

*"All we knowed was go and  
come by de bells and horns"*

"When de day begin to crack," the former Louisiana slave Charley Williams told his interviewer, "de whole plantation break out wid all kinds of noises. . . . You hear de guinea fowls start potracking down at de edge of de woods lot, and den de roosters all start up 'round de barn and de ducks finally wake up and jine in." Then "de wind rise a little, and you can hear a old bell donging way on some plantation a mile or two off, and den more bells at other places and maybe a horn, and purty soon younder go old Master's old ram horn wid a long toot and den some short toots, and here come de overseer down de row of cabins, hollering right and left." As Williams and some seventy-five other slaves on his plantation began work in the fields each day, they could hear too "de anvil start dangling in de blacksmith shop: Tank! Deling-ding! Tank! Deling-ding!, and dat ole bull tongue [of a damaged plow] gitting straightened out," and "de old loom going 'frump, frump,' and you know it all right iffen your clothes do be wearing out, 'cause you gwine git new britches purty soon!"<sup>1</sup>

Williams's interviewer was an employee of the Federal Writers' Project of the WPA, which made an ambitious attempt, in the late 1930s, to gather firsthand testimonies about slavery from those who had survived it.<sup>2</sup> In effect, the WPA project invited large numbers of ordinary African Americans to break a long historical silence, to tell their own stories, often in their own way and to someone other than family and friends, for the first time. As the reminiscences of the former slaves readily show, the sounds of the plantation and its surrounds were an important part of the remembered fabric of slavery, giving both shape and texture to their recollections of the worlds they had once been forced to inhabit. Of course, not all of those worlds were the same as Charley Williams's, and few ex-slaves gave so detailed an account of the soundscapes with which they had once been so familiar. Yet by paying attention to the ex-slaves' memories of sounds that they

themselves had created, or that had originated in the natural environment or with whites, and to hints former slaves gave as to what those sounds meant to them, we can at least begin, in Jane Kamensky's words, "to *hear* their history: to restore the voices, the silences, and the clamor amid which people in that distant world made sense of their lives, day by day."<sup>3</sup>

Former North Carolina slave Tempie Durham, for instance, easily recalled the sounds of domestic industry on the large plantation on which she once worked. "De cardin' an' spinnin' room was full of niggers," she remembered, and all those years later she could still "hear dem spinnin' wheels now turnin' roun' an' sayin' hum-m-m-m, hum-m-m-m, an' hear de slaves singin' while dey spin."<sup>4</sup> Jasper Battle, who was interviewed in Georgia, remembered the sounds of wash-day: the noise made by slave children as they beat the clothes with batten sticks, and the voices of slave women "a-singin' dem old songs," which could be heard "'most a mile away."<sup>5</sup> Heard Griffin, a young boy in slavery times, spoke not of prominent sound-marks—the tolling of the plantation bell, for instance—but of the shifting cadences of ambient sound. Once the slaves on his plantation had reached the field each morning, he remembered, "It wouldn't be long before you would hear the 'geeing and hawing' . . . the squealing of pigs and the barking of dogs—all sounds mingling together."<sup>6</sup> The field work to which former Mississippi slave George Weathersby was assigned was burdensome, he told his interviewer, but not without its compensations: "Us laked all being together. Big bunches would be wukin' in de corn or cotton fields, a hollerin' an' a singing an' a telling ghos' tales."<sup>7</sup> John Davenport even reproduced, as best he could, the hollers that he and other slaves used to call domesticated animals from the fields: "We used to call de cows on de plantation like dis: 'co-winch, co-winch.' We called de mules like dis: 'co, co,' and de hogs and pigs, 'pig-oo,' 'pig-oo.'"<sup>8</sup>

A very young Uncle Stepney, eluding the dreaded patrollers by hiding out in the woods near his Alabama plantation, had listened anxiously to "de panthers a screamin' a way off in de fores' an' de wildcats a howlin.'" More ominous, however, had been the cry of a screech owl, a sure sign of impending death. Quickly, the boy had turned the pockets of his overalls inside out, whereupon the bird's raucous cry had

ceased.<sup>9</sup> In a more nostalgic mood, Aunt Clussey, aged about seventeen when the Civil War began, recalled how, in the days before the conflict, she and the other slaves would gather behind the Big House, where "young massa played his fiddle an' us'd sing, 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot.'" She remembered too "de call of de whip-poor-will ober de ridge at night an' de song of de thrush early in de mornin'," and claimed still to "hear de voices of de tired folks a comin' home singing atter de sun done sunk behin' de mountain."<sup>10</sup> For ex-Alabama slave Clara Davis, too, the memory of plantation sounds was richly evocative. "I wants to hear de sound of de hounds in de woods atter de 'possum . . . an' listen to de wheels [of the old wagon] groanin' as dey rolls along." She longed, also, she said, to hear once more the slaves on boats passing up and down the Alabama River "a singin' at dere work," and to "walk the paths th'ew de woods an . . . listen to frogs at night."<sup>11</sup> Recollections such as these, fragments of African Americans' remembered lives offered in response to interviewers' questions, permit us to eavesdrop on the past, to attempt, in some measure, to "reconstitute the auditory environment" of slavery's hitherto largely soundless world.<sup>12</sup>

Other recollected sounds carried more traumatic associations. The anguished cries of families whose members were sold away; the repetitive crack of the master's or overseer's whip: these were emblematic sounds for captive African Americans, stark "aural reminders," in Robin Kelley's phrase, of the slaveholder's presence and power.<sup>13</sup> "All time, night an' day, you could hear men an' women screamin' to de tip of dere voices as either ma, pa, sister, or brother wuz tak without any warnin' an' sell," Augustus Ladson declared. "People wuz always dyin' frum a broken heart."<sup>14</sup> After lamenting that "babies wuz snatched from dere mother's breas' an' sold to speculators," and "chilluns wuz separated from sisters an' brothers an' never saw each other ag'in," Delia Garlic scornfully rebuked her interviewer's subsequent query: "Course dey cry; you think dey not cry when dey was sold lak cattle?"<sup>15</sup> The sounds associated with whippings, too, had stayed with those who had been forced to listen to them. "I's heard old Jack heep o' mornins 'fo day when Marsa would be whippin him he'd say: 'Oh! pray Marsa,'" Alex McCinney testified. "Oh how he did beg an' plead fo' mercy. My! I can hear dat voice now."<sup>16</sup> Lou Williams's owners had

treated her well, but as she explained, other slaves had not been so fortunate. "We lives close to de meanest owner in de country. . . . He keeps overseers to beat de niggers and he has de big leather bullwhip with lead in de end, and he beats some slaves to death. We heard dem holler and holler till dey couldn't holler no mo! Den dey jes' sorta grunt every lick till dey die."<sup>17</sup> Martha Jackson called to mind the terrible cries of a runaway slave, subjected to a particularly brutal beating, which she and others had silently to watch. "De holes in de strop dey sucks flesh up th'oo 'em, and de nigger's a hollerin' en ev'ybody so skeered dey right ashy, and dey can't nobody say a mumblin' word 'case dey so skeered."<sup>18</sup>

It was not uncommon, either, for interviewees to recall the doleful baying of hounds on the trail of runaway slaves. Pappy Holloway, born free in Fort Valley, Georgia, in 1848, stated that "you could hear the hounds all hours of the night. Some nigger was gone."<sup>19</sup> "The woods was full of runaways," ex-Texas slave Gill Ruffin declared, "and I heered them houn's a runnin' 'em like deer many a time, and heered dat whip when they's caught."<sup>20</sup> As slaves well knew, a successful capture was often followed by a particularly barbaric punishment. If a slave on Henry Waldon's plantation escaped, the owner of a pack of bloodhounds would be summoned, whose dogs would chase the runaway until they had him or her at bay. When the owner arrived, the dogs would be let loose. "They would tell you to stand still and put your hands over your privates," Henry Waldon declared. "Five or six hounds bitin' you on every side and a man settin' on a horse holding a double shotgun on you."<sup>21</sup>

The baying of the "nigger hound," an animal trained specifically to catch and oftentimes to punish escaped slaves, evoked for slaves not merely their own degraded status (as mere beasts to be hunted down), but also what must often have seemed the master's virtually untrammelled power. When Gabe Emmanuel's master's dog died, its grief-stricken owner announced that the animal was to be given a proper burial, adding ominously that "us Niggers might better be's pow'ful sad when us come to dat fun'al." And, Emmanuel assured his interviewer, "dem Niggers was sad over de death o' dat poor old dog what had chased 'em all over de country. Dey all stan' 'roun a-weepin' an'

a-mournin'. Ever' now an' den dey'd put water on dey eyes an' play lak dey was a-weepin' bitter, bitter tears. 'Poor old dog, Amen! . . . De Lawd have mercy!'"<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the rural South, the sounds of tolling bells and blown horns, too, must often have been difficult to escape. William S. Walsh remembered that the bugles his father owned, which were similar to those used by other slaveholders in the area, were huge, commonly measuring five or six feet in length. They were made of poplar wood, which was coated with tar and then submerged for several days, a process that gave the instrument "a resonant sound" that "could be heard for miles on a clear night."<sup>23</sup> One former Georgia slave estimated that the morning bugle that woke slaves on his plantation could be heard "as far as High Shoals, and us lived dis side of Watkinsville." "Heaps of folks all over dat part of de country," he declared, "got up by dat old bugle."<sup>24</sup>

Generally, ex-slaves' memories of plantation bells and horns evoked painful associations. Those sounds had marked for many of them the span of long and arduous working days. Typically, the first bell had sounded at 4:00 AM, but it was not unusual for slaves to have been required to rise earlier. William Byrd explained that his master "had a great iron piece hanging just out side his door and he hit that every morning at 3.30."<sup>25</sup> On every plantation in his Mississippi district other than his own, Anderson Williams testified, the first bell of the day rang at three o'clock and by four o'clock every slave had to be ready to go to the fields. In sharp contrast, "Dr's [that is, Anderson Williams's master's] niggers went to de fiel' one hour after sun-up an' quit in time to git de night work done befo' dark," but so unusually lenient were these arrangements thought to be that "de folks around called Dr's niggers 'De Free Slaves.'"<sup>26</sup> Not only were field slaves usually forced to rise well before daylight, but they had sometimes to remain in the fields long after dark. "Slaves on our place . . . had to work night and day," Estella Jones remembered. "Marster had stobs (staves) all over de field to put lights on so dey could see how to work after dark. De men, more so dan de womens, had to work every night 'til twelve o'clock."<sup>27</sup> Women hardly escaped, however. After laboring long hours in the field, Callie Bracey's mother would cook for the fol-

lowing day, preparing lunch buckets for the field hands. When the horn sounded at 4:00 AM she went back to work in the field.<sup>28</sup>

Former slaves' recollections of plantation bells also called to mind daily rituals of humiliation that degraded slave women's lives. On Laura Smalley's Texas plantation, the blast of a horn summoned nursing mothers from the fields to feed their babies, a demeaning experience, as her description of the spectacle makes clear. "A cow out there will go to the calf. . . . Well they [the nursing mothers] come at ten o'clock every day, . . . to all them babies. . . . When that horn blowed . . . for the mothers, . . . they'd jus' come jus' like cows, jus' a-running, you know, coming to the children."<sup>29</sup>

Former Alabama slave Amy Domino learned to identify bells of a different kind. "I 'member w'en I's jes' a li'l gal a-hearin' bells in d' night," she recounted, "d' ol' folks say dat some 'r' d' run-a-way niggers from uder plantation. Dey put bells on d' slaves, wel' [weld] dem on so dey kaint gittum off 'n' dey kin hear dem iffen dey git 'way in d' woods."<sup>30</sup> In an autobiography written after he had escaped from slavery, Moses Roper provided a more detailed description of one variant of this apparatus. Roper's master, a Mr. Gooch, created a U-shaped iron structure, fitted with bells, which was attached to the back of a slave's neck (and presumably, since the apparatus Roper described was seven feet in height, also secured around the wearer's waist). Three crossbars spanned the U-shaped iron frame, the highest having four bells attached to it, the second-highest six bells, the lowest eight bells. The weight of this "very ponderous machine," as well as the minor cacophony of sound that must have accompanied its wearer, effectively discouraged further attempts at flight. Roper noted that devices of this kind were "generally adopted among the slave-holders in South Carolina, and in some other slave states."<sup>31</sup>

Even apparently routine sounds, mainly associated with workaday activities on plantations and farms, could be loaded with deeper-than-expected meanings. After recounting, without apparent animus, how the blast of his master's horn signaled the start of another day's work, Charley Williams suddenly burst out: "Bells and horns! Bells for dis and horns for dat! All we knowed was go and come by de bells and horns."<sup>32</sup> Williams's sudden flare of resentment signaled the

restive presence of more fundamental concerns. Mark Smith has argued that, from the 1830s, southern slaveholders' adoption of a mechanical "clock-dependent time consciousness," communicated to slaves through the use of bells and horns, challenged slaves' conception of time. Coming, as they or their forbears had done, from societies in which clocks were virtually unknown, where their sense of time was "task-oriented" and "natural" (time marked by the position of the sun, for example), slaves were increasingly required to accommodate themselves to the demands of a clock-regulated world, to a "mechanical regulation of life and thought."<sup>33</sup> As a resentful former slave, Dave Walker, remembering these transitional years, explained: "We wuz trained to live by signals of a ole cow horn. Us knowed whut each blow meant. All through de day de ole horn wuz blowed, to git up in de mo'nings, to go to de big kitchen out in Mars' back yard ter eat, to go to fields, an' to come in an' on lak dat all day."<sup>34</sup> The tension between clock-dependent time and "natural" or task-oriented time, with all that the former portended for the way in which slaves were able to live their lives, helps to explain Charley Williams's impassioned outburst. It also adds poignancy to an incident that stuck in the memory of former slave Jennie Bowen. In the last years of slavery, a male slave on her plantation had been responsible for ringing the bell that woke slaves in the morning and called them back to the quarters at night. After freedom came, this man remained on the same plantation, but when the owner's son rang the plantation bell to summon black workers from the fields, the former bell ringer ignored it. When asked why, the man answered: "'Tain't no mo' bell ringin' for dis nigger, 'caze I is free."<sup>35</sup>

It is revealing to attempt to recover the meanings slaves attached to the sounds of the plantation, especially if those sounds signified differently for the whites who had heard them. But slaves also actively and collectively shaped their acoustic environment. Partly they did so by sheer dint of numbers. At most times on most southern plantations slaves far and away outnumbered any whites who may have been present; this was also the case, for example, at events such as the execution of the slave Jenny in Somerset County, Maryland, in October 1821, where there were two slaves for every white, or on market days in Charleston or Richmond. But the impact of African Americans on

slavery's soundscape was due also to the different nature, often the apparent strangeness, of the sounds blacks made. This sense of cultural dissonance was perhaps most acutely felt by white observers of slave festivals.

The festival of Pinkster came to America with the seventeenth-century Dutch, but at some time, probably in the second third of the eighteenth century, it became almost entirely an African American event.<sup>36</sup> In 1736 the *New-York Weekly Journal* published an account of a slave festival that may have been Pinkster. On this slave holiday, black people gathered on a plain outside town, divided up into groups "according to their different Nations," and danced "to the hollow Sound of a Drum, made of the Trunk of a hollow Tree, . . . the grating rattling Noise of Pebles or Shells in a small Basket," and the sounds of many "Bangers" (banjos), while other blacks accompanied the dancers in song. The seeming cacophony of musical sound, as well as the raucous curses of those "who had been unlucky enough to get a Dram too much," was, declared "The Spy," "enough to raise one's Hair on end."<sup>37</sup> Pinkster occurred intermittently in parts of New York and New Jersey originally settled by the Dutch, but reached its apogee in Albany in the 1790s and 1800s. Here, on "Pinkster Hill" on the outskirts of the state capital, for almost a week and usually in May, King Charles, an African-born slave described as one "whose authority is absolute, and whose will is law during the Pinkster holidays,"<sup>38</sup> presided over a motley crew of slaves, free blacks, and whites. The numbers of those involved were impressive enough—hundreds, indeed quite possibly thousands, of African Americans congregated on these occasions—but what struck spectators even more was the visual and sonic strangeness of this black gathering.

The sense of white alienation is conveyed in the remarks of a contemporary witness. In the "Guinea dance," which climaxed the Pinkster festival, the "chief musician[,] dressed in a horrid manner—rolling his eyes and tossing his head with an air of savage wildness; grunting and mumbling out certain inarticulate but hideous sounds," beat upon a Guinea drum. On either side of this character, twoimps "decorated with feathers and cow tails" performed similar "uncouth and terrifying grimaces," while playing on smaller drums and imitat-

ing the chief musician's "sounds of frightful dissonance." At the same time, males and females danced to music that, to this observer, possessed "no regular air."<sup>39</sup> Several decades later, a Dr. James Eights recalled Pinkster at its height, sometime in the late eighteenth century. His memories centered on the rhythms of the drumming, and particularly on Jackey Quackenboss's beating on "an *eel-pot*, with a cleanly dressed sheep skin drawn tightly over its wide and open extremity." As Quackenboss wailed away, this African New Yorker slave chanted over and over "the ever wild, though euphonic cry of *Hi-a-bomba, bomba, bomba*, in full harmony with the thumping sounds." Quackenboss's vocals were "readily taken up and as oft repeated" by a chorus of African American females, who accompanied their singing by the "beating of time with their ungloved hands, in strict accordance with the eel-pot melody." Such a performance must have sounded fantastic—little wonder that Dr. Eights claimed that the music was "singular in the extreme"—and about as far removed from anything produced by the respectable and dour burghers of Albany as it is possible to imagine.<sup>40</sup>

Much the same was true of the profusion of sounds created by slaves during Jonkonnu, a festival seemingly restricted on the mainland to antebellum North Carolina. The best account of this slave festival comes from a Dr. Edward Warren, who observed the slaves going "John Koonering" on the Christmas Day he spent at Somerset Plantation in 1829. Warren, too, was struck not only by the fantastic attire of the participants, but also by the weirdness of the sounds they made. The "leading character" in the Jonkonnu procession wore a costume of rags, a pair of ox horns attached to the skin of a raccoon, pulled over his face, sandals made of "some wild varmint," and several cow or sheep bells draped across his shoulders. Behind him came a group of slaves "arrayed fantastically in ribbons, rags, and fethers" and carrying "gumba boxes" or "wooden frames covered over with tanned sheepskins," and bringing up the rear was a "motley crowd of all ages." Once the procession had reached the front door of the "great house," "the musicians commenced to beat their gumba boxes violently," and wild dancing began. Simultaneously, the leader of the bizarre procession "led off with a song of strange, monotonous cadence" that was

“extemporized for the occasion,” and “the whole crowd joined in the chorus, shouting and clapping their hands in the wildest glee.”<sup>41</sup>

In the last three or four decades of slavery’s existence in the South, however, by far the most widespread and important slave festival was corn shucking, a ritual event suffused, according to many whites, with unfamiliar, though by no means always unwelcome, sound. After the corn was harvested, slaves from the surrounding plantations would be invited to come on the appointed evening. Competing teams would be organized, and slaves, responding to their captain’s, or song leader’s, calls, shucked enormous piles of corn. Later, after the work was done, there would be more music, dancing, eating, and drinking, and on some plantations, at evening’s end, the slaves would seize their master, carry him around the Big House, occasionally toss him in the air, and take him inside, where, as the former slave George Woods remembered, they would “place him in the chair; comb his head; cross his knees for him and leave him alone.”<sup>42</sup> Unusual as such behavior seemed, it was more often than not the sounds that stayed with whites as their strongest memory of the corn-shucking ritual. In a piece published in *Putnam’s Magazine* in 1855, an anonymous author wrote of the “wild grandeur and stirring music” of one particular corn-shucking song, and of his difficulty in conveying that haunting power on the printed page. Indeed, he wrote, if one slipped back into the dark and watched “the sable forms of the gang” lit by the flickering flames of the torches as they worked, and listened “to the wild notes of their harvest songs,” it was “easy to imagine ourselves unseen spectators of some . . . savage festival.”<sup>43</sup>

The mass slave singing at the core of corn shucking sent shivers down the spine of those lucky enough to witness it. After all, where else in antebellum America could one hear choirs of several score, often hundreds, of voices? One white man, recalling the festival on a North Carolina plantation in the 1850s, wrote that the scene, as “three hundred voices would swell out in the chorus” answering the call of the leader, “simply beggars description.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, corn shucking signified rather differently for the slaves and former slaves, few of whom were prone to freight their accounts of the event with nostalgic references to the peculiar institution. But there was agreement

between black and white about the memorable nature of the singing. Decades after he had managed to escape from slavery, William Wells Brown still recalled the exhilaration he felt when listening to the various groups of slaves approaching his plantation in the dark: "To hear three or four of these gangs coming from different directions, their leaders giving out the words, and the whole company joining in the chorus," Brown wrote, surpassed anything that even the best of the blackface minstrels could manage.<sup>45</sup> The irony was, of course, that by the time he wrote this in 1880, Brown's point of comparison was the minstrel show, a genre that in at least some ways was an imitation of the culture that Brown had heard and seen decades earlier in the plantation South.

Seldom did slave behavior seem and sound so different to whites as it did at slave festivals. As slaves created these syncretic events, they drew on their own African past and also what they found around them in America—these events are properly labeled "African American"—but it was also the case that much of the African influence belonged to the sonic realm. Certainly, festivals sounded like nothing most white onlookers had ever heard, and yet, for all their evidentiary value, it is important to bear their limitations in mind. Festivals lasted only for a day or two each year and most slaves were unable even to participate in them. Not only were these events geographically circumscribed, but even when they did occur in a given locale, they seldom seem to have continued for very many years. On the other hand, wherever slavery existed, rituals such as black funerals punctuated the rhythms of the calendar with depressing regularity. The differences between the practices of slaves and their owners are not so spectacularly obvious here as they were in the festivals but, in the end, a close examination of slave funeral rituals may tell us more about the distinctiveness or otherwise of African American slave culture.

Those differences often became apparent even at the moment of death. A little after nine o'clock on a stormy spring evening at Port Royal on South Carolina's coast, a group of whites heard "a strange wild, screaming wail" above the din of the thunder and wind. Initially, Harriet Ware, a young northern woman drawn like so many others to the South to teach the newly freed slaves, had thought the sound was

that of the mules stirring, but the manner in which the sound “rose and fell again and again in such agony” soon convinced her otherwise. Next morning she was proved right. Betty, Harriet Ware’s maid, came into her bedroom, asked about breakfast, and quietly remarked, “And Bu’ Sam dead too.” “I dunner if you yeardy de whoop when he gone.”<sup>46</sup> Not only did that mournful wail distantly echo the sound made by the fifteen hundred blacks compelled to witness Jenny’s execution in Princess Anne some four decades earlier, but it also reverberated with black memories of a now distant African past. According to the French botanist Michel Adanson, in Senegal, the initial “shriek” was made by one of the deceased’s relatives, following which “all the women in the village came out, and setting up a most terrible howl, they flocked about the place from whence the first noise had issued.”<sup>47</sup> The gender specificity of the ritual may have been lost in the New World—the sources are not clear on that point—but many generations later, even in the last moments of the hated institution of slavery, African Americans were marking death in ways similar to those of their African ancestors.

Of course, the passing of every slave was not memorialized in this fashion. Millions of Africans and African Americans lived and died as slaves in the American North and the South over more than two centuries and, inevitably, the conditions under which they did so varied immensely. Generalizing about something as broad as slave funerary rituals is always fraught with difficulty, not least because it is usually easy enough to come up with counterexamples. Indeed, several former slaves interviewed by the WPA scanted the subject, asserting that the plantation routine was barely interrupted by the demise of one of their number. John Bates, a slave from Limestone County, Texas, remembered that slaves just dug “a hole and rolls em in it and kivers em over wid dirt.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Mary Gaffney answered her interviewer’s question about funerals by detailing that the dead slave was “piled” into the grave and that “no singing, no preaching or praying ever took place during slavery time.” She also added that slaves would “not even shed a tear because he was gone where they would not be any more slaves.”<sup>49</sup> Kate Darling was another who depicted a heartlessly efficient plantation regime. When slaves died, the owner simply assigned

a couple of their compatriots to bury the body, with the admonition "Don't be long." There was no singing or praying, she recalled bitterly, "just put them in the ground, cover 'em up and hurry on back to that fiel'."<sup>50</sup> And yet for all that, the evidence from both slave participants and white onlookers makes it overwhelmingly clear that most owners acknowledged their human property's need to farewell kith and kin after their own fashion. How much they did so varied. One former slave remembered that "whenever there was a corpse on de place Marster didn't make nobody do no wuk, 'cept jus' look atter de stock, 'til atter de buryin'."<sup>51</sup> Other owners were less generous. What slave and white testimony also makes abundantly clear, however, is how the general pattern of ritual associated with most slave deaths and burials differed from that followed by whites, and how those differences were embedded in the slaves' acoustic world.

On the night that "Bu' Sam" died at Port Royal, when the air had been filled with "a strange wild, screaming wail," a couple of white gentlemen keeping company with Harriet Ware had wandered off down the street to investigate. They soon returned to report that there were "a good many people in Uncle Sam's house having a merry time." What these men had stumbled across was the beginning of the "settin' up," or wake, for Sam. Later that night, as Ware was going to bed, "there began, at first quite low, then swelling louder with many voices, the strains of one of their wild, sad songs." The "solemn, wildly sad strains," sounds that Ware categorized as "strange," carried on until sunrise, at which point the participants "ceased and separated."<sup>52</sup> In her telling, she was rather more perceptive than her uncomprehending friends, but the reactions of all three serve to underline the cultural differences between black and white. Most emphatically, death among the slaves was not a subject for muffled tread and black crepe. The fact that Ware's friends mistook the wake for revelry says nothing about the depth of the slaves' feelings for Sam. It merely indicates the different ways in which slaves and their owners chose to mourn their dead.

Hamp Kennedy, a particularly eloquent ex-slave from Mississippi, gave a simple explanation of the wake: "Dey neber lef ' a dead nigger 'lone in de house."<sup>53</sup> That such ideas originated in Africa was certainly

suggested by the fact that the “settin’ up” was evidently particularly important in the case of the African-born. According to Robert Pinckney, “Wen one uh doze Africans die, it wus bery sad. Wen a man’s countryman die, he sit right wid um all night.”<sup>54</sup> As soon as news of a death spread, people flocked to the deceased’s dwelling, often overflowing onto the street outside. Inside, mirrors were turned to the walls and pictures covered up, and if there were any clocks in the room where the body rested, they were stopped. On being asked why this was so, Rena Clark explained that its purpose was to allow people to hear noises throughout the house, since “they didn’t want no haints slipping up on them.”<sup>55</sup> And yet, as Harriet Ware and her friends had discovered, wakes could be noisy affairs, more than loud enough, one would have thought, to allow “haints” to move around at will. Elsie Payne remembered the setting-up parties where slaves would “sing and pray and shout, lak at a meeting.”<sup>56</sup> When night ended, there was often a leave-taking of the body. Robert Pinckney, detailing in particular the deaths of Africans, remembered that “attuh dey pray, dey come in and put deah han on duh frien an say goodbye.”<sup>57</sup>

Something of how a setting up may have sounded is conveyed by Hamp Kennedy’s description. “At de wake we clapped our han’s an’ kep’ time wid our feet—*Walking Egypt*, dey calls hit—an’ we chant an’ hum all night ‘til de nigger was *funeralized*.”<sup>58</sup> Here the sonic texture of black speech, indicated partly by the clumsy way in which the interviewer has rendered his words, but mostly by the speech’s distinctive expressiveness—“*Walking Egypt*” conjuring up both the Old Testament account of the captive children of Israel escaping from bondage and, intentionally or not, the Africa from which the practice derived, and the verb “to funeralize,” a neologism that has survived down to our own time—serves to underscore how different slave rituals sounded from those of their owners.<sup>59</sup>

As there were “no ‘balmers on de plantations,” little time was wasted in burying a deceased slave, particularly in summer.<sup>60</sup> Only specified slaves, often women, could prepare the body, and “dey washed de corpse good wid plenty of hot water and soap” before placing it on the “coolin’ board.”<sup>61</sup> One former slave was totally bemused by his interviewer’s ignorance of this essential item. “Lordy, Missy, ain’t

you never seed no coolin' board?" He then explained that these items were a "good deal lak ironin' boards, only dey had laigs to stand on."<sup>62</sup> Corpses were prepared on these boards—women were usually wrapped in "windin' sheets," men were dressed in homespun suits.<sup>63</sup> Coffins were spare and wooden, although at least one slave remembered one as being "blackened 'til it looked right nice," an effect achieved by painting coffins "wid smut off of de wash pot mixed wid grease and water."<sup>64</sup>

The burial occurred on the day following the death, and it too was hardly a quiet affair. Isaah Morgan from Alabama recalled that the coffin "was taken in a ox cart to de grave, wid all de slaves a-walkin' 'long behine de cart singin' de spirituals."<sup>65</sup> Initially, the loudest sounds were the creaks and groans of the wagon bouncing over what passed for a road on most southern plantations: Annie Davies remembered with a smile that "if you hadn't been dead, it sure would have woke you up, going up and down hill and bumping over the road."<sup>66</sup> And then, starting low but swelling into a full-throated rendition of favorite hymns, the mourners, sometimes a mere handful but at other times numbering in the hundreds, found their collective voice, filled the air with those oft-commented on "wild" and "plaintive" sounds, and for a short time at least, claimed some portion of the plantation South as an African American place. Decades later, Arrie could still remember the sound of the funeral processions slowly making their way to the burial ground. "I've heard 'em 'nough times clear 'cross the fields, singin' and moanin' as they went," she said, adding wistfully that "dem days of real feelin' an' keerin' is gone."<sup>67</sup>

Proceedings at the graveside did not last long, indeed seem almost perfunctory. The coffin was lowered into the grave, some planks were placed over it, someone, occasionally a white but more usually a fellow slave, said a few words, and the hole was filled in. And all the while the mourners kept up a continual accompaniment of song. Ex-slave after ex-slave noted that the song most closely associated with funerals was "Hark from de Tomb a Doleful Sound," not infrequently remembered as "Harps from de Tombs." That variation significantly reminds us that this was, to all intents and purposes, an oral society: this particular hymn was important to many slaves, but consistency in the words or

music to which it was sung could hardly have been expected. WPA interviewee Bert Strong clearly recalled one of the hymns sung at his grandpa Gloster's funeral:

Hark from the tomb my ears a tender cry,  
A living man can view the ground where  
I may shortly lie,  
And must this body die and this frame decay,  
And these active limbs of mine lay molten  
in the clay.<sup>68</sup>

Here, the first two lines are derived from the original hymn (the phonetic resemblance is clear, even if the meaning has been lost), but the last two lines have been taken from somewhere else entirely. Yet for all that, the new words have an expressive force and appropriateness of their own. Doubtless, similar variations also occurred in the tune to which "Harp [or Hark] from de Tombs" was sung. For all the variety, though, what was impressively consistent was the memory of how the hymn was a vital part of the observance of a slave death. Carrie Hudson, for example, told her interviewer that "I 'members how us used to holler and cry when dey come to de part of de fun'ral whar dey sung: 'Hark F'um De Tomb, A Doleful Sound.'"<sup>69</sup>

Slave interments were often almost unseemly in their haste, a response both to the climate and to the participants' circumstances as slaves. In South Carolina and Georgia in particular, slave funerals were often held at night, which allowed rather more friends and relatives from nearby plantations to attend, but even this hardly permitted a satisfactory farewell to the deceased.<sup>70</sup> What generally happened throughout the South was that many of the rituals of the funeral were separated from the burial, sometimes by a few weeks, but often by months or even years. As the Reverend John Dixon Long wrote in the 1850s, "a negro funeral is different from the 'burying.'"<sup>71</sup> James Bolton, a former slave from Oglethorpe County, Georgia, told his interviewer that "sometimes it were two or thee mont's attter the burying fo' the funerl sermon was preached."<sup>72</sup> Another former slave from Georgia declared that "de reason dey had slave fun'ral's so long attter de burial wuz to have 'em on Sunday or some other time when de crops

had been laid by so de other slaves could be on hand."<sup>73</sup> According to Long, these funerals were frequently held out in the woods, and "sometimes as many as three funerals are preached at once." He also noted that such an arrangement was "a unique affair," being unaware of course that this practice of delayed funerals was common in West Africa.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, what is likely is that both African ideas and the restrictions of slavery easily combined to establish the custom of double funerals in the New World. The practice of two rituals occurred in the eighteenth century, but in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, by which time the majority of slaves were Christian, such a procedure appears to have been ubiquitous.<sup>75</sup> It was important to slaves that they heard the right words, delivered by one of their countrymen, spoken about their dead, a fact acknowledged by Long when he wrote that "unless a colored person is preached . . . there is no peace of mind to his friends."<sup>76</sup> Given that these men and women were slaves, the practice of double funerals allowed a surprising amount of solace on this count.

For many whites, the rituals of slave death and burial were deeply disconcerting. The singing of hymns by slaves, or, though less commonly, the preaching of sermons, was familiar enough to Euro-American observers, but this very familiarity made the transformations wrought by the slaves all the more unsettling. Liberal embellishment of hymn tunes; the commingling of lyrics from several sources; the preaching of the funeral sermon some months after the slave's interment, and its content, delivered in Black English and either almost incomprehensible or completely nonsensical to most white listeners; all this and much more contributed to the feeling that things were somehow awry. Embedded in what whites saw and heard were echoes of their own practices, but when they came to describe slave funerals their accounts were suffused with a sense of strangeness. After witnessing a nighttime slave funeral that attracted scores of slaves from nearby plantations, the clergyman Hamilton W. Pierson wrote that "the appearance of such a procession, winding through the fields and woods, as revealed by their flaming torches, marching slowly to the sound of their wild music, was *weird and imposing* in the highest degree."<sup>77</sup>

In much the same way that viewers of the first cubist paintings were confronted by a new way of seeing, by what seemed like a distorted image disturbingly at odds with their usual experience, and yet for all that still recognizable, so too white witnesses to slave funeral rites were forced to contemplate cultural difference. In this case, however, the shock of the new was mostly in the sonic rather than the visual realm and, importantly, after decades of living together, a small minority of whites began to appreciate and then gradually to love this new sound. "White folkses would come lissen to slave fun'ral's," one ex-slave casually remarked, but we would suggest that the word "lissen" here can bear some weight.<sup>78</sup> More and more whites acknowledged their liking for many of the sounds of slavery, sounds that had by then saturated the fabric of southern life.

Much as would later happen with the paintings of Picasso and Braque, antebellum whites continued to use words such as "wild" or "strange" to describe the sounds that they had heard, but they also acknowledged the haunting power of what had been revealed to them. "Viator" was present at the nighttime burial of an important and much-liked slave on a large Georgia plantation in the 1850s. The wagon carrying the coffin was followed by in excess of one hundred and fifty slaves, in the middle of whom "was stationed the black preacher, a man of gigantic frame and stentorian lungs, who gave out from memory the words of a hymn suitable for the occasion." Rooted to the spot, this northern white watched as darkness swallowed up the cortege and then listened for some time to the singing "mellowed by distance." It was, he wrote later that night, "the most solemn and yet the sweetest music" that he had ever heard. Indeed, he concluded, "no incident of my life has impressed me with more powerful emotions than the night funeral of the poor negro."<sup>79</sup>

During the institution's final years, it was quite common for whites to go out of their way to watch and listen to slaves. They attended funerals, corn shuckings, church services, or other black performances, and they did so not so much for the purposes of surveillance, although no one was likely to forget their color or position, but out of an aesthetic appreciation of and inquisitiveness about slave culture. On Sundays in Richmond in the 1850s, curious whites frequently attended

services at the First African Baptist Church. Mary Virginia Hawes Terhune, better known in some circles as the novelist Marion Harland, remembered that "what were known as the 'Amen benches,' at the left of the pulpit, were reserved for white auditors." The attraction was not the performance of Robert Ryland, the white minister, but the singing of the congregation and the impassioned eloquence of the black exhorters. In Mary Terhune's memory the amen benches of this black Baptist church "were always full."<sup>80</sup> These whites who sought out African American singing in black churches and elsewhere were the forebears of later generations who would be entranced by the sounds of blues and jazz.