

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

English Literature Faculty Works

English Literature

---

Fall 2017

### Solomon Northup's Singing Book

Lara Langer Cohen

*Swarthmore College*, lcohen2@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

---

#### Recommended Citation

Lara Langer Cohen. (2017). "Solomon Northup's Singing Book". *African American Review*. Volume 50, Issue 3. 259-272. DOI: 10.1353/afa.2017.0032

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/334>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

## Solomon Northup's Singing Book

---

When Steve McQueen's film adaptation of Solomon Northup's 1853 slave narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, appeared in 2013, it was accompanied by a soundtrack album of music "from and inspired by" the movie. Executive producer John Legend combined selections from the film score, spirituals, and new material from contemporary artists to impressive ends: "*12 Years a Slave Leads Contemporary Soundtrack Revival*," announced *Billboard Magazine* (Gallo).<sup>1</sup> But 160 years before *Music from and Inspired by 12 Years a Slave*, the book came with its own soundtrack. At the end of the narrative, Northup, a talented violinist, includes a musical score: a setting of a song called "Roaring River" that, as he recounted earlier in the book, he heard enslaved people on the Red River plantation singing as they patted juba at a Christmas celebration (Fig. 1). The study of slave narratives has been profoundly shaped by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s argument that its foundational trope is the "talking book," a set piece in which the not-yet-print-literate narrator puts ear to book to see if it will talk (127-69). With "Roaring River," however, *Twelve Years a Slave* asks us also to consider the meaning of a "singing book."

Once we attune ourselves to the voices as well as the words of slave narratives, its surprising how much music they make. In the *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (1847), Brown (who also edited the antislavery songster *The Anti-Slavery*

**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."

Fig. 1: "Roaring River; A Refrain of the Red River Plantation,"  
in Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853).

*Harp*) illustrates a harrowing description of a woman's child being sold away from her by inserting a song that he recalls having "often heard the slaves sing, when about to be carried away to the South" (51).<sup>2</sup> *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) not only expatiates on the songs of enslaved people but also ends with its own song, a thirteen-verse parody of the Southern hymn "Heavenly Union." Ashon Crawley has shown how "sound reverberates throughout" Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), where it becomes the "residue and materiality of thought that memory refuses to forget" (33). Noting how both Douglass and Jacobs foreground scenes of listening, Daphne Brooks calls for new approaches to the study of slave narratives that could also pick up "dissident, sonic modes of enslaved narration" in genres seemingly distant from them, such as the sheet music and performances of enslaved pianist Blind Tom ("Puzzling the Intervals" 392). Listening to (and for) slave narratives allows us to understand them as both signing and singing, in Lindon Barrett's terms (55-93), or as early versions of what Alexander Weheliye calls "phonographies," "the coupling of the graphematic *and* the phonic" that he contends "represents the prime achievement of black cultural production in the New World" (38). Listening also offers an alternative to the visual imperatives of slave narratives, which begin in what Saidiya Hartman describes as the "hyper-visibility of the enslaved" (36), as well as in what Jasmine Nichole Cobbs calls the "peculiarly ocular nature" (31) of slavery as an institution, and become compounded by genre conventions of eyewitnessing and descriptions of spectacular violence.

*Twelve Years a Slave* poses a particular challenge to text-based understandings of slave narratives because it is such a multimedia object. Interleaving written narration, illustrations, and musical notation, it tests the expressive possibilities and limits of each mode. In this essay, I argue that "Roaring River" tries to answer a question that the narrative poses but cannot itself answer: a question of how to represent slavery once Northup is outside "the circle," in Douglass's famous term. You can hear that question in the title of the book: does it emphasize the *length* of those twelve years as a slave? Or the *finiteness* of those years—*only* twelve years a slave, when so many are enslaved forever? And notice, too, how the title's truncated phrasing unmoors that experience from a grammatical subject; is Northup the author, it asks, the same as the person who was enslaved? More specifically, I suggest that *Twelve Years a Slave* asks how to love what one makes in the shadow of slavery: the intimacies forged, and especially the music borne of them.

## I.

It is probably impossible to know who decided to include the score of "Roaring River" in *Twelve Years*. Paratexts are a common feature of slave narratives; prefaces by white editors, excerpts from slave codes and letters from witnesses often buttress slave narratives with the verification they were presumed to need. *Twelve Years* includes these kinds of paratexts as well, but the function of "Roaring River" seems different: it does not authenticate Northup's narrative as much as it remediates it. Northup himself could have added it; or it could have been his editor, David Wilson, or his upstate New York publishers, Derby and Miller. Given both the song's source in Northup's experience and his own musical skills, Northup was probably involved, at least in some way.

One way or another, it was an astute decision to join the slave narrative to the format of sheet music, which was booming in the 1850s. More broadly, Northup's singing book entered a cultural milieu where white audiences were eager for various forms of what Nina Sun Eidsheim calls "sonic blackness," especially the sounds of slavery.<sup>3</sup> In 1853, the same year Northup's narrative appeared, Elizabeth Taylor

Greenfield, the celebrated concert singer born in slavery who became known as the “Black Swan,” made her New York City debut before embarking on an English tour. Blackface minstrelsy began to move away from the “comic” modes of the 1830s and ’40s and increasingly featured sentimental songs that claimed to present the true feelings of enslaved people. The publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852 led to a burst of “Tom shows,” both minstrel burlesques and earnest musical dramatizations, and dozens of songs from these performances circulated as sheet music.<sup>4</sup> The Hutchinson Family Singers, one of the country’s most famous white singing troupes, became increasingly vocal abolitionists during the 1850s, and the Luca Family Singers, a black troupe who also sang abolitionist songs, toured widely. This musical context may well have shaped the decision to include the score of “Roaring River,” which invites the largely white readers of Northup’s narrative not only to “hear” enslaved voices but themselves to sing *in* them. And in fact, *Twelve Years* proved hugely popular, selling 25,000 copies in its first year—which likely made “Roaring River” one of the best-selling songs of the year during a time when sheet music publishers considered sales of 5,000 units highly successful for a popular song (Sanjek 76). Sales of the book continued strongly through the 1850s and several new editions appeared in the 1880s and ’90s, once the original copyright had expired (Pope). Although we’ll never know how many readers actually played or sang “Roaring River,” these sales mean that it was probably one of the more widely distributed songs of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

People had been singing some version of “Roaring River” for at least ten years by the time Northup’s narrative appeared. Two years after he was kidnapped, in 1843, the *Spirit of the Times*, a sporting newspaper that catered to mid-nineteenth-century white men, reported hearing “the irresistible song” sung “with infinite humor and spirit” by the president of the Alexandria, Virginia Jockey Club at a meeting (Fig. 2). That same year, a song with related lyrics but a different title appeared in a songbook attributed to Dan Emmett, a famous blackface minstrelsy composer and performer (Fig. 3). By the 1850s, variations had entered the repertoires of multiple blackface minstrelsy troupes, as evidenced by songsters that collected minstrel lyrics for home performance. The lyrics diverged at points, often incorporating topical allusions: versions in the songsters *Lucy Neale’s Nigga Warbler* (ca. 1850), *Christy and White’s Ethiopian Melodies* (1854), and *Wood’s New Plantation Melodies* (1862), for instance, add lines mocking the messianic theology of William Miller, whose predictions of Christ’s imminent Second Coming attracted a wide following in the 1840s; the version in *Lucy Neale’s Nigga Warbler* also references the abolitionist Arthur Tappan. But all the versions retain the reference to Roaring River (now an origin rather than a destination), the narrator’s widowhood, and the search for a new wife in Indian territory. (Whether these are lands inhabited by Native Americans or lands expropriated from Native Americans through removal is not clear, and the Roaring River location does not explain further: there are Roaring Rivers in both North Carolina and Missouri, but it might also be a generic place name.) Some trace of these versions probably survives in the chorus to Woody Guthrie’s 1945 song “Oklahoma Hills”: “Way down yonder in the Indian Nation / Ridin’ my pony on the reservation.”

The version of “Roaring River” that appears in *Twelve Years* includes elements of all the earlier songs. It has the title and creation/plantation rhyme of the song in the *Spirit of the Times*, along with its pairing of “little . . . wife and big plantation.” The reference to the “Chickasaw Nation” in this earlier “Roaring River,” which would become “Ingin nation” in Northup’s and other later versions, may also help explain what drew Northup to the song. In his narrative, he recounts periodically visiting a nearby village of “Chickasaws or Chicopees” (63), whose customs he observes closely. The people Northup met were likely Choctaws, who are closely related to the Chickasaws culturally and linguistically; in the 1840s there was a Choctaw village in Avoyelles parish, where Northup was enslaved (Saucier 5).<sup>6</sup> I will

Those who remember the "Roaring River"—the irresistible song of the President of the Alexandria Jockey Club—Col. J. McC—, of Virginia— which he gives with such infinite humor and spirit, when surrounded by his friends at a Club dinner—will thank us for giving, from memory, the first stanza, if it revive in any degree the pleasant associations incident to such meetings at the social board in the Old Dominion:—

I had a wife, and now I'm a widower,  
On my way to the Roaring River,  
Where I expect to get another,  
Every bit as good as t' other.

Oh dear! for the Chickasaw Nation,  
The finest place in the whole creation!  
A little small wife and a big plantation  
Make a paradise in the Chickasaw Nation.

Fig. 2: From the *Spirit of the Times*, 12 Aug. 1843.

**OLD DAN EMMIT'S**  
**ORIGINAL BANJO MELODIES**  
—EMMIT, BROWER, WHITLOCK, PELHAM—

It is by the Tennessee that we live, with cultivation, agriculture, the grandest rivers and streams in the South, being no more nor less than the gift of nature.

—A DANCE OF THE FISHES—  
—THE WIFE OF THE FISH—  
—THE FISH OF THE FISH—  
—THE FISH OF THE FISH—

Arranged for the Banjo by  
**EMMIT.**

Published by Charles H. Keith, 67 & 69 Court St.

**O LUD GALS GIB ME, &c.**

Is performed by the Virginia Minstrels  
Words by Old Dan Emmet

Boston. Published by C. H. Keith 67 & 69 Court St.

It's up the river an' down the side, For 'ry ban-ner in the sta-ble.

First an' an'—you shan't be again. Give us a way to the ha-ken-see.

O lud gals, gib me chow to eat - eat. O lud gals,

With nothing in it of course for the year past by C. H. Keith in the City office of the Boston Court of Mass.

1  
Fetch a long de whis - key, Makes my head swim when I gets a fi - de - tip - ty.

2  
Vinegar shows an paper stockings,  
Set to me Miss Polly Hopkins  
My wife's dead an' I'm a widder,  
All de way from roasts ribber.  
O lud gals, &c.

3  
If I had a wife an a little baby,  
I'd support her like a lady;  
Gods of war an little fishes  
Yearthen plates an putter dishes.  
O lud gals, &c.

4  
Cowhide shows an buckskin breeches,  
Gits me de gal dat sewed de stitches  
De prettiest thing in creation  
Is a little yellow gal in de wild goose nation.  
O lud gals, &c.

5  
Pompey Smash an de Pete lewe  
Two best men in human natur,  
Hop in de creek, an roll in de ribber  
Two othersen to one little zigget.  
O lud gals, &c.

6  
All de way from de injun nation,  
Big coon cribs on little plantations;  
My wife's dead an I'll get another,  
Pretty little black gal jis like tickler.  
O lud gals, &c.

7  
Blow away yo gentle breezes  
All among de cypress trees,  
Dax I set long wild de waves,  
Mendin my old boots an shoes.  
O lud gals, &c.

Fig. 3: *Old Dan Emmet's Original Banjo Melodies* (Boston: Charles H. Keith, 1843).

discuss this encounter at greater length later in the essay; for now I'll just note that if Northup knew the people as Chickasaw and had heard a version of "Roaring River" that included the reference, the song's call to "make a paradise in the Chickasaw Nation" might well have resonated for him. Additionally, the first line of the version of "Roaring River" in *Twelve Years*, "Harper's creek and roarin' ribber," seems to rewrite Emmett's "Hop in de creek, an roll in de ribber" (verse 5), while its chorus incorporates the next line in that song ("Two oberseers to one little nigger"). And perhaps its vision of a place to "live forebber" derives from the Millerite fixation the song's minstrel relatives exhibited by 1850. While the version in *Twelve Years* borrows from these sources, however, it also makes significant changes. Its additions, deletions, and reorganization transform the dreamy escapism of the other versions into a poignant story of literal escape. Most strikingly, the chorus centers the image of a fugitive chased by two overseers, framing the verse as the fugitive's fantasy of freedom and rest.

Northup's version of the song then took on a life of its own. A "Roaring River" listed in the 1870 Board of Music Trade Catalog is likely a reprinting of the song in *Twelve Years*, but clearer signs of its popularity appear in the viral circulation of the last two lines of its verse—"All I want in dis creation / Is pretty little wife and big plantation"—following the book's publication. Beginning in the late 1850s, variations on these lines appear in texts from a novel to articles about farming to the reminiscences of a telegraph operator, who "repeated over and over" this snippet of "his favorite" song but, to the frustration of his co-worker, cannot remember the rest.<sup>7</sup> Joel Chandler Harris (mis)quotes the lines in *Stories of Georgia* (1896), where he observes, "There used to be an old song running in this wise,—

All I want in this creation,  
Is a pretty little wife and a big plantation  
Away up yonder in the Cherokee nation

—and this song no doubt represented the real feeling behind the whole matter" of Indian removal (213). It is possible that these sources extracted the lines from yet another version of the song, but it is almost certainly the "Roaring River" from *Twelve Years* we can hear in the words to "Black-Eyed Susie," a "square-dance tune" that John A. and Alan Lomax collected in their monumental *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, published eighty years after Northup's narrative. It borrows a number of lines more or less intact: "Up dat oak and down dat ribber, / Two overseers and one little nigger"; "All I want in this creation, / Pretty little wife on a big plantation"; and "Den we'll go to de Indian Nation." The scene-setting first line merges with the up/down motion of the chorus to become "Up Onion Creek and down Salt Water." Most amazingly, midway through, "Black-Eyed Susie" slips in the first lines of another juba song whose lyrics Northup transcribes immediately after "Roaring River": "Who's been here since I been gone? / Pretty little girl with a josey on" (287-88). The songs have no apparent relation to one another besides proximity on Northup's page (Fig. 4). Rather than proceeding from timeless oral tradition, as we sometimes assume folk music does, "Black-Eyed Susie" may preserve the trace of someone reading *Twelve Years a Slave*.

## II.

In what follows, I argue that the sheet music for "Roaring River" re-sounds (at least) four musical scenes included in the narrative. While not in harmony to begin with, these scenes when considered together make for an impossible song.

SOUTHERN LIFE AS IT IS. 219

show Miss Lively and all the world that Sam Roberts was of no account.

Pete's affection, however, was greater than his discretion. Such violent exercise took the breath out of him directly, and he dropped like an empty bag. Then was the time for Harry Carey to try his hand; but Lively also soon out-winded him, amidst hurrahs and shouts, fully sustaining her well-earned reputation of being the "fastest gal" on the bayou.

One "set" off, another takes its place, he or she remaining longest on the floor receiving the most uproarious commendation, and so the dancing continues until broad daylight. It does not cease with the sound of the fiddle, but in that case they set up a music peculiar to themselves. This is called "patting," accompanied 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. The patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet, and singing, perhaps, this song:

"Harper's creek and roarin' ribber,  
 That, my dear, we'll live forribber;  
 Den we'll go to de Indian nation,  
 All I want in dis creation,  
 Is pretty little wife and big plantation.  
 Chorus. Up dat oak and down dat ribber,  
 Two overreers and one little nigger."

220 TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE.

Or, if these words are not adapted to the tune called for, it may be that "Old Hog Eye" is—a rather solemn and startling specimen of verification, not, however, to be appreciated unless heard at the South. It runneth as follows:

"Who's been here since I've been gone!  
 Pretty little gal wid a joesy on.  
 Hog Eye!  
 Old Hog Eye,  
 And Honey too!

Never see de like since I was born,  
 Here come a little gal wid a joesy on.  
 Hog Eye!  
 Old Hog Eye!  
 And Honey too!"

Or, may be the following, perhaps, equally nonsensical, but full of melody, nevertheless, as it flows from the negro's mouth:

"Ebo Dick and Jurden's Jo,  
 Them two niggers stole my yo'.  
 Chorus. Hop Jim along,  
 Walk Jim along,  
 Talk Jim along," &c.

Old black Dan, as black as tar,  
 He dam glad he was not dar.  
 Hop Jim along," &c.

During the remaining holidays succeeding Christmas, they are provided with passes, and permitted to go where they please within a limited distance, or they may remain and labor on the plantation, in

American Ballads and Folk Songs

All I want in this creation,  
 Pretty little wife on a big plantation.

Chorus:  
 Oh, my pretty little black-eyed Susie,  
 Oh, my pretty little black-eyed Susie.\*

Up Onion Creek and down Salt Water,  
 Some old man's gals' to lose his daughter.

All I want to make me happy,  
 Two little boys to call me pappy.

Black dog, white dog, little black nigger,  
 Good-by, boys, gals' to see the widow.

\* May be repeated and prolonged indefinitely.

[ 287 ]

American Ballads and Folk Songs

Go in' back home with a pocketful o' money,  
 Somebody there to call me honey.

If I stop and stumble in the water,  
 Some old man's gals' to lose his daughter.

Who's been here since I been gone?  
 Pretty little girl with a joesy on!

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

Den we'll go to de Indian Nation,  
 A pretty little wife and a big plantation.

LOUISIANA GIRLS

*Soft and steady*

As I was lam-bain' down the street, Down the street,  
 down the street, As I was lam-bain' down the street, I

REFRAIN

met a girl named Susie. Oh, Lard - si - an - lar  
 With a hole in her  
 gills, want' you come out in a night! Want' you  
 sack - bag an' her head keep in a rock - le', An' her

[ 288 ]

Fig. 4: Christmas juba songs, from *Twelve Years a Slave* (top) and "Black-Eyed Susie," from John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

In gathering these scenes together, "Roaring River" exposes the excruciating contradictions of music under slavery, and it demands what music, so fundamental a part of Northrup's life both before and during his own enslavement, could mean to Northrup after it.

Most directly, "Roaring River" serves as a kind of supplement to a scene in the narrative that occurs at the culmination of the Christmas holiday, "the only respite from constant labor the slave has through the whole year" (141). After Northrup has played violin at the "ball," the enslaved people on Epps's plantation "set up a music peculiar to themselves" by patting juba: "striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the

other—all the while keeping time with the feet, and singing, perhaps, this song,” whose lyrics Northup then transcribes (144). Saidiya Hartman has described juba as a “form of redressive action” (71) that uses one’s captive body “for one’s own ends” (72). Put differently, the song represents “freedom as a bodily practice,” as Walter Johnson has argued of another musical moment in the narrative, Northup’s recollections of birds singing in the trees above the Red River plantation (210). In doing so, it holds out a version of freedom beyond Northup’s individual, legal freedom, which otherwise structures the narrative. Its inclusion thus breaks the focus *Twelve Years* places on Northup’s exceptionality—his virtuosic violin playing, his talents as an engineer, his remarkable rescue. Instead, it raises the voices of those still enslaved, whom he left behind.

When the song reappears at the end of the narrative, however, translated into staff notation with accompanying lyrics, it is not their voices we hear. What was once a kind of music “peculiar to” enslaved people is repackaged as a commodity for the home entertainment of the book’s largely white and nominally free readers, who are invited to sing in the voices of the enslaved. In this transformation, *Twelve Years* itself participates in the blackface minstrelsy genealogy of “Roaring River” and perhaps helps script its continuation. More broadly, the juba song’s translation into staff notation converts the song from a living expression into an artifact, formalizing and nailing down a process of collective improvisation. Following the narrative’s scenes of brutal violence, including the attempted lynching of Northup and the binding of Patsey to stakes, it is hard not to flinch at all these black note heads (there is not a white one among them) suspended on bars, upside-down and right-side up.<sup>8</sup>

In its regimentation, its intimations of black bodies in agony, its fast-paced dance rhythm (all eighth and sixteenth notes, with no rests), and its conversion of a reparative practice into material for white people’s amusement, the score echoes an earlier scene in the narrative. Since he was young, playing the violin had been Northup’s “ruling passion” (7); he marvels, “had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage” (143). Yet while Northup’s violin sustains him, he writes with horror of the humiliation and suffering it unwillingly assists. He recalls evenings when Epps would call the people he owned into the house, and “no matter how worn out and tired” they were, demand that they dance. Then Northup’s violin becomes an instrument of violence, “ruling” over others:

Usually his whip was in his hand, ready to fall about the ears of the presumptuous thrall, who dared to rest a moment, or even stop to catch his breath. . . . With a slash, and crack, and flourish of the whip, he would shout again, “Dance, niggers, dance,” and away they would go once more, pell-mell, while I, spurred by an occasional sharp touch of the lash, sat in a corner, extracting from my violin a marvelous quick-stepping tune. . . . Frequently we were thus detained until almost morning. Bent with excessive toil—actually suffering for a little refreshing rest, and feeling rather as if we would cast ourselves upon the earth and weep, many a night in the house of Edwin Epps have his unhappy slaves been made to dance and laugh. (119)<sup>9</sup>

In this extraordinarily brutal scene, it might be the “marvelous quick-stepping tune” that jangles most painfully. You can hear Northup’s love of music, the pleasure he takes in his talents, and the comfort his violin offers, all curdle. Where his violin was once a “beloved” companion, now he wrings music from it as they both become links in a cruel chain of “extraction”: Epps extracts the playing from Northup that will extract the music from the violin that will extract the dancing from the “unhappy slaves.”

In the final setting of “Roaring River,” we find an afterimage of this scene’s violence. Its reappearance contravenes the finite duration of Northup’s “twelve years a slave” as well as the customary trajectory of the slave narrative, for instead



of finally moving out of slavery, *Twelve Years* returns to it. Some hint of this return appears in the subtitle of “Roaring River,” “A Refrain of the Red River Plantation,” which suggests not only a song proper to the plantation but a repetition of the plantation itself. And in fact continuation becomes a motif in the song; consider the title’s image of running water, its chorus’s chase “up” and “down,” its fantasy of living forever, its repeat signs.<sup>10</sup> The score of “Roaring River” thus raises harrowing questions about the meaning of Northup’s ultimate “freedom.”

So far I have been treating the staff notation of “Roaring River” with some trepidation, to the extent that it invites the narrative’s largely white and nominally free readers to restage the music of enslaved black people in their parlors. Now I want to reconsider whether this is actually the case. Northup supplies both words and a score but separates them from one another, a presentation that departs from the conventions of nineteenth-century printed music. In sheet music, lyrics were usually written under the staff, at least for the first verse (with lyrics to subsequent verses included after the staff, once the tune had been set), to help singers follow the melody. In songsters, cheap songbooks popular around midcentury, lyrics usually appeared alone because most were sung to familiar tunes, often noted at the beginning. “Roaring River,” however, follows neither of these conventions. Instead, its unusual split structure prefigures W. E. B. Du Bois’s polyphonic chapter epigraphs in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which pair a fragment of Euro-American poetry with a musical phrase from a spiritual. Yet where Du Bois’s paired epigraphs are both a manifestation of double consciousness and a vision of a world undivided by the color line, in which “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not” (109), Northup’s words and music resist combination.<sup>11</sup> Nineteenth-century staff notation of black music was often loose at best, but here the rhythm and duration of the words and music are impossibly out of sync.<sup>12</sup> The moods clash, too—the plaintive words on the one hand, and jaunty eighth and sixteenth notes and staccatos in G major on the other. It is difficult to reconstruct a single song from these parts.<sup>13</sup> And in fact, Northup tells us that they do not constitute one. The Christmas dance begins with Northup’s violin performance, but it is only once “the sound of the fiddle” (144) has ended that his audience begins patting and singing “Roaring River.” Although the song at the end of the narrative bears the same title, it gives an instrumental accompaniment to words we have learned do not belong with one—while the rhythm of patting, which is what Northup insists determine the words, is absent.

What can we make of this perverse sheet music, which not only does not correspond to the song it claims to transcribe but also seems not to be playable at all? Much as its notation is haunted by the scene of Epps’s torturous “revels” (119), its odd fragmentation, too, evokes an earlier moment in Northup’s history as an enslaved musician. As Northup’s reputation spreads, Epps hires him out to play at his white neighbors’ parties. These gigs release Northup from working in the fields and often garner him material goods or tips (although it is Epps, of course, who is paid for Northup’s labor). But something strange happens to his narrative voice as he describes his newfound celebrity. It moves from the first person into the third person:

The young men and maidens of Holmesville always knew there was to be a jollification somewhere, whenever Platt Epps was seen passing through the town with his fiddle in his hand. “Where are you going now, Platt?” and “What is coming off tonight, Platt?” would be interrogatories issuing from every door and window, and many a time when there was no special hurry, yielding to pressing importunities, Platt would draw his bow, and sitting astride his mule, perhaps, discourse musically to a crowd of delighted children, gathered around him in the street. (142)

Northup’s musical talents “delight” the white residents of the town, promising “a jollification.” Yet while they flock to him, he narratively distances himself from the scene. Not only does he narrate his musical performance in the third person

(“Platt would draw his bow”), but he identifies himself, in a sickening moment, by the names forced on him by the slave dealer Burch and the man who claims to own him, Edwin Epps: Platt Epps.

Northup’s narrative disappearance sounds a different note in his white admirers’ question, “Where are you going now?” It suggests that his coerced performance estranges him so profoundly that he can only see himself as his white interrogators do—from the outside and as Platt Epps, an identity that exists at the whim of those who enslave him. The scene recalls Robert Stepto’s regretful observation that Northup, whose musical knowledge should make him a sensitive interpreter of juba, instead maintains his distance from it, calling the songs “unmeaning” and “nonsensical.” Stepto attributes Northup’s “objective posture” to “the demands of audience and authentication,” but one might also understand it as alienation (23). Doing so would not only focus a different lens on Northup’s apparent aloofness but also help us situate him in the scene, for while we can assume that Northup is the person playing the violin at the Christmas festivities before the juba songs begin, he does not say whether he leaves the group at that point or joins them in patting and singing. If he remains part of the group, we might see his distanced description not as capitulation to his white audience but as another instance of the estrangement they introduce between Northup and the music he makes. When the final setting of “Roaring River” once again summons the desires of this white audience, Northup’s dissociation becomes a property of the song itself, disjointed and wanting.

It is tempting to imagine Northup playing his largely white readers like a violin, assembling a song that cannot be sung precisely to deny them the “jollification,” as he put it earlier, that they crave from enslaved musicians. Yet we don’t need to read the sheet music as a deliberate setup of its audience to register its critical power. We could understand his setting of the song as what Daphne Brooks calls an “Afro-alienation act,” a trope of black performance that encodes “traumas of self-fragmentation” while “critically defamiliarizing” them (*Bodies in Dissent* 5). By this account, Northup’s disjunctive “Roaring River” transforms the estrangement that his performances engender into a material artifact. Or we could see the song’s non-adhesion as manifesting the radical dissonances that wrench *Twelve Years a Slave*: that Northup’s “beloved violin” became a weapon of terror; that the solidarities and intimacies that upheld him for twelve years were made possible by horror.

We might also hear how the score’s nonconvergence introduces a loud silence into the narrative. Whether you read the music and want the lyrics, or read the lyrics and want the music, something is always missing. This emphatic insufficiency turns “Roaring River” into a kind of fugitive text. Just as its words imagine escape, so the song takes flight as the notation points us somewhere off the page, beyond our reach. The absence it inscribes thus holds out, as Fred Moten writes of literary representations of music and other forms of “phonic materiality” (191), “a possibility of augmentation, abounding, or of a dynamic whole that operates in a complex relation with loss or lack or incompleteness or static hole” (177). If, as I suggested earlier, we take the invocation of the “Ingin nation” (and the “Chickasaw Nation” of its earlier iteration) in “Roaring River” as an intertextual reference to the nearby Choctaws rather than simply a cliché, it might tell us something further about the space the sheet music opens in the text. Notably, the space of the Choctaws’ village is also out of view. “They had little fancy for the open country, the cleared lands on the shores of the bayous, but preferred to hide themselves within the shadows of the forest,” Northup writes (64). While he describes various aspects of everyday life in the village, he focuses on a musical event, an “Indian ball” held when another band from Texas passes through. Northup’s description of the celebration as a “ball” frames the scene as a counterpart to the Christmas “ball” that culminates in the singing of “Roaring River.” On this holiday, too, Northup recounts competitive

dancing, dwelling on the dancers' great physical feats. But given Northup's violin-playing, it is not surprising that the most vivid image is of "a sort of Indian fiddle" he hears. It "set up an indescribable tune," Northup recalls. "It was a continuous, melancholy kind of wavy sound, with the slightest possible variation" (64).

I have been arguing that the scored "Roaring River" mixes the remembered juba performances of the song with Northup's enforced violin performances at Epps's all-night dances and the dissociation these performances induce. But what if we take the Choctaw song, too, as a sonic intertext for "Roaring River"?<sup>14</sup> We could recognize in the lyrics' story of escape a memory of seeking refuge in Indian territory. The ongoingness of "Roaring River" would echo not only Epps's interminable forced dances but also the "continuousness" of the "Indian fiddle" and the expressions of exuberant collectivity it enables.<sup>15</sup> The inaudible oscillations between the score above and the words below might resemble the Choctaw song's "indescribable" "wavy sound." And we could understand that elusiveness as marking not absence but a zone of opacity like the Choctaw village. In its own "indescribable," "continuous, melancholy wavy sound," "Roaring River" affirms a space inaccessible to the reader, perhaps to the slave narrative as a genre, perhaps even to Northup the survivor. It is the ongoingness of slavery that outlasts Northup's "twelve years a slave" and eludes his story. It is a space of black collectivity and imagination that remains out of his hearing and out of ours. It is all of these at the same time.

### III.

In reopening the apparently finished story of *Twelve Years a Slave*, the sheet music of "Roaring River" calls attention to the various other remediations to which Northup's narrative was subjected long before the release of McQueen's film. These include its illustrations, drawn by Frederick M. Coffin and engraved by Nathaniel Orr, as well as reenactments by Northup himself, who often appeared on the lecture circuit after the book's publication and went on to produce two dramatizations, featuring music and dancing (Pope). (The theatrical production was called *The Free Slave*, a title that is hauntingly imprecise about whether it refers to Northup's time in slavery or out of it.) In fact, the narrative of *Twelve Years* is itself a remediation. Many readers first learned of Northup's kidnapping and rescue through newspaper reports in early 1853. A few months later, Harriet Beecher Stowe referenced Northup's story in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* as evidence that her novel had not exaggerated the horrors of slavery. A few months after that, *Twelve Years* appeared, with the reference to Northup from *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* as its epigraph. These enfolded texts mean that *Twelve Years a Slave* not only has no clear ending but also no clear beginning, much as Northup—ever subject to oppression, exploitation, racial violence, and the threat of enslavement even before he is kidnapped, "always already positioned as Slave," as Frank B. Wilderson III describes the black subject of modernity (7)—was never originally free.

*Twelve Years'* experiments with media take on further weight because Northup frames the ideology of slaveholding in terms of its sensory properties. Recalling the man who first purchased him, a "model master" who sometimes intervened to protect Northup after selling him to Epps, Northup remarks that this "kind, noble, candid, Christian man" "never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection."

The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of slavery. . . . Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different. (57)

Northup here describes slavery as both a material reality and a perceptual apparatus—a “surrounding” set of “influences and associations” controlling how one “s[ees] things”—that cloaks this reality. Northup’s image of slavery’s “surrounding” consciousness calls to mind the famous passage in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life*, in which Douglass recalls hearing the “wild songs” (13) improvised by enslaved people: “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” (14). In an example of the *Narrative*’s well-known syncretic phrasing, Douglass stands outside the circle and listens to the songs he heard while within it to show that slavery regulates perception: one cannot “see and hear” from within the circle as one sees and hears from without. When Northup refers to the “circle” of slavery as a “medium,” he frames slavery’s arrangement of sensory evidence as a technology of communication.

The use of “medium” in the sense of a communication technology did not become widespread until later in the nineteenth century, so strictly speaking it is anachronistic to connect his use of the word here to that sense of it. When Northup pictures slavery as a “medium,” he uses the word in the sense of an intervening substance through which information reaches the senses. But John Guillory has argued that even before the word “medium” was used to describe the “media concept,” we can nevertheless glimpse this emergent sense, pushing into language that did not yet exist for it. “The concept of a medium of communication was absent but *wanted* for several centuries prior to its appearance,” he writes, exerting “a distinctive pressure, as if from the future, on early efforts to theorize communication” (321). The media experimentation of *Twelve Years a Slave* encourages us to understand Northup’s image of slavery’s cloudy “medium” in precisely this sense: as a “media concept” that was not yet (but almost) there. Understood in this way, we can see Northup theorizing a connection between slavery and the emergence of the media concept.

As scholars such as Trish Loughran and Radiclan Clytus have shown, antislavery organizations like the American Anti-Slavery Society paid unprecedented attention to media, using it prolifically and innovatively to sway public opinion.<sup>16</sup> But Northup goes beyond these organizations’ instrumental approaches to posit an epistemological relation between media and slavery, in which slavery, by mediating information, models an understanding of media. Northup’s media theory opens a way into *Twelve Years*’ multimedia account of slavery, which refuses to coalesce into a unified picture and instead inhabits disparate and painfully contradictory vantage points. If slavery, as a medium, places one in the middle, always enveloped by the system, Northup’s media experiments—“phonographies,” in Weheliye’s terms, “sonic modes of enslaved narration,” in Brooks’s, or “phonic materiality,” in Moten’s—locate one in two places at once, simultaneously inside and outside slavery. The book’s incommensurable registers address themselves to the questions of bondage’s bounds, which anguishes *Twelve Years*. On the one hand, how can Northup, plucked from slavery, imaginatively return to those who remain enslaved fully enough to tell their story? And, on the other, how is he always still with them, even once ostensibly freed?

If slavery functions as a medium, then Northup, stitching together sonic and textual modes of communication that never quite hold, tries out how to be both *there* and *somewhere else*. He materializes the conjunction between then and now, between slavery and the (un)freedom that Douglass’s syncretic phrasing enacts, but he is less certain that he can find the “deep meaning” of enslaved people’s music from the vantage point of his present. Although the sheet music for “Roaring River” references the narrative’s musical scenes, it is not reducible to any one of them. Instead, it holds them together in almost unbearable tension. This tension in the sheet music is the tension *of* music for Northup—the music he and his companions made in bondage, which simultaneously raised them up and ravaged them,

whose sustenance bore the imprint of slavery. And this tension is also the tension of Northup's "twelve years a slave," which emerges in the narrative as at once a time he wants to keep before him and a time he would desperately like to put behind him, or perhaps a time that simply *is* always both behind and before him. Did Northup ever play the violin again? How, and why? And what would we know if we knew the answer to those questions?

---

## Notes

Many thanks to Travis Foster, Andrew Friedman, John Hyland, Homay King, Bethany Schneider, Gus Stadler, and Jennifer Harford Vargas of the Faculty Working Group in American Studies at Haverford College for their crucial contributions to this essay; to the students in my fall 2015 Early American Media Cultures class—Corey Branch, Mary Mannion, Adriana Obiols Roca, Geoffrey Sheppard, and Yumi Shiroma—for first thinking through it with me; to participants in the 2016 EMP Pop Conference for important questions and suggestions; and to Elizabeth Watts Pope of the American Antiquarian Society for encouraging me to research the history of "Roaring River" and for generously sharing her own discoveries.

1. The film's use of music also drew unusual attention from critics. For two very different accounts, see Ann Powers, "12 Years a Slave Is this Year's Best Film about Music," *NPR*, 12 Nov. 2013, Web; and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "There Was Music in 12 Years a Slave? Yes. It Sounds Like 'Get Lucky,'" *Gawker*, 8 Nov. 2013, Web.

2. Brown seems to have borrowed the song from an 1845 anti-slavery songster, *The Liberty Minstrel*, where it appears as "Song of the Coffle Gang" with the note, "This song is said to be sung by Slaves, as they are chained in gangs, when parting from friends for the far off South—children taken from parents, husbands from wives, and brothers from sisters" (Clark 22-23). Brown also included the song in *The Anti-Slavery Harp*, with an identical note.

3. Eidsheim coins the term "sonic blackness" to explain how "visual blackness was projected onto timbre" (653). I am using the term somewhat more broadly to describe a range of music heard as "Black" in the 1850s, whether or not it came from bodies identified as such.

4. The *Uncle Tom's Cabin in American Culture* website collects numerous examples of songs from Tom shows: <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/songs/sohp.html>.

5. For comparison, in 1854 the New York music publishers Firth, Pond advertised that sales of the hit songs of Stephen Foster ranged from 48,000 copies ("Old Dog Tray") to more than 130,000 ("Old Folks at Home") (Sanjek 77).

6. Chicopee is the name (derived from the Nipmuc language) of a town in western Massachusetts. It is about 100 miles from Northup's home in Saratoga Springs, so Northup could have remembered it from another context.

7. See Florence Anderson, *Zenaida* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1858), 181; "Cotton Planting Under the Present Regime: Its Entities and Humbuggeries," *Virginia University Magazine* (December 1882): 135; "W. C. Torrance, "Farming, By One Who Has Been In It Twenty-Five Years," *Southern Cultivator and Dixie Farmer* (April 1893): 216; "N," "Southern Telegraph Reminiscence," *Telegraph and Telephone Age* 16 Dec. 1921: 571.

8. To the extent that the sheet music functions as a disciplinary mechanism, we might read it as continuous with the appendix that follows it, which consists of legal documents used to secure Northup's rescue. Stepto describes these materials as representing "the unfolding of a law" and takes them as evidence that the narrative "ultimately retrogresses" to strategies of white authentication (15).

9. Northup bookends this scene with two strikingly similar paragraphs. First, "Then there must be a merry-making. Then all must move to the measure of a tune. Then Master Epps must needs regale his melodious ears with the music of a fiddle. Then did he become buoyant, elastic, gaily 'tripping the light fantastic toe' around the piazza and all through the house" (118). Second, "Ten years I toiled for that man. Ten years of my incessant labor has contributed to increase the bulk of his possessions. Ten years I was compelled to address him with down-cast eyes and uncovered head—in the attitude and language of a slave" (119). Their anaphora ("Then. . . , "Ten years. . . ") is unlike any other passage in the book, and it is tempting to see Northup pitting the musicality of the sound pattern against the terrible musical performance he represents.

10. Compare Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," with its insistence on knowledge that transcends the temporality of individual experience.

11. In its manifest incongruity, "Roaring River" also anticipates the work of the contemporary black visual artist Charles Gaines, whose recent *Notes on Social Justice* series replaces the lyrics to nineteenth-century sheet music with excerpts from political manifestos. I am grateful to Nico Rosario for making this comparison.

12. “The best that we can do, however, with paper and types, or even with voices, will convey but a faint shadow of the original,” Allen, Ware, and Garrison write in their introduction to *Slave Songs of the United States* (v). Staff notation was invariably reductive, but as Radano reminds us, white writers’ professions of its impossibility projected an almost mystical racial difference, which “depicted the experience of the slave sound world as a peculiarly audible sensation whose special properties tested the outer limits of the Western imagination” (508).

13. In a fascinating post on the *Sounding Out!* blog, Lingold discusses the significance of Northup’s fiddle to *Twelve Years* and experiments with playing the violin melody for “Roaring River,” but notes that “the lyrics are ill-fitting for the fiddle tune provided.”

14. The influence of the Choctaw song on “Roaring River” may be representative of a broader musical tradition. As Byrd reminds us, the “blues epistemologies and blues aesthetics” that arose from slavery and its afterlife in the Mississippi Delta did so in close proximity to Chickasaw and Choctaw people’s musical practices (122). See Byrd 118-22.

15. If in escaping from slavery Northup left behind people he loved and the music they created together, then the Choctaw song’s “continuous, melancholy kind of wavy sound” might hold out the promise that Snead finds in black techniques of repetition: that “the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is ‘there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it’ ” (67).

16. See Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), 303-61; and Radiclanı Clytus, “‘Keep It Before the People’: The Pictorialization of American Abolitionism,” in *Early African American Print Culture*, Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2012), 290-317.

Allen, William Francis, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison. Introduction. *Slave Songs of the United States*. New York: A. Simpson, 1867. i-xxxviii.

Barrett, Linton. *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

“Black-Eyed Susie.” Lomax and Lomax 287-88.

Brooks, Daphne A. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

—. “‘Puzzling the Intervals’: Blind Tom and the Poetics of the Sonic Slave Narrative.” *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. John Ernest. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014. 391-414.

Brown, William Wells. *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847.

Byrd, Jodi. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011.

Clark, George W. *The Liberty Minstrel*. New York: Leavitt and Alden, 1845.

Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*. New York: New York UP, 2015.

Crawley, Ashon. “Harriet Jacobs Gets a Hearing.” *Current Musicology* 93 (Spring 2012): 33-55.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.

Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera.” *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies*. Ed. Kara Keeling and Josh Kun. Spec. issue of *American Quarterly* 63.3 (2011): 641-71.

Gallo, Phil. “12 Years a Slave Leads Contemporary Soundtrack Revival.” *Billboard Magazine* 11 Dec. 2013. Web. 15 Mar. 2017.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Guillory, John. “Genesis of the Media Concept.” *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2010): 321-62.

Harris, Joel Chandler. *Stories of Georgia*. New York: American Book, 1896.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013.

Lingold, Mary Caton. “Fiddling with Freedom: Solomon Northup’s Musical Trade in *12 Years a Slave*.” *Sounding Out!* 16 Dec. 2013. Web. 15 Mar. 2017.

Lomax, John A., and Alan Lomax. *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: Macmillan, 1934.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.

Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. 1853. New York: Penguin, 2012.

*Old Dan Emmitt’s Original Banjo Melodies*. Boston: Charles H. Keith, 1843.

Pope, Elizabeth Watts. “*Twelve Years a Slave*, the Book: Dramatizations, Illustrations, and Editions.” *Past is Present*. 2014. Web. 15 Mar. 2017.

## Works Cited

- Radano, Ronald. "Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals." *Critical Inquiry* 22.3 (1996): 506-44.
- Sanjek, Russell. *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years*. Vol. 2. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Saucier, Corinne L. *History of Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana*. New Orleans: Pelican, 1943.
- Snead, James A. "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture." *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Methuen, 1984. 59-80.
- Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- Wilderson, Frank B., III. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.