Guide to Responding

Study Guide for Shane White and Graham White’s *The Sounds of Slavery*: “Chapter 1: ‘All We Knowed Was Go and Come by de Bells and Horns’”

Main Point Summary/Background: In the *Sounds of Slavery*, Shane White and Graham White (no relation) explain the importance of sound to a mostly oral (and aural) culture. Banned from reading and writing and possessing little or no power over their own daily actions, the American slave’s world was one of sounds. The facts of Atlantic slavery in what became the United States created conditions where many cultures from Africa came into contact with predominantly English customs (or French in New Orleans and Spanish in the Caribbean). Ripped from their homeland and permitted to carry nothing save their own memories, African slaves replicated cultural artifacts in America. Musical instruments that could easily be made from local resources (like drums and the banjo) became staples on southern plantations. Rituals such as funerary practice and harvest festivals also demanded specialized costuming and songs. Slaves and slave owners occupied vastly different worlds in close proximity. Slave cultures borrowed from European rites, including Christianity in place of native Islam or animism. Some Europeans were shocked by the sharp difference of slave rituals, but others came to appreciate them as sources of new art forms. These contacts are the historical source of uniquely American music, from blues and jazz to country, rock, and hip-hop.

The slave trade was outlawed in the U.S. in 1808, but there was still illegal importation of slaves from Africa through the Caribbean until the end of slavery in 1865. Not many slaves, whose memories were taken down by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, were “Africa-born,” but some were (as recounted by the witnesses).

Related Readings: This reading is related to the other readings in subunit 4.3.3, especially WBUR’s OnPoint (NPR): Tom Ashbrook’s Interview with Jessica Harris, “African-American Food’s History and Soul.” Culture as well as biology began to be swapped across the Atlantic in the Columbian Exchange. Food and music are two major products of that exchange.

Instructions: Below are copied sections of the reading that answer the study guide questions. Highlighting or taking notes while you read paired with later outlining and paraphrasing is an excellent method to insure comprehension and retention of difficult material.
1. 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. 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 surroundings 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 1)

2. 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 the 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 1–2)

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. (White and White, 2005, p. 3)

3. 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 6–7)

4. Machinery: 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 2)

Wild animals: 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 2–3)

Dogs: 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.” “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.” 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.” 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 untrammeled power. (White and White, 2005, p. 4)

Bells: 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 6)
Former Alabama slave Amy Domino learned to identify bells of a different kind. "I 'member w'en l'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." 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 6)

Horns: 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 6)

4/5. 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; …But the impact of African Americans on the sounds of 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 7–8)

6. The festival of Pinkster [Note: Pinkster is a shortening of the Dutch word Pinksteren, meaning Pentecost, a Christian celebration held 7 weeks after Easter] 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 8)

Much the same was true of the profusion of sounds created by slaves during Jonkonnu [Note: Jonjunnu is also known in the Americas, especially the Caribbean, as “John Canoe” or “John Cooner,” Jonkonnu had a uniquely African origin] a festival seemingly restricted on the main-land to antebellum North Carolina. (White and White, 2005, p. 9)

7. 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, shucke
d 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.” 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 10)

One white man, recalling the festival on a North Carolina plantation in the 1850s, wrote about the scene, as “three hundred voices would swell out in the chorus” answering the call of the leader, “simply beggars description.” (White and White, 2005, p. 10)

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. (White and White, 2005, p. 11)
8. 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 11)

9/10. 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.” 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 12)

10. 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 13)

… but the reactions of all three serve to underline the cultural differences between black and white. (White and White, 2005, p. 13)
11. 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.” 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 13–14)

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. (White and White, 2005, p. 15–16)

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…. 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. 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 16–17)

12. 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.” (White and White, 2005, p. 17)

13. 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 funerals,” one ex-slave casually remarked, but we would suggest that the word “lissen” here can bear some weight. 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 18)

14. 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.” 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. (White and White, 2005, p. 18–19)