Abstract and Keywords

This article explores the enslaved musician Blind Tom’s sonic repertoire as an alternative to that of the discursive slave narrative, and it considers the methodological challenges of theorizing the conditions of captivity and freedom in cultural representations of Blind Tom’s performances. The article explores how the extant anecdotes, testimonials and cultural ephemera about Thomas Wiggins live in tension with the conventional fugitive’s narrative, and it traces the ways in which the “scenarios” emerging from the Blind Tom archive reveal a consistent set of themes concerning aesthetic authorship, imitation, reproduction and duplication, which tell us much about quotidian forms of power and subjugation in the cultural life of slavery, as well as the cultural means by which a figure like Blind Tom complicated and disrupted that power.

Keywords: sound, listening, sonic ekphrasis, echo, memory, reproduction, imitation, transcription, notation, improvisation

For my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me with stinging, scorching words, words that scathed ear and brain like fire!

—Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)

I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was, myself, within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear.

—Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of an American Slave (1845)

He is a human phonograph, a sort of animated memory, with sound producing power.

—Willa Cather, Nebraska State Journal

To Tell a Sound Story

The ear is the delicate conduit through which fugitive authors have both (re)enacted their subjugation and performed the wondrously complex dimensions of their freedom. Two iconic scenes in the twin pillars of the slave narrative genre, Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of an American Slave (1845), figure the shifting material condition of their respective protagonists by way of the ear. Jacobs’s heroine Linda Brent falls prey to the advances of her rapacious master Dr. Flint, whose “stinging, scorching words…scathed ear and brain like fire” (29) in a passage that turns on vivid sexual metaphor and uses the ear of the female captive as the portal through which “innocent” girlhood transforms into
“prematurely knowing” (45) sexual chattel, Jacobs not only recreates her own “fall” through the ear in order to illuminate the moral exigencies surrounding the plight of women in slavery but also, by making that organ the site of sexual vulnerability, she paradoxically challenges her audience to preserve the “purity” of their own ears by awakening them to her plaintive call for liberation (“hear my voice, ye careless daughters!”). To listen as a captive in Incidents is to be rendered abject, whereas to see (through the aperture of a cramped garret space) is but one of the many ways that our heroine choreographs her liberation.

Douglass’s “big ears” are, in contrast, the evidence of his own emancipated enlightenment in one of the most influential and oft-cited passages in (African) American literature. Writing from the realm of fugitive author(by), Douglass recounts the sound of captive song, emotionally and structurally as “dense” as the woods in which this music takes root/route, and he beckons readers to a retrospective hearing shaped by liberated distance. Douglass as ear translates the “wild” elixir of euphoria and despair coursing through the music of the enslaved into earnest testimony about what “the mere hearing of those songs would do to impress some minds with the horrible character” of slavery (26). But his sound story squarely attests to his own intellectual freedom, his marked distance from bondage, and his ironically heightened ability to recognize “the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs” as a sign of his analytically elevated removal from “the circle” of enslavement.” As the contemplative fugitive who listens to his own past, Douglass’s theorization of the insurgency of slavery’s soundscape is but one of the many elegant and ideologically virtuosic ways in which The Narrative of the Life conjoins the realm of (resounding) reason with freedom itself.

In both cases, Jacobs and Douglass instrumentalize their own ears in the service of signature tropes in their respective discursive narratives. We are invited to imagine (horribly in the case of Jacobs, sublimely in the case of Douglass) what we cannot hear but what attests to the torturous state and brave resolve of the captive, and the pivotal role that sound memory plays in the canonical slave narrative form. Both texts also challenge us to consider the extent to which performative listening and sonic expressiveness might constitute alternative forms of the former slave’s narration by way of articulating that which exceeds and complicates the written word.

No figure in the cultural history of slavery would more fully manifest and aestheticize the sonic politics of enslavement than classical musician, trans-Atlantic celebrity and bondsman Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins, a performer who was, himself, a kind of “ear” to slave culture, as well as its roiling, stubborn afterlife and a person whose sonic labor in captivity opens up new questions about the varied means by which the enslaved document their bondage and create commentary about their condition.

Having left behind no conventional writings of his own and having apparently never quested to “tell a free story” in the most legible ways that one associates with the slave narrative genre or abolitionist aesthetics, the physically disabled and cognitively challenged Blind Tom remains a conundrum to scholars of nineteenth-century American culture. Neither “free” for most of his life (which lasted well beyond the Civil War) nor a man of letters or conventional public speaker, he nonetheless generated a matrix of cultural representations that stretch and disrupt our definitions of black abjection and liberation in the age of slavery. As critical race theorist Stephen Best suggests, Tom’s classical piano performances in which he barreled through the work of weighty masters such as Beethoven and Liszt, must be understood within the peculiar juridical context of slavery that “place[s] on display unsettled transformations of sound from forms exchanged between” musicians “to properties circulated between things (i.e., piano and slave).” With no legal recourse to owning his unique brand of “acoustic phenomena,” Tom (quite literally) played out a struggle for self-authorship and self-possession on the concert-hall stage and in the realm of nineteenth-century popular music culture (Best, 56–60).

My aim is to recuperate the archival traces of that struggle and read Blind Tom’s repertoire as a kind of alternative narration of the bondsman to that of the canonical slave narrative protagonist/author. If, as historian Mark Smith asserts, “antebellum slave narratives and their audiences listened to more than just songs and literary texts; they communicated and listened to myriad other sounds of slavery...including the gruesome noises and silences of premodern bondage...,” then we might think of Blind Tom’s work as a musical analogue to the genre in all of its acoustic capaciousness (Smith, 156). As both a fastidious classical pianist as well as an eccentric “human phonograph” who reproduced the sounds in his midst, he created an archive of sound commentary about the world in which he lived and performed and the one which tenaciously held him in bonds. In this way, Blind Tom’s sonic repertoire emerges as the means by which he “underwrites” the self in expressive forms that move outside of conventional slave narrative aesthetics (Olney, 156–7). Neither fully subjugated (like Jacobs) by his ear nor
radically liberated (like Douglass) by his tremendous relationship to sound, Blind Tom’s life and career encourage us to forge new critical methodologies to consider the multisensory dimensions of enslavement as well as the dissident, sonic modes of enslaved narration (Jenson-Moulton, “Specimens’ and ‘Peculiar Idiosyncracies”).

“Metamorphoses in the Acoustic”: Performing the Blind Tom Slave Narrative

...what Tom made available for scrutiny...was the implication of metamorphoses in the acoustic...

—Stephen Best (59)

His ability to name any combination of notes, no matter how disconnected and puzzling the intervals, was... fully proved...

—Anonymous (Marvelous Musical Prodigy, 29)

He was born on May 25, 1849 to the captive woman Charity Wiggins and a field worker named Mingo, enslaved by General James Neil Bethune and family in Columbus, Georgia, and there is no major literary text that documents his life, no narrative that traces his “heroic transformations,” no tale of a defining moment when he would “rise up and find his voice,” no treatise of his on the evils of slavery, and no passionate appeal to his northern brethren to abolish the system that held him in bonds. In nearly every recognizable way, Blind Tom Wiggins’s odyssey defies the conventions of the classic slave narrative genre. Having never authored an autobiographical text, Blind Tom exists outside of the tradition in which the bondsman-turned-author testifies to his own humanity and fraternity with white sympathetic readers. He neither worked to cultivate an aesthetics of moral transparency in his public persona nor did he produce a suspenseful, artfully rendered narrative of the life. He did none of these things in part because of his multiple disabilities. As one of 12 children born to Charity, and blind since infancy, he was said to have struggled with aspects of severe social dysfunction from his earliest years forward. In a recent biography, Deidre O’Connell likens Tom’s turbulent nighttime fits and combative daytime behavior to that of “Early Infantile Autism,” observing that his “echolalia, heightened sensory discrimination and [his] ability to recall seemingly meaningless details alert[ed]” his captors “to the possibility of an autistic spectral disorder, his striking lack of common sense clinching the verdict” (35) (Davis and Baron; Jensen-Moulton, “Finding Autism”; Sacks, liner notes; Sacks, Musicophilia).

The pursuit of standard speech and literacy is thus not a central theme in the Blind Tom story. Yet as O’Connell, pioneering black musicologist Genevieve Sout halluc and other scholars insist, Blind Tom’s “extraordinary sensory powers” in many ways defied conventional medical diagnoses and, as I suggest below, produced insurgent articulations of expressive alterity that defy categorization. Blind Tom’s virtuosity as a mimic of sounds, his vast repository of social memory, “sensory information” and “aural pictures,” and above all his ability to translate and reproduce that information in performative contexts both catapulted him into the realm of nineteenth-century celebrity culture and left him vulnerable to triply complex exploitation and disenfranchisement—as a slave, as a disabled musician, and as an entertainer whose (stolen) livelihood rested in part on meeting the prejudicial demands of a “freak show” circuit shaped by P.T. Barnum and others (O’Connell, 35-6).

Having debuted in 1857 at the age of eight at Temperance Hall in Columbus, Georgia, and having been subsequently placed under the supervision of road manager-impresario Perry H. Oliver, Tom toured throughout the south and eventually the north and abroad. In the process, he journeyed to the center of the culture of spectacle. Playbills from the first decade of his career trumpet the coming of the “blind Negro boy...Sightless and Untutored from Birth...a composer and musician of skill and excellence” who “can produce correct music with his back to the piano! In fact, he is a WONDER...” “He is presented to the public,” announces another, “as surpassing everything hitherto known the world as a MUSICAL PHENOMENON.” The Blind Tom publicity machine found a comfortable home in the “freak show” celebrity culture that exploited figures such as Joice Heth, Millie-Christine, and William Henry Johnson, “stars” whose racialized corporeality putatively manifested social deviance for the masses (Adams; Biographical Sketch of Millie-Christine; Reiss; Thomson). Yet Blind Tom as cultural agent stands apart from these other figures. For it was his virtuosic talents crossed with his “blackness” that caused such a stir among white audiences and critics who thought it impossible for these two categories to co-exist. How is it possible that this “grinning, idiotic, Congo boy,” a “full-blooded negro” who “appears more like an ape than a man” could execute a repertoire consisting of “characteristics and parlor expressions,” concertos (by Chopin, Mendelssohn,
Beethoven and others), as well as marches (by Liszt) and “fantasias, caprices and etudes (by Thalberg, Gottschalk)” and numerous other programs (St. Louis, Dwight’s Journal May 1861)? Here was a circus “wonder” to behold indeed.

Accounts of his live performances, of which there are many, suggest that in Blind Tom concerts every scene was one of “subjection,” where race and disability were thrown into temporary “relief” by a mastery of “the most difficult works by Beethoven, Mozart, Hertz and others of equal reputation” (Southall, Blind Tom, the Black Pianist-Composer, 14). The more challenging the composition, the more delicious was his act to audiences who marveled over the incongruity of “a half-idiot looking boy” who “has powers as a musical performer, such probably as no one has ever attained by any amount of art or practice” (“Musical Genius—Blind Tom”). Musical genius thus cemented Tom’s black “freakish” capital, over which General Bethune guarded closely, obsessively, and litigiously for nearly 35 years until losing legal “guardianship” of Tom in 1887 to his son John’s widow, Eliza Lerche. Tom died in 1908 in Hoboken, New Jersey, isolated and cloistered away by Lerche—an equally expedient handler—but having lived a life largely onstage, largely praised and yet forever scrutinized by the incredulous white masses, performing for confederate, Yankee, and eventually English and French audiences through the turn of the century.

How do we read the life of Blind Tom? His story demands that we shift the criteria and critical methodologies that we use to explore the culture of captives so as to attune ourselves to the sounds of the fugitive who scores a kind of “strange, weird improvisation[al]” freedom within the very confines of enslavement. We must imagine the extant anecdotes, testimonials, and cultural ephemera about Thomas Wiggins as being in formalistic tension with the conventional fugitive’s narrative. Though distinct from canonical texts that vociferously condemn the institution of slavery, the “scenarios” of the Blind Tom archive adhere to a consistent set of themes concerning aesthetic authorship, imitation, reproduction and duplication that convey much about quotidian forms of power and subjugation in the cultural life of slavery, as well as the cultural means by which a figure like Tom complicates and troubles the terms of that power. In short, these materials reveal a fugitive who ran (masterful, exquisite, dizzying circles) even while in bonds (Taylor, 28–9).

To illustrate what I mean, I’ll first turn to a brief consideration of the well-circulated, Blind Tom promotional pamphlet in order to demonstrate how this text both adheres to and also disrupts slave narrative aesthetics. I’ll then explore two influential articles that shaped the discourse on Tom as a way to consider the representational struggles bound up with his iconography. Taken together, these texts reveal the ways that Blind Tom’s act(s) slipped through and around convention and “puzzled the intervals” of sonic expressiveness by creating what we might think of as enclaves of performative opacity. Comprised of a “sketch of the life,” “testimonials,” a repertoire list with lyrics and critical endorsements from the trans-Atlantic press, The Marvelous Musical Prodigy pamphlet is like the slave narrative with its “mixed production” of documents, but it is also a curious text that shreds up enigmatic constructions of Blind Tom’s persona that defy familiar representations of the enslaved (Olney, 151, Andrews 1–18). Its opening profile, “Blind Tom: The Great Negro Pianist” traffics in the kind of promotional shock so common in show-culture pamphlets. “His peculiarities,” the text declares, “were so singular...his powers so wonderful, even in their first manifestations, as to astonish and bewilder all who witnessed them” (Marvelous Musical Prodigy, 3). It is a tale of the “marvelous,” a black and blind boy who exhibits near mystical “powers” from infancy. It is a tale of possession, one in which “musical sounds exert [a controlling influence over him]” (4), one in which Tom is seemingly beholden to sound, not to his masters. It is a tale of a child born into chattel slavery and yet still enchanted by his acoustic universe: butter churning, dishes and pans rattling, babies crying, the rain and thunder of fierce Georgia storms, and the piano played by his young mistresses in the parlor. It is not a tale “ Written by Himself, with the standard opening ‘I was born’” (Olney, 155). Rather, the anonymous narrator assumes the role usually assigned to the former slave-author who emerges as the principal “truth-teller,” the presumably transparent figurehead on hand to “furnish facts” (MMP, 4) for readers’ scrutiny. Tom, conversely, exists at a remove from writer and reader alike. “‘a living miracle,’ unparalleled, incomprehensible, such has not been seen before, and probably will never be seen again” (MMP, 9).

Like the “authenticating machinery” of slave narrative texts, Tom’s agency and abilities are subject to the corroboration of testimonials (“I lifted him to the piano; he played several pieces...the Professor then performed a piece of his own composition.... To my surprise ‘Tom’ played it immediately...” [MMP, 9]) and press reviews (“He not only performs solos with a full command of all the dexterity which distinguishes pianoforte soloists, but is able to play from memory...” [MMP, 26]), but it is the music in The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, on its back and inside covers and in the middle of the text itself, that tells a contrapuntal tale of self-authorship, one that veers away from
the form's insistence on a "truth that depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art." Instead, Tom's "art" defies the "truthful" order established by the genre. Listen closely to the archive for traces of a complex, enigmatic "self" that plays itself out across a vast repertoire of songs—from classical to folk to unusual acoustic re-presentations; alluring "descriptive" music attributed to Tom himself ("Water in Moonlight," "Daylight" and "Nocturne") and quirky environmental "imitations" (of sewing machines, musical instruments and people) cut a dissonant trail through his classical set pieces. This sonic ekphrasis, this "sound centered...Impressionism," as Amiri Baraka calls it, anchors Tom's ecological and cosmic alterity that lives in the intervals of this text and quietly crests as the background noise to (white), starry-eyed witnessing. "Oh, give me a home by the sea," read the lyrics of the penultimate vocal composition included in the pamphlet, "where wild waves are crested with foam/Where shrill winds are caroling free...a home, a home, a home by the deep heaving sea" (MMP, 19). Like the vibrancy of Phillis Wheatley's pastoral, like the stirring, existential possibility bound up in Frederick Douglass' encounter with the Chesapeake Bay, Tom's communion with nature is all awash in the glory of the "the ocean's loud roar" that speaks back to him, instilling in him "its stormiest glee" (MMP, 19). This we might recognize as Tom's "acoustic metamorphoses," the moment when his persona transforms from "thing" into sound.

The quirks and idiosyncracies of Blind Tom's sounded self are thus fugitive forms that we might track on the other frequencies of cultural texts left behind. As is the case with the majority of nineteenth-century black performers, his legacy lives on overwhelmingly in press publications, historical documents and memorabilia produced and preserved by white journalists, scholars, spectators, and fans (Trotter). In particular, texts by two iconic white women authors offer florid accounts of Tom's performances that, although littered with racial Darwinian mythologies and "the ugly jumble of white supremacist mumbo jumbo," nonetheless illuminate the extent to which archival documents hold the traces of a free(style) story within the confines of the dominant Blind Tom script.

Although separated by some three decades, Rebecca Harding Davis and Willa Cather's respective reportage on his performances are by turns crude, maudlin, detailed, and colorful portraits of Blind Tom on stage. Each text strikes a balance between literary realism, ethnological discourse and theatrical playbill hyperbole, and each turns on the narrator's initial incredulity toward a seeming "idiot" whose sophisticated musicianship ultimately wins over critics and audiences alike. Neither text fills the perpetually gaping void in Blind Tom studies that will seemingly always remain—the one that beckons, in the tradition of the classic genre, for a moment of recognition regarding one's own wretched condition and the resolve to be free by any means necessary. Yet in making a case for the superlative and singular talents of a bondsman living a life of spectacular entrapment, and by generating vivid representations of his stage aesthetics, physical and gestural eccentricities, and musical "gifts," both Davis and Cather's accounts illustrate the extent to which the archival trace of Blind Tom performances constitute a genre unto itself, the sonic slave narrative.

Davis's 1862 Atlantic Monthly essay, "Blind Tom," is significantly longer than Cather's one-page account, and it loosely engages with the slave narrative form, beginning with the protagonist's birth into the chaos of the peculiar institution with "no clan, no family names...chosen by God to be anointed with the holy chrism...[who] is only 'Tom'..." One year removed from her realist meditation on the exploitation of the labor class in Life in the Iron Mills, Davis reads Tom as "the lowest negro type, from which only field-hands can be made" (105). From "unconscious[ly]...wear[ing] his crown as an idiot might" (104) to finding the "ecstasy of delight, breaking out at the end of each successful fugue into shouts of laughter, kicking his heels and clapping his hands" (105-6) at the piano like a toddler, Davis's Tom navigates rather than escapes the material subjugation of slavery and the psychological abjection of disability by way of music.

Even as the text constructs Tom out of the language of racial science as an "agreeable monster," as "[p]hysically...and in animal temperament" a "negro" who "ranks next to the lowest Guinea type: with strong appetites and gross bodily health" (107), the musical Tom defies the straight-jacket of racial categorization, the myth of the rote mimic who merely "repeat[s] the airs they drummed" (106) out before him. He defies the limitations of the "possessed" black cipher through whom "some ghost spoke" (106). Davis celebrates Tom's "comprehension of the meaning of music" and the "scientific precision of his manner of touch" (108) as evidence of "a prophetic or historical voice which few souls utter and fewer understand" (108).

But we might think instead of these "strange, weird improvisations of every day" (109) in Tom's repertoire, his ability to "stow[e] away" and then play "old airs, forgotten by every one else" but him (106) as evidence of the complexities of his masterpiece, aesthetic subjectivity. With "every note intact...with whatever quirk or quiddity of
“Puzzling the Intervals”

style” endemic to the music that he had heard reproduced by audience members and still more, with “harmonies... he had never heard, had learned from no man” (106), the Tom of Davis’s profile scores a heterogeneous repertoire for astounded onlookers. Having “heard him sometime in 1860” (109), Davis recounts a series of concerts in “a great barn of a room, gaudy with hot, soot-stained frescoes, chandeliers, walls splotted with gilt” and populated by a “large” audience featuring “siftings of old country families...” (109–110). Up at the piano, ogled by the masses who watch in wonder as the “head fell farther back,” as “the claws began to work,” as selections from Weber and Beethoven fill the air, this Tom “without waiting for the audience, would himself applaud violently, kicking, pounding his hands together” (110). Davis’s Tom depends here on the “approving pat on the head” from his master (110), and he remains a steadfastly tragic figure whose “stubby little black fingers...wander[ed] over the keys” and speak for a “beautiful caged spirit” that “struggle[s] for breath under the brutal form and idiotic brain” (110). That he can “play secondo to music never heard or seen implies,” she concludes, his “comprehension of the full drift of the symphony,” it is the gesture that manifests a vulnerable artistic humanity that somehow exists beyond the conditions of material entrapment. Davis’s essay yokes together racial romanticism, racial science, populist cultural sentiment, and music criticism. But it is also a work that hints at the opaque workings of a black radical imagination.

Though clearly indebted to Davis’s Civil War remembrance of Tom, Cather’s brief 1894 account lingers a bit longer on the spectacle of Tom’s public privacy and his putatively baffling inner dialogue in the act of performance. As she observes,

It was a fair audience that gathered at the Lansing last night to listen to Blind Tom. Certainly the man was worth hearing—at least once. Probably there has never been seen on the stage a stranger figure of one more uncanny. He is a human phonograph, a sort of animated memory, with sound producing powers. It was a strange sight to see him walk out on the stage and with his own lips—and another man’s words—introduce himself and talk quietly about his own idiocy. Then, too, he would applaud himself, and apologize, still in the third person, for his lack of courtesy. There was an insanity, a grotesque horribleness about it that was interestingly unpleasant

(Cather, 166).

The “panoply of voices” so central to the slave narrative form turns “uncanny” and unsettling in Cather’s version of the Blind Tom act, where his own orchestral polyvalence threatens to render him impervious to onlookers who find his disorienting noise “grotesque,” “insane,” and appealingly distasteful.

His peculiar status as a disabled performer with extraordinary theatrical gifts would earn Blind Tom unusual “privileges” both in slavery (access to the master’s parlor) and later in the Jim Crow era (access to segregated hotels), and yet these same gifts resulted in the extended duration of his lengthy performative servitude such that he was called by some the “last American slave” (O’Connell, 211). And it is for these reasons that we might more closely consider the resonance of his iconicity in the culture of slavery and beyond. Like an historical echo, he reverberates through the mouths of others, presently absent, partially remembered, opaque rendered. Tuning up, then, to the lost traces of his history, listening for the echo of Blind Tom returned to us gives us another dimension to consider “wide stretches of lacunae that speak above all of absence” in the slave narrative archive (Radano, 51).

The Blind Tom echo chamber thus beckons us to listen in hemeneutic stereo to the evidence of things not heard, so that we might pick up what Ron Radano calls “the resonance” of the “unforgotten,” the “echo of the original,” “the sound of that which has already sounded.” In his pursuit of the “countervoice of slavery’s past,” Radano “listen[s] for a story with no beginnings” and he pursues “fragments of texts that sound forth inscriptively from the noisy legacy of colonial violence” (53, 67). Meanwhile, Alexander Weheliye, busy at the Phonographies turntable, reminds us of how to “listen around corners” to a “sonic Afro-modernity” that “emerges at the spatiotemporal crossroads” to “produce[e] a flash point of [black] subjectivity gleaned in and through sound.” His work plays out the ways that sound in black diasporic culture “occupies a privileged place precisely because it manages to augment an inferior black subjectivity—a subjectivity created by racist ideologies and practices in the field of vision—establishing venues for the constitution of new modes of existence.” Likewise, Josh Kun heads out onto the audio-topic frontier, “focusing on the social spaces, geographies and identities that music can enable, reflect, and prophecy” and “listen[ing] for music that is already made but not yet heard, music that makes audible
racialized communities who have been silenced by the nationalist ear” (Kun, 23–25).

Their works invite us to consider the enchanting ecolalia of Blind Tom, embedded in dominant texts, and to explore these sounds as sites of historical inquiry that continue to expand how we engage the culture of slavery. Ecolalia is, in fact, a concept that we might further theorize in studies of Blind Tom since it might serve as a sonic model for recuperating the archival material traces of his social subjectivity, as well as the dimensions of his cultural agency. The case of Blind Tom challenges us to better hear the intricacies of his sonic mimicry and performative listening as cultural acts that disturb and revise the politics of “authentic” black selfhood in the nineteenth century.

Ghostwriting Sound: Repetition and Reproduction in the Blind Tom Saga

Whether or not they found merit in his musicianship, the arguments nearly always returned to the question of imitation. Was Tom’s act pure mimicry or something more? As Best observes, “[w]hen imitating, Tom became, in the act of repetition, a creative human subject, however qualified that creativity and marginal that subjectivity might have been. When duplicating, repetitions made him a mere mimetic contrivance” (57–8). Tom was in both a familiar and an ironic bind compared to that of the ex-slave narrator whose task was putatively limited to that of duplication, whose “claim…must be his claim, that...he is not fictionalizing...and not performing any act of poiesis” (Olney, 150, emphasis his). Conversely, in the realm of Tom’s musical bondage, the terms of credibility hinge instead on creativity as opposed to transparency. It is for these reasons, then, that the terms of Tom’s “free(style) story” were waged most tenaciously and ferociously in the realms of transcription and composition, realms that still remain partially obscure(d) to many scholars researching his career.

One of the biggest unsolved mysteries of the Blind Tom archive is that of authorship. Though lauded in the press and his promotional pamphlet for keen compositional skills from a young age, the particularities concerning the production of his sheet music remain murky. If “The Rainstorm,” said to have been composed by Tom when he was 5 years old and published some 10 years later, would become one of his most popular songs, it was also a work—like the vast majority of his musical pieces—whose materiality eludes historicization. Although The Marvelous Musical Prodigy makes legendary the scene of Tom’s improvisational invention as a child in the master’s parlor, “having been there during a severe thunderstorm” and walking “to the piano...play[ing] what is now known as his Rain Storm and [saying] it was what the rain, the wind, and the thunder said to him...” (MMP, 7), less clear are the other figures who engineered the processing and distribution of his music at mid-century and during the rise of the sheet music publishing industry (Southall, Post-Civil War, xviii; O’Connell, 51–53).
Figure 24.1  “Blind Tom, the Musical Prodigy,” illustration.  

Figure 24.2  “Grand March Resurrection,” composed by Blind Tom, published by E. Bethune, Highlands, N.J.  
(Copyright 1901 by E. Bethune). Courtesy of Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
The marketing of Blind Tom’s sheet music remains a significant if oft-overlooked narrative to piece together since it figures in larger questions surrounding his representational control and the terms of his intellectual property. One illustration of the musician, which shows him in perhaps his teen or young adult years, alone and seated, with eyes closed, and holding in his left hand a copy of “Rain Storm by Blind Tom” sheet music drives home the suggestion that the discursive, notational text is his proud creation. While this illustration draws a distinction between producer and commodity, artist and art work, the extant sheet music itself often conflates the two, “selling” Tom on the cover of these musical works from the post-war period, yoking (former) human chattel with leisure goods for the bourgeois home. These texts, like those without the portrait imprint, list Tom as the sole composer of the musical work. In at least one instance, the “authenticating machinery” of a press review from The Baltimore Sun made its way into his sheet music material and further blurred the lines between high (classical) and low (show business) culture on which Tom’s career balanced (Stepto, 225).

To some critics, there can be no doubt that Thomas Wiggins is the author of this music. Music historian Thomas Riis points out, for instance, that, “[w]hile many observers expressed disbelief about the most outlandish claims made for Tom’s talent, no ghost writers for his pieces have been alleged by credible sources.” Yet what interests me here are the gray areas regarding how the musical texts attributed to Tom were (mis)handled and manufactured for the masses. Although Riis alludes to “the teachers who transcribed his work,” rarely have scholars considered the curious parallels between this kind of exchange between composer and listener/scribe with that of the dynamic between ex-slave author and amanuensis (Riis). If we think of the transcriber as bearing something in common with the editor and ghostwriter of the slave narrative form, then we would have to keep in mind how it is the transcriber “who contextualizes the essential facts of the narrator’s dictation and thus has much to do with how they will be received as institutional facts by their white readers” (Andrews, 20).
“Tom, the Blind Negro Boy Pianist, Only Ten Years Old. Oliver Gallop and Virginia Polka,” by Thomas Green Bethune.

Two self-identified transcribers of Blind Tom’s music appear in the archives. In an article covering the custody battle over Tom in 1886, The Washington Post reports that a “Professor Joseph Poznanski” had testified in court that he “taught Blind Tom music two hours a day for nine years” and that “he believed him to be rational with respect to only two things—music and eating.” In response to the court’s inquiry about the details of his instruction, Poznanski describes the scene as follows:

Well, we had two pianos in one room. I would play for him, and after listening a while he would get up, walk around, stand on one foot, then on the other, pull his hair and knock his head against the wall. Then he would sit down and play a very good imitation of what I had played, with additions to it.

Q: Would he retain his knowledge?—

A. Oh yes; his memory was something prodigious…. I wrote his compositions many times. He always had them written under other names than his own. While he played the piano I would write the music.

(Emphasis added; O’Connell, 201–204, 211, 216–221).

Poznanski buttresses all of the speculations regarding Tom’s musical skills as mere rote mimicry. Brute and impetuous, he replays the sounds of his master/teacher, producing “a very good imitation.” All we have is Poznanski’s word here, but his words also hold the ghostly remnants of Tom’s “additions,” traces of the captive artist leaving his (black) marks on the page (Moten).

More sensational is an article published two decades earlier in Dwight’s Journal by self-described “German musician” H. J. Wiesel. Appearing just three weeks after the Emancipation Proclamation, Wiesel’s article is the most extensive and contentious of the responses to Rebecca Harding Davis’s essay, and it positions the author as an experienced artist and composer in an epic transcribing encounter with Tom and his handlers. Aimed at debunking Davis’s profile of the musician as nothing more than “myth” and “a piece of pretty romance,” Wiesel declares that he will “vindicate” “truth” by way of reporting his observations about an 1862 concert that he attended in Maryland. “Then Tom began to play,” writes Wiesel, “we don’t remember what it was, we know it was not over well done…. nothing but simple polkas, marches, Schottisches, &c., pieces in which he tenaciously clung to the tonic and its related harmonies….“ Wiesel’s critique is tempered by allusions to Tom’s competency as a musician, his ability to “accentuate” and keep tempo which “evinced” evidence that “he had practised (sic)...considerably.”
Competent yes, but a “genius”? Wiesel sets out to expel Tom from the world of wonder, and he does this by way of transcription.

Wiesel makes his case, describing how,

[d]uring the second exhibition, Mr. Oliver asserted that he had employed several eminent musicians of New Orleans as well as of Baltimore to copy Tom’s compositions, and that, after having made the attempt, they acknowledged their inability to do so, pronouncing it impossible to copy his weird music. At the conclusion of the concert we went to Mr. Oliver and told him that it could not be impossible to write Tom’s music, but that it was impossible it could not be written; the art of music-writing was in such a state of perfection, and had been for several centuries past, that no new musical forms or figures could be invented which defied perpetuating writing. He said, “I will give you twenty dollars if you write me that one piece, the Oliver Galop.” Of course we agreed to it, determined to make a trial....

(H. J. Weisel, *Dwight’s Journal* Jan. 1863, emphasis not added).

Wiesel sets the terms of the battle, insisting that notation will rule in the end, that its law, cultivated and “perfected” over centuries, could tame and make legible the “weird music” of the enslaved. His determination to score Tom’s place him at odds with the white abolitionists who, four years later, would declare in their collection of *Slave Songs of the United States* that “what makes it all the harder to unravel a thread of melody out of this strange network is that, like birds, they seem not infrequently to strike sounds that cannot be precisely represented by the gamut....” (*Slave Songs*, v-vi). Setting himself apart from the many white listeners who testified to the opacity of black sound, Wiesel invokes the artistic science of “music-writing” as an instrument of order. What unfolds is an interpersonal struggle between two artists, a tiny maelstrom on the continuum of Blind Tom scenarios. “When asked to repeat the Oliver Galop,” Wiesel begins,

so that we, his amanuensis, could write it, he said he did not want his pieces written. “Why Tom?” said Mr. Oliver, “you’re going to have your pieces published, they’ll go over all the world with your name on them everybody will play them and you’ll be a great boy.” “I don’t want my pieces published, and I don’t want anybody else to play them,” Tom said. Finally by threats and offers of candy he was induced to play it as often and in the manner we desired it. After we had completed our copy we sat down to play it. Tom was perfectly infuriated, tears coursed down his cheeks and he attempted to push me off the piano-stool; the demon was in him then, surely. “I don’t want him to play my pieces,” he said. Threats and candy again appeased his anger and he became as gentle as a lamb


What a twist on the “terror of enjoyment” of which Saidiya Hartman has told us much. Though coerced to repeatedly and numbingly “step lively” across the piano keys according to the whimsy of Wiesel, Oliver, and company, Tom does not here expend performative labor in order to manufacture a scene of abject, feigned pleasure for the delight of onlookers. While his subjection is indeed a byproduct of the gross inequity he faces in this disturbing anecdote, his performance—one in which he is forced to generate music for reasons other than his own, one in which he is impelled to render material in a style dictated by strangers, one in which he is instructed to act as an instrument to be played by someone other than himself—yields a kind of terror unique to Blind Tom’s complex biography. At stake in the contest between Wiesel, the Morrisonian “Schoolteacher” figure, and Tom, the captive “specimen” of curiosity, is a form of intellectual property that the enslaved recognizes as solely his domain (Morrison). The violence that yields terror and an unusual show of fury on the part of the captive is one derived from artistic theft.

Wiesel’s evaluation is measured, but ultimately damning. The “Galop” lacks “coherence.” His “musical improvisations” have “no musical merit whatsoever.... He can not repeat long songs and discourses without the loss of many syllables,” and “[h]is fingering is not ‘that of the schools.’” In “all of Tom’s performances” he claims to have witnessed, Wiesel concludes that “his fantasy did not take him beyond the bounds of relationship of his tonic, to this he clung like a ship-wrecked mariner to a spar,—it was his tower of strength” (Weisel). Wiesel’s pejorative observation aims to expose the core unoriginality of Tom’s craft.

But what does it mean to “cling” to your tonic, the tonal center of a tune, when hostile transcribers lurk in your
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audience? If Tom was aware of and steadfastly resistant to Wiesel and his task, if he was present for Wiesel’s interpretations of his material and made it clear to Oliver that “he didn’t like [Wiesel] at all and wanted to go away out of this ‘ole town,’” who’s to say that he didn’t engage in fugitive tactics to obscure his property? Who’s to say that Blind Tom didn’t refuse to dance according to someone else’s command on the (musical) auction block? Who’s to say that he didn’t withhold, obfuscate, render his art strangely reflective of his own singular universe? Who’s to say that even in his perpetual entrapment, Blind Tom hadn’t found a way through his music to sail like those enchanting ships that spelled freedom for Douglass on the Chesapeake Bay?

“Strange, Weird Improvisations of Everyday”: The Radical Acoustics of Captivity

Can you be captive and still be free? Can you be “mentally impaired” and also an innovator? These are the volatile questions that lie at the root of most studies of Blind Tom. For the architects of the slave narrative genre, the answer to the former question is, of course, largely a moot one since the genre was itself predicated upon showcasing the movement from bondage to liberation. Tom’s story clearly disrupts the temporal arc of the narrative that “ends” in material freedom and instead calls for us to consider whether it is possible to locate a kind of alterity that serves as its own form of emancipation for a figure like him.

Yet the latter question involving Tom’s capacity for “innovation” and creativity further complicates how one defines “freedom” in his epic tale. For clinical scholars such as Oliver Sacks, the answer as to whether or not Blind Tom was a “creative” individual is a resounding “no;” since, as he argues,

[c]reativity…entails not only a ‘what,’ a talent, but a “who”—strong personality characteristics, a strong identity, personal sensibility, a personal style, which flow into the talent, interfuse it, give it personal body and form…. Creativity has to do with inner life—with the flow of new ideas and strong feelings. Creativity, in this sense, was probably never possible for Tom

(Sacks, liner notes).

To Sacks, Tom’s apparent savant autism negates his free will, circumscribes his “inner life” and, seemingly, above all else, cancels out his ability to produce a personal imprint that transcends the auto-compulsive symptoms of his mental impairment. What his champions hail as virtuosic—a prodigious memory, impeccable instrumentation, eccentric verbosity—are, to Sacks, confirmations of his disability and signs of a condition that “indifferently ni[mes]” the “large and small, the trivial and momentous” with “little disposition to generalize from these particulars or to integrate them with each other, causally or historically, or with the self” (Sacks, liner notes).

But Stephen Best counters this claim by recognizing Tom’s capacity to “imitate.” Though his execution of the seconde in his performances, heralded by Davis and others, may seem to some like mere duplication, Best contends that “[w]hen imitating, Tom became, in the act of repetition, a creative subject however qualified that creativity and marginal that subjectivity might have been” (56–9). I would add that what is missing from Sacks’s useful observations here is an historical contextualization of his career. What do “creativity” and “mental impairment” look and sound like within the culture of slavery? And what constitutes “a strong identity, personal sensibility” and “personal style” when one is rendered a commodity? What if these “savant talents” that “have a more autonomous, even automatic quality [rather] than normal ones” are creatively at odds with the social codes of enslavement? What if Blind Tom’s tale of “automatic” art is one that archives “the thing” who is a man “exhausting” the instrument and thereby becoming an instrument, “a kind of meditative medium, a conduit” and “a means to the long history of being an instrument” (Sacks liner notes; Moten, “On Escape Velocity”). And what if Blind Tom’s “freedom” derives from his uncanny ability to become both art subject and object, an insurgent representational event that exceeds the socio-cultural codes of the peculiar institution? This is uniquely possible by way of the remarkable sonic skills at his disposal, skills that enable him to redefine and simultaneously create a singular(ly) sound archive of slavery (Davis and Baron, 101–103).

From his toddler years he was believed to have “absorbed the music of the antebellum world: a vast repository of black work songs, white ballads and minstrel hits or sometimes a seamless amalgam of all three.” As his captors would observe, “[n]othing existed for him beyond his everlasting thirst for sound.” Words, tones, conversations became fodder for his repertoire, material for his consumption, the gateway to his emergence as a kind of recorder of “the sounds of the South,” an embodied, performative ethnographic archive of the soundscape of antebellum
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America (O’Connell, 34–44).

But what did Blind Tom hear? Like his contemporary Walt Whitman, he no doubt heard “America Singing,” but the discordance of the nation’s quotidian sounds, the sounds of nature, mechanical and industrialized sounds, and foreign voices that he mixed and relayed in his repertoire would have been at odds with Whitman’s model of fashioning himself as “a kind of human audio receiver who channeled the voices of the common people and the voices of the earth and the cosmos, receiving their signals and broadcasting them outward as his own” (Kun).

Whitman as transistor poet picks up the vocals of mechanics and carpenters, masons and boatmen, shoemakers and woodcutters, and “the delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work/or of the girl sewing or washing,” creating a chorus across these amber waves that might drown out the simmering political dissonance and emerging disunionism of 1860 (Whitman). What he fades out and what Josh Kun’s work beautifully sounds out as a clarion call to that old gray poet are the voices of those other Americas, like the one that Douglass hears with chilling lucidity in his 1845 Narrative of the Life, the one that was, as Kun puts it, “an America of viciousness, of bondage and slavery, of institutionalized, nationalized racial violence wreaked on subjugated black bodies” (Kun).

So bring that beat back. The politics of black listenership first articulated in Douglass’s masterpiece come even more fully to the surface in the situation of Blind Tom, a figure who stands simultaneously within and outside of the circle of his fellow captives and his captors, and still more, a figure who is also perched in yet another outer concentric circle, listening to and recording the intermingling sounds of both universes as they collide with one another on muddled frequencies.

Consider the elements of a tricked out Blind Tom concert playlist: on the one hand, all the hits: America’s mid-19th-century classical-music soundtrack: Beethoven’s Sonata Pathetique and Moonlight, the Rigolotto opera, Mendelssohn’s Wedding Song or Schumann’s Erl King, “a heavily arpeggiated Thalberg fantasia and a rich sentimental dose of Gottschalk” (O’Connell, page), a piano forte solo of Meyerbeer’s “Le Prophet,” alongside Chopin’s funeral march. But cross that line up with some trickster keyboard antics: imitations of the guitar, the harp, and the African banjo and then for a curve ball add some techno-human firewoks, pre-Hendrix “machine gun” style piano riffs: imitations of the sewing machine, the staccato punch of drums and fifes, the thunderous cacophony of warfare—“the discharge of musketry and heavy guns, the trudge of soldiers and [the] gallop of horses”—all along the black(est) of keys. Play all this while human beat boxing the dissonant sounds of music boxes and railroad cars, “the Dutch woman and hand organ,” and try whistling “Dixie” while you’re at it as well and you have more than the sum of any contemporary Girl Talk (MMP).

His onomatopoeias, his forceful utterances and exclamations, “displaced sonic difference beyond the scope of white comprehension” while taking “a crucial step in the formation of a sonically informed, oppositional/slave creativity” (Heller-Roazen, 13; Radano, 74). Belligerent and bewildering, ambient and aberrant, Blind Tom (re)sounded manmade as well as ecological noises all around him, playing back the dissonances of the nation. His repertoire manifests and transcends the kind of “aural sectional consciousness” described by historian Mark Smith in that it both reflected the acoustic distinctiveness of North and South and yet confounded putative regional boundaries by way of sound (Smith, 14).

He is the “noisy” slave, the one who sounded out(side) multiple socio-cultural spheres (Smith, 34). He is the heterophonic captive who, like his brethren who sang in response to and in conversation with one another, produced a symphony of sounds that spanned the dimensions of his environment. From the captive world of his childhood, a world of corporeal punishment, “crying and tears,” “the gruesome noises and silences of premordern bondage” (Smith, 156; White and White, 63; “Wonderful ‘Blind Tom’”; MMP, 5; Levine) to the industrial rumble of the steam engine barreling through the plantocracy, his sonic “quality of doubleness” is “simultaneously complicit with and critical of the ideology of those who dominate” him (M. Smith, 231; V. Smith, 20).

The work of Blind Tom listening thus enables us to consider the black captive’s agency as a recorder—and not just the object that is recorded by others. His act echoes forth a response to music theorist Peter Szendy’s query: “Can one make a listening listened to? Can [one] transmit [one’s] listening, unique as it is?” (Szendy, 5–6). Blind Tom flips the hegemonic notational script, as it were, in the culture of bondage. His eccentric soundings force us to re-interrogate the acoustic architecture of slavery and, more specifically, to consider who has the power to listen to sound as well as to record that strange, mercurial universe. A “hot mic” of sorts, he picked up the sounds of Whitman’s (free, white) world of musicality and joyous labor, Douglass’ (black) world of audible, anguished, and yet
persevering captivity, as well as the turbulent sounds of the natural world unleashed, the raucous sounds of military turmoil, the excess(ive) sounds of nascent modernity, becoming, in the process, an instrument of modernity himself. His pre-phonographic performances augmented the “new presence of ‘Negro’ public sound” and “not only unsteadied definitions of a national music but also amplified the fractured identity of the nation as a whole” (Radano, 177; Thompson). Still more, Blind Tom’s radical acoustics would create the template for a capacious sphere of selfhood that stretches between and beyond freedom and enslavement and into the world of black radical, avant-garde emancipation.

“Last Night of Tom,” playbill for Masonic Hall, March 17, 1866. Harvard Theatre Collection, ‘US theatres’ playbill collection, call number TCS 68. My thanks to Caitlin Marshall for bringing this item to my attention.

“Specimens of Blind Tom’s Vocal Compositions,” April 10, 1867. Many thanks to Stephanie Jensen-Moulton for sharing this archival document with me.

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Biographical Sketch of Millie Christine, the Carolina Twin, Surnamed the Two-Headed Nightingale and the Eighth Wonder of the World. C. 1889.


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——. to consent to not being a single being. Durham, NC: Duke University, forthcoming.


“Wonderful ‘Blind Tom.’” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 28, 1886. My thanks to Deidre O’Connell for bringing this clipping to my attention and for her thoughtful observations with regards to the notion of Tom’s “additions.”

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