reveal how Griffin's oratory style was characterized by features such as "the power of the preacher's imagery; the lavish use of biblical texts; the rhythms and tonal contours of elevated speech; the incessant call-and-response; the grainy tautness of the preacher's voice (signifying intensity); [and] the surprising juxtapositions" of verses from different biblical texts (142). In the book's final chapters, the authors offer portraits of the "soundtracks" of a range of urban African American communities. Weaving together strands of evidence from a number of primary and secondary sources, Shane White and Graham White recreate the atmosphere of the city streets, which African Americans turned into markets, religious meeting places, areas for dance and ritualized celebration, and also zones of confrontation with suspicious whites. In these final chapters, the authors suggest that white distaste for some of the defining features of the urban slave experience foreshadowed the concerns of their postbellum descendants who sought new methods of racial control once slavery itself had been abolished. As they do throughout the book, Shane White and Graham White establish beyond any doubt that the unique sounds of African American culture simultaneously sparked white hostility and also provided African Americans with a means of resisting white authority.

A brief epilogue exploring emancipation tantalizes readers with an avenue of analysis that the structure of the book does not permit the authors to follow fully. As indicated by their deft use of the audio recordings and oral evidence

from the 1930s, the authors repeatedly demonstrate continuities in the defining characteristics of the African American culture of sound. As such, it would have been interesting—to say the least—to hear the authors extend their story into the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Sounds of Slavery is one of the very best books I have read on any dimension of the slave experience. It is also a book that manages to speak to the questions of professional scholars while painting a vivid portrait of the past that will satisfy a general audience.

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