

# Toward a Black Ecomusicology, 1853?

## Listening to Enslavement with Solomon Northup

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April 1841. On the day he was abducted and sold into slavery, Solomon Northup, a free-born Black man from New York, was in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup> He attended the funeral procession of American president William Henry Harrison while seeking to join a touring circus as a violinist. In his autobiographical account, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Northup recounts watching—and more to the point, hearing—the procession with his soon-to-be-kidnappers:

There was a great pageant in Washington. The roar of cannon and the tolling of bells filled the air, [after which] the procession made its appearance, coming slowly through the Avenue, carriage after carriage, in

long succession, while thousands upon thousands followed on foot—all moving to the sound of melancholy music. They were bearing the dead body of Harrison to the grave. . . . We stood together as the funeral pomp passed by. I remember distinctly how the window glass would break and rattle to the ground, after each report of the cannon they were firing in the burial ground.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River in Louisiana* (London: Sampson Low, Son & Co.; Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1853), 35. As with many slave narratives, this book involved an editor, David Wilson, who transformed Northup's oral account into writing. It is thus impossible to ascertain precisely how much of the narrative comes from Northup, though most recent accounts agree the material is primarily his: "At times the syntax and word choices likely come from Wilson's initiatives, but this is Northup's book." David Fiske, Clifford W. Brown, and Rachel Seligman, *The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 114. More importantly, however, following Sara E. Johnson, I find meaningful Northup's "dead-on description of the antagonistic *land* and its nonhuman inhabitants," not solely as an ecological treatise, but as a kind of sensory

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Later that afternoon, with no sign of the supposed circus he would join, Northup was drugged by his white companions and imprisoned, to be sold and ultimately transported to Louisiana.

Throughout the twelve years he spent there, Northup's skill as a violinist spared him some of the burdens of slavery and created others. In one of the best-known passages from his account, he describes his relationship with the violin:

Alas! had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage. It introduced me to great houses—relieved me of many days' labor in the field—supplied me with conveniences for my cabin—with pipes and tobacco, and extra pairs of shoes, and oftentimes led me away from the presence of a hard master, to witness scenes of jollity and mirth. It was my companion—the friend of my bosom triumphing loudly when I was joyful, and uttering its soft, melodious consolations when I was sad. Often, at midnight, when sleep had fled affrighted from the cabin, and my soul was disturbed and troubled with the contemplation of my fate, it would sing me a song of peace. On holy Sabbath days, when an hour or two of leisure was allowed, it would accompany me to some quiet place on the bayou bank, and, lifting up its voice, discourse kindly and pleasantly indeed. It heralded my name round the country—made me friends, who, otherwise would not have noticed me—gave me an honored seat at the yearly feasts, and secured the loudest and heartiest welcome of them all at the Christmas dance. The Christmas dance! Oh, ye pleasure-seeking sons and daughters of idleness, who move with measured step, listless and snail-like, through the slow-winding cotillon, if ye wish to look upon the celerity, if not the "poetry of motion"—upon genuine happiness, rampant and unrestrained—go down to Louisiana, and see the slaves dancing in the starlight of a Christmas night.<sup>3</sup>

At other times, as Lara Langer Cohen points out, Northup was forced by his enslaver to play while other enslaved people were forced to dance, thus

transforming the instrument into a "weapon of terror" as well as a source of comfort.<sup>4</sup>

I cite this passage, along with the previous one, not to explore Black violin performance in the nineteenth century per se, but rather to call attention to the ways Northup engages with his sonic environment throughout his narrative. In Washington, he comments on the affective qualities of music and the interaction between the "belliphonic" cannon fire and the built environment (especially windows).<sup>5</sup> In Louisiana, he not only extols the violin, but also notes distinctly different sonic environments for playing it, including "great houses" and large social gatherings—his larger discussion here is about parties held at various plantations in the area—as well as in the confines of his cabin, in "some quiet place on the bayou bank" (next to the plantation), and at open-air Christmas parties for slaves.

In short, Northup not only plays music professionally, but also interrogates music, sound, dance, and their interconnections with the environment around him. In this article, I argue that his experiences and writing offer a foundational act of what I call (with some trepidation) Black ecomusicology. Northup's narrative is a scathing critique of American slavery, but also an extended meditation on the possibilities and violent limitations of ecological sounding and listening in antebellum America. As such, it also lays the groundwork for theorizing about sonic environments in terms that decenter white experience while also raising questions about the implicit biases of ecomusicology as an emerging field.

#### ECOMUSICOLOGY, RACE, AND THE WHITE RACIAL FRAME?

In suggesting that Northup's life and work instate a form of Black ecomusicology, I hope

meditation on his encounter with that ecology. Johnson, "Never Put Your Feet Where Your Eyes Cain't See: A Meditation on Deepness," *South: A Scholarly Journal* 48, no. 1 (2015): 52–62, at 54.

<sup>3</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 217–18. Throughout this article, I quote liberally from Northup, in hopes both of amplifying his voice and of giving a sense of some of the particular details of sonic ecology in his accounts, again, with the caveat that the text as we have it is highly mediated.

<sup>4</sup>Lara Langer Cohen, "Solomon Northup's Singing Book," *African American Review* 50, no. 3 (2017): 267. See also Mary Caton Lingold, "Fiddling with Freedom: Solomon Northup's Musical Trade in 12 Years a Slave," *Sounding Out!*, 16 December 2013, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2013/12/16/11444/>, accessed 1 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup>On the notion of "belliphonic" sound and its affective power, see Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

to entwine two ongoing narratives about the nexus of race, forced labor, and sound. The first is the practice of listening to slave narratives, especially to the ways in which sound became a site for contesting the presumption that the enslaved were non-human and thus unable to participate in comprehensible forms of music or communication. This strand dates back (at least) to Fred Moten's rehearsing of Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography as an originary moment in the Black radical tradition, an approach that has been built on since by Ashon Crawley (on Harriet Jacobs), Daphne Brooks (on Blind Tom), and Jennifer Stoever (on Douglass and Jacobs), as well as by Langer Cohen and Mary Caton Lingold (on Northup).<sup>6</sup> The second strand here is the sonic exploration of Black ecologies, especially in the context of enslavement and forced labor. Ana María Ochoa Gautier's writing on the songs of *boga* boatmen in early-nineteenth-century Colombia, as well as her formulation of "acoustic multinaturalism," critique the narrowness of ecomusicology's aims and scope, particularly with regard to race.<sup>7</sup> I agree with Ochoa's critique, but am less convinced in this case by the usefulness of alternative approaches (acoustic ecology, acoustemology). The language of ecomusicology would seem to have more obvious resonance with ideas of ecocriticism in other disciplines.

<sup>6</sup>See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Ashon Crawley, "Harriet Jacobs Gets a Hearing," *Current Musicology* 93 (2012): 33–55; Daphne A. Brooks, "'Puzzling the Intervals': Blind Tom and the Poetics of the Sonic Slave Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 391–414; and Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016). Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) also engages considerably with these narratives.

<sup>7</sup>Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 31–75. Outside of music studies, scholars have also begun a more expansive ecocritical analysis of slave narratives; see Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Kimberly K. Smith, "Environmental Criticism and the Slave Narratives," in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, 315–27.

Yet even ecocritical musicology formulates many of its touchstone ideas (nature, environment, ecology) from within the relatively narrow scope of white European and North American thought—in other words, one might say, within a white racial frame. I draw this language most directly from Philip Ewell's recent critique of music theory in the United States, which argues that prevailing worldviews about race and music, rarely articulated explicitly yet pervasive among music theorists and in music theory as a discipline, bolster structural forms of white privilege.<sup>8</sup> In drawing attention to this issue, I am in large part amplifying an observation by Aaron Allen and Kevin Dawe that the authors in their recent volume on ecomusicology lack racial diversity, although several of them write about indigenous and non-white ecomusicological practices.<sup>9</sup> That volume, strikingly, includes nothing on Black America, and relatively little on Africa or Black diasporic cultures. I highlight this absence not to fault the editors or authors, whose contributions are certainly wide-ranging, but rather to pose a more difficult question: what would a notion like "environment" mean in the historical context of American slavery? Walter Johnson describes enslavement in America as a "dialectic of economy and ecology" in which cotton plantations sought "ways of attempting to control and organize nature." The result was "both a radical simplification of nature and a radical simplification of human being: the reduction of landscape to cotton plantation and of human being to 'hand.'" <sup>10</sup> Plantations, rivers, and bayous were no mere landscapes, amenable to be re-perceived as soundscapes, but rather environments of violence, dehumanization, and death.

<sup>8</sup>Philip A. Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online: A Journal of the Society for Music Theory* 26, no. 2, [https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html?fbclid=IwAR1dSc4pSk6bBaW79vRFPJbLFMF1tXsr79t4iSorWnm\\_OU3lpj9EnWGcd20](https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html?fbclid=IwAR1dSc4pSk6bBaW79vRFPJbLFMF1tXsr79t4iSorWnm_OU3lpj9EnWGcd20), DOI: 10.30535/mto.26.2.4, accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>9</sup>*Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Nature, Environment*, ed. Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6–8.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 91 and 8.

Given this potential dissonance in the very formulation of an idea of nature or environment, especially in the Americas, I am particularly interested here in engaging with recent ecocritical approaches to African American studies, especially Joshua Bennett's recent *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (2020). Reflecting on the dehumanizing conditions of enslavement and its long historical wake, Bennett explores "the counterhegemonic, and also seemingly *counterintuitive*, ways that black authors often render animal life in their poetry and fiction . . . to make arguments about the nature of black sociality, black interiority, and *black feeling*."<sup>11</sup> Bennett's study of literature, "firmly situated at the nexus of black studies, ecocriticism and affect theory," offers a rough template for what a similar nexus in music/sound studies may look like. Within studies of music, Olusegun Titus has drawn on ecomusicology to argue for the importance of indigenous knowledge about environmental degradation as formed and archived in Yoruba popular music in Nigeria.<sup>12</sup> Chelsea Frazier, pointing to Beyoncé and other Black feminist artists and thinkers, has underscored the importance of not merely diversifying ecocriticism by, say, including Black women in that discourse, but by "find[ing] a collaborative rhythm" between Black feminist thought and ecocriticism, and, in so doing, reframing—or "troubling"—fundamental presumptions about the environment.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 8–9.

<sup>12</sup>Olusegun Titus, "Ecomusicology, Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Degradation in Ibadan, Nigeria," *Journal of the International Library of African Music* 11/1 (2019): 72–90. This article is part of a larger series of explorations by the author of the applicability of ecomusicology to Nigerian musical contexts. See also Olusegun Stephen Titus, "Ìrègún Music and Sounding Spaces among Yagba-Yoruba People of Nigeria," *Space and Culture* (2021): 1–16.

<sup>13</sup>Chelsea Mikael Frazier, "Black Feminist Ecological Thought: A Manifesto," *Atmos*, 1 October 2020, <https://atmos.earth/black-feminist-ecological-thought-essay/>, accessed 20 March 2021. See also Chelsea M. Frazier, "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 40–72. My extended reading of Northup in this article unfortunately tends to elide more intersectional narratives that are clearly possible in slave narratives, as (again) in Crawley, "Harriet Jacobs Gets

Thus in suggesting the possibility of a Black ecomusicology, I join a conversation already underway. Nevertheless, as a white scholar, I recognize that I risk reterritorializing Black experiences in a discursive framework (ecomusicology) that may ultimately be incompatible with histories of slavery or may even re-enact the extractivism those histories embody. Saidiya Hartman has warned of "a translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy" in the current moment of racial reckoning since George Floyd's death, rather than the necessary "radical divestment in the project of whiteness."<sup>14</sup> It seems that a necessary initial step in that process of divestment is naming the problem—ecomusicology's white racial frame.<sup>15</sup> And so, following recent calls to "re-map" sound studies and to decolonize music studies more generally, I hope there may be similar value in reorienting ecocritical approaches to music and sound to consider histories of race, not as an ancillary or extraneous topic but rather one that challenges core assumptions in ecomusicology about human value, the potential violence of the "environment," the boundaries between human and non-human, and the mediated traces of human/environmental interactions.

Why Northup? Many of the arguments I make here about Northup do not apply to his narrative alone. They resonate with other slave narratives, including accounts that are firmly positioned in the music/sound studies canon (for example, Frederick Douglass listening to singing in the woods) and those that ought to be (there are numerous instances in William Wells Brown's

a Hearing." Other relevant figures from this period might include Harriet Tubman, whose imitations of owl hooting were used as a signal (among many other forms of ecological knowledge she put to use) on the Underground Railroad. See Allison Keyes, "Harriet Tubman, an Unsung Naturalist, Used Owl Calls as a Signal on the Underground Railroad," *Audubon*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.audubon.org/news/harriet-tubman-unsung-naturalist-used-owl-calls-signal-underground-railroad>, accessed 20 March 2021.

<sup>14</sup>Saidiya Hartman, "Interviews: Saidiya Hartman," *Artforum*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/saidiya-hartman-83579>, accessed 15 September 2020.

<sup>15</sup>On the importance of naming as part of a "divestment from whiteness," see Ananya Roy, "Divesting from Whiteness: The University in the Age of Trumpism," *Society & Space Magazine*, 28 November 2016, <https://www.societyand-space.org/articles/divesting-from-whiteness-the-university-in-the-age-of-trumpism>, accessed 15 September 2020.

autobiography and his other publications). But Northup is unique in making his own musicianship so central to his narrative, something that has long attracted the attention of scholars, not to mention its importance in Steve McQueen's award-winning 2013 film. Northup thus offers an opportunity to think broadly about how his musical practice and broader sonic experiences intertwine with ecological questions. We might also look sideways, as it were, at his white contemporaries who were celebrated for their ecological listening, such as Henry David Thoreau, whom I discuss briefly in my conclusion. In any case, Northup's profile as a musician makes his writings especially well suited for further aural and ecological analysis.

#### ICHTHYOMUSICOLOGY, OR NORTHUP AS MUSICAL ETHNOGRAPHER

Although Northup writes frequently about music, there are two particular moments in which he takes on a role akin to that of a musicologist or anthropologist, documenting music and dance rituals and reflecting on the broader ecology of their performance. In the first, an important passage for music historians, Northup continues from the previously cited discussion of his violin to record how enslaved people celebrated Christmas with song and dance.<sup>16</sup> After recounting how men would use dancing to court women, he notes that when the fiddler stops playing, the group continues with "patting" (or juba), "a music peculiar to themselves" involving slapping thighs and shoulders, clapping hands, and tapping feet along with "one of those unmeaning songs, composed rather for its adaptation to a certain tune or measure, than for the purpose of expressing any distinct idea."<sup>17</sup> Northup then gives lyrics for several different songs that might be used for juba, one of which, "Roaring River," I discuss below. The practice of juba can be seen not only in Northup's writing here in somewhat informal ways, but also in that of his contemporary William Wells

Brown, who published not only an autobiographical narrative, but also his own song collection.<sup>18</sup>

A second instance of Northup's musicological practice comes earlier in the narrative, when, during the course of his work shipping lumber down Indian Creek, he comes into contact with local Native Americans ("a remnant of the Chickasaws or Chickopees, if I remember rightly").<sup>19</sup> After giving a brief description of their living arrangements, foodways, dress, and relation to animals, he describes their impressive skills with horses and their vocalizations while riding: "I have seen them dash out into the woods at the utmost of their speed, following narrow winding paths, and dodging trees, in a manner that eclipsed the most miraculous feats of civilized equestrianism. Circling away in various directions, the forest echoing and re-echoing with their whoops, they would presently return at the same dashing, headlong speed with which they started."<sup>20</sup>

Northup continues with a description of "a carnival in the 'Great Pine Woods'"<sup>21</sup>—a kind of micro-ethnography—when another tribe from Texas would come visit:

On one occasion I was present at a dance, when a roving herd from Texas had encamped in their village. The entire carcass of a deer was roasting before a large fire, which threw its light a long distance among the trees under which they were assembled. When they had formed in a ring, men and squaws alternately, a sort of Indian fiddle set up an indescribable tune. It was a continuous, melancholy kind of wavy sound, with the slightest possible variation. At the first note, if indeed there was more than one note in the whole tune, they circled around, trotting after each other, and giving utterance to a

<sup>18</sup>See William W. Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847); and *The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*, ed. William W. Brown (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848).

<sup>19</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 100.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>21</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 101. This musical gathering in the woods and its circle of rapturous vocalizing bear a certain resemblance to Frederick Douglass's account of singing in the woods on the way to the Great House Farm, though Northup gives his account from outside the circle rather than inside it, as Langer Cohen argues ("Solomon Northup's Singing Book," 260). See also Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845).

<sup>16</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 218–20.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

guttural, sing-song noise, equally as nondescript as the music of the fiddle. At the end of the third circuit, they would stop suddenly, whoop as if their lungs would crack, then break from the ring, forming in couples, man and squaw, each jumping backwards as far as possible from the other, then forwards—which graceful feat having been twice or thrice accomplished, they would form in a ring, and go trotting round again. The best dancer appeared to be considered the one who could whoop the loudest, jump the farthest, and utter the most excruciating noise. At intervals, one or more would leave the dancing circle, and going to the fire, cut from the roasting carcass a slice of venison.

In a hole, shaped like a mortar, cut in the trunk of a fallen tree, they pounded corn with a wooden pestle, and of the meal made cake. Alternately they danced and ate. Thus were the visitors from Texas entertained by the dusky sons and daughters of the Chickopees, and such is a description, as I saw it, of an Indian ball in the Pine Woods of Avoyelles.<sup>22</sup>

Dixie Brewer, a Chickasaw dancer working currently as a cultural revitalization specialist, has suggested that the dance described by Northup is probably the Garfish Dance, the oldest extant dance still performed by Chickasaw.<sup>23</sup> If so, what Northup observed and documented was a seasonal dance “traditionally associated with the [agricultural] Green Corn Ceremony, in which the teeth of garfish are used in the purification ritual connected with the ceremonies” and men and women dance together in circular motions.<sup>24</sup> Claude Medford, an anthropologist and member of the closely related Choctaw tribe (perhaps what Northup meant instead of “Chicopee”), described the intimate relationship the garfish has with the ceremony: “These songs are not sung for the entertainment or the pleasure of the singer or listener. The songs are sung, in this instance, to the garfish, for what the garfish wants to hear. . . . Indian people have been singing to the garfish for thousands of years,

and they know what the garfish likes.”<sup>25</sup> Such dances thus connect all the social groups in attendance with the environment around them.

This ritual-focused reading is admittedly speculative, but Northup’s text offers several additional points of interest as well. First, he shows a close intertwining between music, dance, food, landscape, and even the visual effects of the fire. Food preparation takes place in both the fire and the trunk of a tree; dancing and eating are interspersed; and the ceremonial space is situated within an area full of trees.

Reading this text nearly 170 years later, I find Northup’s language to be, at least superficially, somewhat pejorative. Some of his descriptions are relatively value-neutral, such as the “continuous, melancholy kind of wavy sound,” but he then describes his hosts’ vocal practices as “guttural, sing-song noise” and “nondescript,” with the vocal interjections, or whooping, as “excruciating noise.” He also initially describes the visiting group as “a roving herd.” Granted, it would be simple enough to understand this language as a product of its time, but perhaps not even that gesture is necessary. On some level, the fact that Northup was there at all—that he was trusted by his hosts to stay and observe—suggests that during his preceding logging runs, they had cultivated a substantive relationship or even solidarity, rooted perhaps in some shared sense of marginalization, labor, and repeated, violent removal from their homes and land. In other words, Northup’s account affirms a shared humanity, even if there is some slippage in the particular musical details. Furthermore, Northup’s concluding qualifier, “as I saw it,” simultaneously notes his own eyewitness status (as I saw it) and the kind of circumspection more typical of ethnography since the “crisis of representation” in the 1980s (as I saw it). Northup’s observations do offer details comparable to those in his descriptions of his own musical experiences; in fact, his attention to

<sup>22</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 101–02.

<sup>23</sup>In Arika Easley-Houser, “*The Indian Image in The Black Mind*”: *Representing Native Americans in Antebellum African American Public Culture* (PhD diss., Graduate School-New Brunswick, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 2014), 219.

<sup>24</sup>The Chickasaw Nation, “Stomp Dance,” <https://www.chickasaw.net/Our-Nation/Culture/Society/Social-Dances.aspx>, accessed 1 August 2020.

<sup>25</sup>In Jason Baird Jackson and Victoria Lindsay Levine, “Singing for Garfish: Music and Woodland Communities in Eastern Oklahoma,” *Ethnomusicology* 46, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 2002): 284–306 (291). Lara Langer Cohen argues that the Native American tribe in Northup’s account is in fact the Choctaws. See Cohen, “Solomon Northup’s Singing Book,” 261.

detail—he mentions Cascalla, the local chief, and John Baltese, the second-in-command, by name—has led to *Twelve Years* being used as part of the historical adjudication of local Indian rights.<sup>26</sup> In short, Northup's presence and documentary effort here produced a rich, if brief, ethnographic account of local musical/environmental practices and the complex relationships between Blacks and Native Americans, an important historical narrative in recent decades.<sup>27</sup>

SONIC REFUGE? BAYOUS, SWAMPS, AND THE  
AUDIBLE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN

Not all of Solomon Northup's observations on sound are concerned with music. For instance, he comments on the intense weeping of an enslaved woman, Eliza, when separated from her child.<sup>28</sup> After being sold to another enslaver named Epps, Northup comments that the sound of slaves being whipped is the most prevalent sound in the fields.<sup>29</sup> (Interestingly, he never mentions any kind of vocalizing or singing by enslaved laborers, although it seems likely to have been a common practice.) But perhaps the most aurality-intensive moments of the narrative outside performances of music come when Northup is repeatedly attacked by one of his enslavers, Tibeats, and in the aftermath when, after subduing Tibeats, Northup flees into the nearby Bayou Boeuf.

"In silence and in dread": Northup uses this phrase to describe the moment just before Tibeats attacked him, a moment of impending violence.<sup>30</sup> The two fight for some time. Northup defends himself against Tibeats, who continues to find new weapons to use against Northup. Northup interrupts his account of the

melee to state that he had sometimes lost the will to live, but, drawing inspiration from animal life, notes that "Life is dear to every living thing; the worm that crawls upon the ground will struggle for it. At that moment it was dear to me, enslaved and treated as I was."<sup>31</sup> The worm turns, so to speak, when Northup describes Tibeats looking like a snake, especially as Northup chokes him to break his grip on an axe. While keeping his choke-hold, Northup reflects on his dilemma: kill him and be killed; let him live, and still probably be killed. He writes, "A voice within whispered me to fly. To be a wanderer among the swamps, a fugitive and a vagabond on the face of the earth, was preferable to the life that I was leading."<sup>32</sup> While Tibeats recovered and summoned help, Northup flees toward the bayou and prays, "silently and unuttered," then waits in vain for some kind of "answering voice—no sweet, low tone, coming down from on high, whispering to my soul."<sup>33</sup> Instead, he soon sees Tibeats returning with other men and a pack of bloodhounds.

The chase through the bayou is an intense, sensory narrative: sound, smell, and proprioception all take on prominent roles for Northup, his pursuers (especially the hounds), and other creatures in the bayou. The sound of hounds in the bayou was apparently common, and commonly used to speculate on runaways' fates: "Frequently their loud bay is heard in the swamps, and then there is speculation as to what point the runaway will be overhauled—the same as a New-York hunter stops to listen to the hounds coursing along the hillsides, and suggests to his companion that the fox will be taken at such a place."<sup>34</sup> As Northup ran, the hounds' "savage yells" served a dual psychoacoustic function of inducing violent dread and transmitting spatial information. They also potentially convey the temporality of the chase:

Every few moments I could hear the yelpings of the dogs. They were gaining upon me. Every howl was nearer and nearer. Each moment I expected they would spring upon my back—expected to feel their

<sup>26</sup>Easley-Houser, "The Indian Image," 219.

<sup>27</sup>See Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*, ed. Sharon Patricia Holland and Tiya Miles (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); and Celia Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>28</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 80–82.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 132.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 134–35.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 137.

long teeth sinking into my flesh. There were so many of them, I knew they would tear me to pieces, that they would worry me, at once, to death. I gasped for breath—gasped forth a half-uttered, choking prayer to the Almighty to save me—to give me strength to reach some wide, deep bayou where I could throw them off the track, or sink into its waters. Presently I reached a thick palmetto bottom. As I fled through them they made a loud rustling noise, not loud enough, however, to drown the voices of the dogs. [Arriving at the water's edge] I could hear them crashing and plunging through the palmettoes, their loud, eager yells making the whole swamp clamorous with the sound.<sup>35</sup>

As with the Chickasaw horse-riding (and implicitly with the Indian ball), we see here the motif of a local ecosystem set into reverberation in a moment of crucial sounding. Northup did succeed in throwing the hounds off his scent by swimming through the bayou, which he confirmed aurally as the dogs' "savage intonations grew more and more distant" until they were gone.<sup>36</sup>

Having survived the hounds, Northup encountered a new sensory, and specifically bioacoustic, realm in the bayou inhabited by alligators, poisonous cottonmouth snakes, and avian life. Here his task shifts from listening (quietly) to making noise (intentionally) to inform the bayou fauna of his intrusion to avoid any lethal encounters, and then back to a different kind of listening. Hours passed, with his "dread" of death-by-reptile intensifying.<sup>37</sup> He then recounts the following sonic experience:

After midnight, however, I came to a halt. Imagination cannot picture the dreariness of the scene. The swamp was resonant with the quacking of innumerable ducks! Since the foundation of the earth, in all probability, a human footstep had never before so far penetrated the recesses of the swamp. It was not silent now—silent to a degree that rendered it oppressive,—as it was when the sun was shining in the heavens. My midnight intrusion had awakened the feathered tribes, which seemed to throng the morass in hundreds of thousands, and their garrulous throats poured forth such multitudinous sounds—there was such a fluttering of wings—such

sullen plunges in the water all around me—that I was affrighted and appalled. All the fowls of the air, and all the creeping things of the earth appeared to have assembled together in that particular place, for the purpose of filling it with clamor and confusion. Not by human dwellings—not in crowded cities alone, are the sights and sounds of life. The wildest places of the earth are full of them. Even in the heart of that dismal swamp, God had provided a refuge and a dwelling place for millions of living things.<sup>38</sup>

Although he had apparently never spent extended time in the bayou, Northup again shows himself to be an adept listener. He notes the way sound marks the passing of time—counter-intuitively, with daytime oppressively silent and night surprisingly loud, perhaps in direct response to his presence, as he readily acknowledges. He also inverts the truism, found in certain corners of soundscape ecology, that "nature" must be the sonic benchmark of sound in the world; Northup, instead, finds "crowded cities" to be a useful way of understanding the "clamor and confusion" of the bayou's nightlife. Furthermore, he ascribes to those animals, and their "garrulous throats pour[ing] forth such multitudinous sounds," a kind of willfulness: they come "for the purpose of filling [the bayou] with clamor and confusion." This was not a realm of human dominion.

Northup thus makes explicit that the bayou, with all its "sights and sounds of life," is a place of refuge, divinely provided "for millions of living things"—including himself. Like all sanctuaries, that bayou refuge has its bounds delineated both geographically and sensorially. Northup accesses that refuge through his own sheer determination, abetted (he seems to say) through prayer, at first "silently and unuttered" then later uttered aloud as, while "gasp[ing] for breath," he "gasped forth a half-uttered, choking prayer" for safety in the bayou.<sup>39</sup> Beyond the religious elements here, Northup's view of "refuge and a dwelling place" suggests an entirely new possibility for relations among humans and also between humans and other living things. As Joshua Bennett writes of Frederick Douglass,

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 137–38.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 138, 140.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 141–42.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 136, 138.



so, too, with Northup: he “get[s] out of animality by going through it,” resisting the violent social order he inhabited by “embrac[ing] another, more radical form of sociality, one grounded in the desire for a world without cages or chains,” imagining human personhood as rooted “not in the logics of private property or dominion but in wildness, flight, brotherhood and sisterhood beyond blood.”<sup>40</sup> At least for a few hours, until Northup figured out how he could return to enslavement without being killed, the bayou formed a space of refuge through its overabundance of sound and life.

Northup was not alone in seeking such refuge, nor in having intense sonic encounters in the local bayous and swamps. He tells of an enslaved woman, Celeste, who appeared at his hut seeking food one night while he was playing violin. She had been hiding near a swamp in a large area covered densely with palmetto trees, affording her protection but not food. She was ultimately driven from her own refuge by sound: “At all seasons of the year the howlings of wild animals can be heard at night along the borders of the swamps. Several times they had made her a midnight call, awakening her from slumber with a growl. Terrified by such unpleasant salutations, she finally concluded to abandon her lonely dwelling.”<sup>41</sup>

Celeste’s extended sojourn in the swamp belongs to the longer history of Maroons throughout the Americas, which sometimes involved intensive sonic practices.<sup>42</sup> An 1829 slave narrative about one Robert the Hermit, who had lived for fourteen years in a cave in New England, concluded by appending an account of an enslaved woman with two children in North Carolina who turned herself in after seven years of living near a marsh with support from her enslaved husband who lived nearby. (Remarkably, she even gave birth while in hiding.) Minimizing sound became a matter of life and death for mother and children: “By the strictest discipline, she prevented them ever crying aloud; she compelled them to stifle their little

cries and complaints, though urged to it by pinching hunger, or the severest cold. She prohibited them from speaking louder than a whisper.”<sup>43</sup> Ultimately her husband abandoned her, forcing her to surrender to the authorities. In all these cases, environmental silence was both a discipline of living and a state perpetually adjacent to death.

#### LACUNA—ON PATSEY

As mentioned briefly above, shortly after Northup recounts his arrival at the Epps plantation, where he spent a decade, he notes that “the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of slaves, can be heard from dark till bed time, on Epps’ plantation, any day almost during the entire period of the cotton-picking season.”<sup>44</sup> Of all the violence Northup witnesses, the most harrowing moment seems to come when Epps viciously attacks a young enslaved woman named Patsey outside the house on the piazza.<sup>45</sup> Northup’s account creates a striking sonic juxtaposition—a bloody pastoral—but I leave that moment as an intentional gap in my account here. I do so, not because the incident doesn’t warrant mention, but because to do justice to it would require considerably more space than I have. Hartman opens her book *Scenes of Subjection* by discussing Frederick Douglass’s account of his Aunt Hester, and how the act of reproducing beatings casually or superficially risks “immur[ing] us to pain by virtue of their familiarity” and transforming acts of witnessing into voyeurism.<sup>46</sup> While sound may re-route the particular visual intensities of this “terrible spectacle” (Douglass’s term), it maintains its

<sup>43</sup>Robert Voorhis and Henry Trumbull, *Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts: Who has lived 14 Years in a Cave, secluded from human society* (Providence: Printed for H. Trumbull, 1829), 34.

<sup>44</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 179.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 253–59; see also 188–90.

<sup>46</sup>Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–4. For further discussion of this issue in the McQueen film, see Stephanie Li, “12 Years a Slave as a Neo-Slave Narrative,” *American Literary History* 26, no. 2 (2014): 326–31; and Salamishah Tillet, “‘I Got No Comfort in This Life’: The Increasing Importance of Patsey in *12 Years a Slave*,” *American Literary History* 26, no. 2 (2014): 354–61.

<sup>40</sup>Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself*, 2–4.

<sup>41</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 246.

<sup>42</sup>Sylviane Diouf recounts several other instances in her book, *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 97–98, 159–60.

own potency. Suffice it to say that sound could be—and was—deployed as a key component in violence, and particularly violence against enslaved women.

ECOLOGICAL REMEDIATION AS PRESERVATION  
AND DESTRUCTION

For a final set of examples, I want to touch briefly on two remediations of Northup's experience: his inclusion of notated music at the end of his book ("Roaring River: A Refrain of the Red River Plantation") and a single scene from McQueen's 2013 film, which depicts Northup destroying his violin in a grove of trees—something that Northup never mentions. Both incidents highlight the porousness between "medium" and "nature." In the former, a river becomes a song that in turn becomes a notated piece of music. In the latter, a violin is de-stringed, taken apart, and left to decompose. One scene preserves music; the other destroys it. But both draw attention to the fact that "nature" and its sonic manifestations are always already mediated.

The notated music, "Roaring River: A Refrain of the Red River Plantation," appears with no explanation as a single page immediately after Northup's narrative ends, just before a series of appendices of documents verifying Northup's account. It includes a melody that has generally been thought to be a plausible fiddle tune from the period, but the melody fits poorly with the lyrics included alongside it. The lyrics have appeared earlier in Northup's description of patting juba and Christmas music (see plate 1).<sup>47</sup>

Harper's creek and roarin' ribber,  
Thar, my dear, we'll live forebber;  
Den we'll go to the Ingin nation,  
All I want in dis creation,  
Is pretty little wife and big plantation.

CHORUS

Up dat oak and down dat ribber,  
Two overseers and one little nigger.

Lara Langer Cohen's recent article, "Solomon Northup's Singing Book," makes the case that

<sup>47</sup>Northup, *Twelve Years*, 322, 219.

ROARING RIVER.

A REFRAIN OF THE RED RIVER PLANTATION.



"Harper's creek and roarin' ribber,  
Thar, my dear, we'll live forebber;  
Den we'll go to de Ingin nation,  
All I want in dis creation,  
Is pretty little wife and big plantation.

CHORUS.

Up dat oak and down dat ribber,  
Two overseers and one little nigger."

Plate 1: "Roaring River: A Refrain of the Red River Plantation" from *Twelve Years a Slave*.

Northup's narrative "tests the expressive possibilities and limits" of representing enslavement through its multimedia format of text, illustrations, and musical notation.<sup>48</sup> She shows how the song (especially its lyrics) reaches out to a number of "sonic intertexts," including other popular songs of the era, juba songs, Northup's other performances in *Twelve Years*, and even songs from the "Indian ball." This multimedia, polyphonic book was further enmeshed in contemporaneous remediations (drawings for the book produced by two artists, lectures about the book by Northup, dramatic re-enactments). Northup even designated slavery "a medium," leading Cohen to suggest that he was "theorizing a connection between slavery and the emergence of the media concept."<sup>49</sup> I agree and would push the notion one step further. Northup's

<sup>48</sup>Cohen, "Solomon Northup's Singing Book," 260.

<sup>49</sup>Cohen, "Solomon Northup's Singing Book," 267–68.

Ur-medium here seems to be the river, which pulls together sound, temporality, physical passage, and time. The “roarin’ ribber” is preserved in the song as a “refrain” of the river; the song is preserved in Northup’s juba description; and it is remediated yet again in a form that captures more sonic details than alphabetic writing could and also renders the musical idiom audible/legible to white readers in the northern United States.

However, music need not be a medium of preservation; it can also be destructive. In McQueen’s 2013 film adaptation, after Patsey is beaten (initially by Northup, at Epps’s insistence), women tend to her wounds and she looks at Northup. Her brief gaze causes Northup to leave and sit alone in the woods. In a series of rhythmic shots that follow, his hands are then shown tightening the strings of his violin until they snap, with each string’s snapping increasingly violent. The pacing continues to build as he breaks the neck of the violin from its body, after which a flurry of extremely quick shots show him destroying the rest of the instrument. The scene concludes with a longer shot looking down over his shoulders, exhaling heavily, with the remains of the splintered violin on the ground. Northup never mentions such an act, but McQueen’s augmentation underscores two things: first, Northup notes that Epps regularly made him and other enslaved people make music, dance, and sing, so this act of destruction strikes a blow (however limited) at the pleasures of the enslaver; second, as Salamishah Tillet argues, it grants Patsey greater subjectivity and (brief) authorial control, creating a space in which she can “hold Solomon accountable” for not agreeing to her earlier request to end her life, given how immense her sufferings had been.<sup>50</sup> To this, I would add that the violin serves as a kind of stand-in for the whip: both have become instruments of torture, or “the master’s tools,” in Audre Lorde’s memorable phrase. The destruction of the violin and its literal deformation provide an alternate reality—a reimagining of Northup’s musical life in which the aim is not to preserve or conserve anything, let alone

a sonic relationship with nature, but to escape the trauma that music already embodies.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, ecomusicology has—rightly, in my mind—paid close attention to the environmental writings of Henry David Thoreau.<sup>51</sup> He, too, spent a few years during the 1840s living in a new environment. He, too, traveled along rivers and documented his experiences (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 1849), while also writing about life around a body of water, including its sounds (*Walden*, 1854). Of course, the comparison of circumstances between Thoreau and Solomon Northup is absurd, and perhaps even offensive, given the artificial and limited nature of Thoreau’s braving the elements, compared to the immense precarity of Northup’s situation. So why has Thoreau been lionized and Northup largely ignored in these conversations? Again, my suggestion here has been a white racial frame—not so stark as in music theory, perhaps, but nevertheless salient across so many soundscapes, sound maps, and other acoustic ecology ventures. Accordingly, a more concerted reckoning with race in, or lacking in, ecomusicological discourse is thus all the more urgent, despite the relative newness of the field, precisely because the central question at the heart of Northup’s narrative is the status of the human within a vast plantation ecology and economy. I close then with an excerpt from Frederick Douglass’s review of Northup’s book, which points to this same grotesque slippage between human and animal, between musician (implicitly) and mule: “For thirty years a man, with all a man’s hopes, fears, and aspirations—with a wife and children to

<sup>51</sup>For example, see Jeff Todd Titon, “Thoreau’s Ear,” *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 144–54. In highlighting Titon, I am not faulting him for his interest in Thoreau, something I, too, have pursued in my own media-making practice in a 2013 experimental film with Hannah Lewis, *Sounds @ Solitude*. Rather, I emphasize here how such projects, including my own, presuppose certain values and norms about what constitutes environmental listening and whose accounts of listening warrant further examination and engagement.

<sup>50</sup>Tillet, “I Got No Comfort in This Life,” 359.

call him by endearing names of husband and father—with a *home*, humble it may be, but still a home . . . then for twelve years a *thing*, a chattel personal, classed with mules and horses. . . . It chills the blood.”<sup>52</sup>



**Abstract.**

In his 1853 autobiographical narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, violinist Solomon Northup recounts his own experience of being abducted and sold into slavery for twelve years. Born as a free Black man with significant musical experience prior to enslavement, Northup offers considerable detail about his sonic (and musical) experiences, frequently situating them in a broader environmental context of slave plantations, land- and

riverscapes of the American South, and their remediations in print/musical notation. In asserting a salient connection between environment, race, and sound, Northup’s memoir points to possible limitations in conceptualizations of the environment that have predominated in recent ecomusicology but have tended to efface the issues of race. I sketch here a prehistory of ecomusicology that grapples directly with the sonic legacies of transatlantic slavery, underscoring how landscape might be understood not as a space of solitude or contemplation, but rather of economic exploitation and violence. Like other areas in musicology, ecomusicology has been hindered by its reliance on a “white racial frame” that tends to presume certain kinds of subjectivity and possible relationships with the environment. When considered from this perspective, Northup’s account offers an important, if harrowing, reminder of the complex entanglements of environment, race, sound, economy, and violence. Keywords: ecomusicology, race, enslavement, Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*

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<sup>52</sup>Ira Berlin, “Introduction,” in Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (New York: Penguin, 2012), xxv.