

The Double Passage: Performing Sound in Slave Narrative¹

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Abstract

The article describes the “double passage” of millions of African people from freedom to America, and from America to freedom. Focusing on the role of sound in slave narrative, and in particular in slave narrative for performance (drama and music), the article will try to reach an understanding of the importance of sound in the construction of meaning, and in the fight for freedom in slave narrative. If slaves have in fact seen their freedom vanish through writing, it is often through the spoken word and through music that they have acquired a right to speak out and obtain freedom. The corpus analyzed includes Dion Boucicault's melodrama *The Octoroon; or Life in Louisiana* (1861), LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's play *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967), and Hannibal Lokumbe's oratorio *African Portraits* (1990), as well as Ouladah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979), and Clarence Major's poem *The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage* (1994).

Keywords: Sound, slave narrative, performance, Africa, African-American literature, middle passage, double passage.

The Double Passage: Köle Anlatısında Sesin İcrası

Özet

Makale, milyonlarca Afrikalının, özgürlükten Amerika'ya ve Amerika'dan özgürlüğe giden “köle yolu”nu (*double passage*) betimler. Makalede, köle anlatısında ve özellikle sergilenen köle anlatısında (tiyatro ve müzik) sesin rolüne odaklanarak anlamın oluşturulmasında ve köle anlatısındaki özgürlük savaşında sesin önemi ele alınacaktır. Eğer köleler özgürlüklerinin yazı aracılığıyla yok olduğunu görmüşlerse düşüncelerini açıklama hakkı kazanmaları ve özgürlüklerini elde etmeleri, çoğu zaman söylenen söz ve müzik aracılığıyla olmuştur. Dion Boucicault'nun *The Octoroon; or Life in Louisiana* (1861) başlıklı melodramı, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka'nın *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967) başlıklı oyunu, Hannibal Lokumbe'nin *African Portraits* (1990) başlıklı oratoryosu, Ouladah Equiano'nun *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), Frederick Douglass'ın *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) başlıklı eserleri, Octavia Butler'ın *Kindred* (1979) başlıklı romanı ve Clarence Major'ın *The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage* (1994) başlıklı şiiri çalışmanın bütüncesini oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Ses, köle anlatısı, sergileme, Afrika, Afrikan-Amerikan edebiyatı, middle passage, köle yolu.

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*Mfu says let's gather in a sky chorus today,
with all of those gone and all of those coming,
with Josephine and Leopold the King,
and make, he says, some sounds mean
what they're supposed to mean.
Clarence Major, The Slave Trade: View from
the Middle Passage (1994, p. 22).*

I have already defined the “double passage” as the voyage of return of postcolonial literatures into European tongues, but in this article I want to discuss another kind of double passage: the voyage from America to freedom of the people the middle passage had brought from freedom to America. To make “sounds mean what they're supposed to mean,” as Clarence Major suggests in this short passage of his poem *The Slave Trade: View From the Middle Passage*, I will analyze in this brief article the role of sound, music and the spoken word in constructing meaning on slavery in performances of the slave narrative genre, especially in Dion Boucicault's melodrama *The Octoroon; or Life in Louisiana* (1861), LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's play *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1978 [1967]), and Hannibal Lokumbe's oratorio *African Portraits* (1997 [1990]). In order to analyze the peculiarities of the performative genres applied to slave narrative I will also make reference to other slave narratives belonging to other genres: two of the most famous early slave narratives in prose, Ouladah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (2004 [1789]), and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1995 [1845]), together with Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979), and a poem by Clarence Major, *The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage* (1994).

1. Sound and African-American culture

The fundamental role of sound in the African-American culture has been extensively researched: “over nearly two and a half centuries, several million African and African American slaves had fashioned a dynamic, unruly culture that was principally made to be heard,” as Shane White and Graham White tell us (2005, p. 189). Sounds “whose roots lay deep in the slaves' African homelands”, and which “collided with Euro-American musical and speech forms, to create something new” (p. XVIII).

The distance between sounds, music and spoken words on one side and the written language on the other side becomes even more relevant because this culture has also been deprived of its simplest rights through language, and mostly through written language. As Brathwaite (1995) puts it: “it was in language, that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master; and it was in his (mis-)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled. Within the folk tradition, language was (and is) a creative act in itself” (p. 83). A creative act which has indeed been used to resist slavery and oppression.

When talking about the role of sound in slaves' daily life, Douglass (1995) writes that “the thought that came up, came out – if not in the word, in the sound; – and as frequently in the one as in the other” (p. 8), giving us a clear image of the ability of sounds to construct meaning, even without the need of being linguistically recognizable. African American slaves became the “lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths” (Hurston 1978 [1937], p. 10) and through these sound they contributed to the emancipation of the whole nation, not only of themselves.

2. From freedom to America

The first encounter of the reader with the reality of slavery in Frederick Douglass' narrative (and our first perception of his master) also happens through sound. After a long passage in which we know of his undocumented life, of which he has been able to gather information only through whispers, through what he has heard, Douglass (1955) tells his reader of the screams that would wake him up in his master's plantation:

I have often been awaked at the dawn of the day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped . . . He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush. (pp. 3-4)

The confrontation between the slave and the master happens through sound and for the sound itself, for the scream and for the hush, and Douglass' aunt's screams only achieve the purpose of making her master want to whip her even more. In the following chapter, Douglass (1955) also gives us a hint to the presence of sound in the slaves' daily life: "The slaves . . . would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune" (p.8).

This constant presence of sounds remains and is even stressed further in the performances of slave narratives by LeRoi Jones and Hannibal Lokumbe; the following scenes from Jones' play and Lokumbe's oratorio show us the moment in which the Africans encounter for the first time the European merchants, who are going to enslave them to sell them in the Americas; an encounter, which happens through sounds only. What is interesting in these passages, is that both parties react with horror when confronted with the other's language or sounds. And Equiano's (2004) description of the merchant's arrival is also there to prove that: "I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief" (p. 203).

In an excerpt from Hannibal Lokumbe's *African Portraits* (1996), we can see how both of the sides see the other and his language as "ghostly", in just a few lines:

CHORUS: Jumalemu nyimolute menning

Who are these ghosts that come with sticks.

Dokabalunata doko membe kumala.

That speak with fire, a sound of death?

. . . CAPTAIN: What is this ghostly sound?

LIEUTENANT: It must be the witch doctor. (p. 2)

The stage version of *African Portraits* is opened by a griot's chant to God, a request to listen to his people: "Banko otelube din killo lala eya. / *Hear us as we sing it to you this day*" (p. 1) a chant sung by children and by the forces of nature as well:

Sanjo beh donkililala yiri fitoluka kotimintimino.

The rain sings like crickets upon the leaves.

Dindinolu neneh man bata donkililala.

The children are never tired of singing.

Anin sinsinolu beh fata nio kesola.

And the baskets overflow with grain.

Nemo la bafala beh molu yeh.

The spirit of mercy lives among us.

Andun wokan na nuntokumolu bejeh.

And to it we offer our ancient chants. (p. 1)

A chant that never stops, not even during the massacre by the Europeans, who are themselves surprised by the fact that their victims are still singing: “CAPTAIN: I have never seen so much blood, still they sing, still they sing. Enough talking, I tire of this hellish place” (p. 2). What the captain takes for singing, though, might simply be language. He probably mistakes words for music, as when he hears the chorus singing “ma kero ma kero kelo kelo kelo” (p. 1), which has the rhythm of a song but is indeed a desperate call for help. And according to Amiri Baraka (2009), as LeRoi Jones later chose to be called, the word griot itself could also be connected to sound:

Griot, with its 'French' vibration, from the colonial 'gift' the northerners imposed on their piece of the West African pie, yet carries with it the insistence of 'Cry.' As in Cry Out? From tears, or in the essentially secular remonstrance of 'Town Crier,' as it was used in the North, Europe. . . . It could be 'Cry' as in the southern 'Shouts' and 'Hollers' and in them churches they was sure hollerin. (p. 5)

In his script for *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant*, Jones (1978) at the beginning gives us a “whole Theater in darkness” (p. 132); there is nothing for us to see on stage, but sounds only. Sounds of crying and screaming, of ships coming and leaving, of people fighting and eventually dying:

African drums like the worship of some Orisha. Obatala. Mbwanga rattles of the priests. BamBamBamBamBoom BoomBoom BamBam. Rocking of the slave ship, in darkness, without sound. But smells. Then sound. Now slowly, out of blackness, with smells and drums staccato the hideous screams. All the women together, scream. AAAAIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEE. Drums come up again, rocking rocking, black darkness of the slave ship. Smells. Drums go up high. Stop. Scream. AAAAAIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEE. Drums. Black darkness with smells. (p. 132)

There is no word being pronounced on stage. No sound has a lexical valor, but all of these sounds together have a very strong rhetoric value. With only sounds, Jones has given us the arrival of a ship, the feeling of Africa through its voice, and the feeling of a tragedy coming. Words like “Obatala,” the name of a divinity and “Mbwanga” are here used as adjectives, and not only as onomatopoeic sounds. Jones makes sense through sounds without using a

Pete: Hey! laws a massey! why, clar out! drop dat banana! I'll mrrrder this yer crowd. . . .

George: What's the matter, Pete.

Pete: It's dem black trash, Mas'r George; dis ere ProPerty wants claring; dem's getting too numerous round: when I gets time I'll kill some on'em, sure!

George: They don't seem to be scared by the threat. (p. 153)

And the difference of language between George and Pete will be even clearer when Pete will fail to understand George's metaphor, "I will sell myself, but the slaves shall be protected" (p. 173), and interpret it as an actual selling of George, which would make of him "a slave! A slave!" (p. 176) as Zoe says: "'No,' say Mas'r George, 'I'd rather sell myself fuss; but dey shan't suffer, nohow, – I see 'em dam fuss'" (p. 177). Language, though, seems to be the force that draws George and Zoe together:

George: If I dared to speak!

Zoe: That's just what you must do, and do it at once, or it will be too late. . . .

George: . . . Zoe, you have suspected the feeling that now commands an utterance – you have seen that I love you. . . .

Zoe: . . . Yes, I love you – I did not know it until your words showed me what has been in my heart; (p. 166-167)

The narrative by Frederick Douglass also informs us on the positive role that sounds can play toward the construction of a new nation, in two different ways. On one side, they have helped his comprehension of slavery and therefore opened his path towards emancipation. On the other side, the songs sang by the slaves could even be the best way to impress other people who have not experienced it, with a power that the written word could not have:

I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. . . . To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me . . . If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation . . . and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, – and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because 'there is no flesh in obdurate heart'." (1995, pp. 8-9)

The sound becomes also an instrument of resistance, as we can read in LeRoi Jones' *Slave Ship* (1978). In this play, it is in fact to the sound of music that the actual revolt will start. In the form of a song, eloquently named "When We Gonna Rise," and in sounds of fighting, sounds of laughters, and of a slave ship, the same one the audience heard at the very beginning of the play. And once again, we only hear sounds when the light goes down, as soon as the new scene begins:

Lights down. Ommmm sound, mixed with sounds of slave ship, saxophone and drums. Sounds of people, thrown against each other, now as if trying all, to rise, pick up. Sounds of people picking up. Like dead people rising. And against that the same sounds of slave ship. White laughter over all of it. White laughter. Song

begins to build with the saxophone and drums. First chanted. (p. 143)

Also Major (1994), or rather his poem's persona Mfu, calls for a "rising" to the rhythm of music, remembering Equiano once more and calling Douglass as the first of his list:

Mfu remembers Equiano.

Equiano (1789) said: "We are almost a
nation of dancers, musicians and poets."

So, if this is so, why not celebrate?

Mfu calls on all oh his people of the Diaspora:

. . . Come on, ya'll-

Come on Frederick Come on Sojourner

Come on Martin Come on Adam Come

. . . Mfu says, Come on, ya'll.

You can get out of the cotton field and and you can rise

above the coconut tree. (p. 25)

4. The Sound Voice of Slave Narratives for Performance

After all these pages on the role of sound, it would be unfair to dismiss the role of writing in the emancipation of former slaves. What is interesting for this study is that novels and prose narratives on slavery insist much more than slave narratives for performance on the role the written word as an instrument of resistance.

A passage from Octavia Butler's keystone of African-American writing about slavery, *Kindred*, is quite revealing to this purpose. Dana, the main character, is a well-educated black woman from the last century, who travels through time and space to save the life of her white ancestor Rufus, owner of a plantation in 19th century's Maryland. She is seen as a danger both by white people and by black people, as she is not what one would expect from a black woman of the 19th century. In one passage, in particular, Alice (her black ancestor) insults her calling her a "reading-nigger. *White-nigger!*" (1979, p. 160), where both parts of the insult serve as the same paradox; there is no such a thing as a black person who can read, just like there is no such a thing as a black person whose skin color is white. The reason Dana is considered dangerous, by both black and white people in the plantation, is that she has a knowledge of what should be the white man's domain only, the written language. And even more, because she is trying to teach other black enslaved people to read and to write.

It is therefore no chance that Frederick Douglass decides to title his narrative, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, just like Olaudah Equiano had titled his own *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. To master the written language is the instrument that brought many slaves to freedom, and it also brought Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass the freedom to narrate their own identity, without it being mediated by

white abolitionists, who usually wrote slave narratives that had been narrated to them. Douglass (1995) has instead “very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else” (p. X). And evidence of that could be found in the fact that we know that this narrative was “written in part to counter the incredulity of audiences dubious that a speaker of Douglass' eloquence could have emerged virtually unaided from such a lowly background” (p. III).

Nonetheless, the voice of the African slaves in America has been heard and listened to, and it is that voice that has opened the path to emancipation and freedom; it is in fact fundamental to acknowledge that even the best writer of the slavery experience, Frederick Douglass was first heard than read, and even after the publication of his work, he was often considered as a “voice,” before than as a writer. Margaret Fuller (1845) introduces him in her review of the Narrative, by writing that “he is said to be an excellent speaker – can speak from a thorough personal experience . . . In the book before us he has put into the story of his life the thoughts, the feelings and the adventures that have been so affecting through the living voice; nor are they less so from the printed page” (p. 778).

There is a potential for sound confrontation in every slave narrative, starting from Equiano's and Frederick Douglass' works and continuing with most of the prose narratives written by former slaves, which performance was able to bring forward and turn into a rhetoric instrument rather than a simple accompaniment. If an author like Boucicault has highlighted this confrontation through language, the switching and the “mash-up” (1861, p. 159) of tongues, Lokumbe has started from music rather than from the written word, and Jones has gone even further; Elizabeth Pittman (2010), writing about *Slave Ship* writes about a “centrality of the voice” (p. 36), which would indeed be hard to deny. A centrality, which has brought to a dramaturgy completely based on sounds and voice, transforming sounds into stage directions and language.

The voices and the sounds of slavery have survived, silenced but represented, through the slave narratives in prose, and the authors of slave narratives for musical and dramatic performance have been able to recollect them and use them not only as a part of their works, as an addition to the written word, but rather as the basis of their new aesthetics for the slave narrative genre.

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