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The hush harbour as sanctuary

African American survival silence during British/American slavery

Maya Cunningham

Introduction: African American slavery as occupation

African America was formed because of the British colonial project in North America. English colonists seized lands from Native Americans, and enslaved West and central Africans as colonial subjects, to form plantations that rendered 'cash crops'. This colonial project was only possible because of the transatlantic slave trade, the largest human-trafficking industry in world history. Europeans captured, enslaved and transported over ten million Africans to the Americas and Europe.¹ Between roughly 1500 and 1888, Blackburn (2013: 16) states that 'the plantation and mining slaves of the Americas toiled extraordinarily long hours to meet European consumers' craving for exotic luxuries'. These 'luxuries', which were previously only available to Europe through the silk routes, included sugar, cotton, coffee, spices, gold, silver and other items. Gomez (2005: 61) explains that in Europe, before the slave trade and colonial period, sugar had been a rare commodity, available only to the elite and often locked in 'spice cabinets'. He connects the early development of the transatlantic slave trade to the Spanish and Portuguese plantation cultivation of sugar in the late 1400s on Mediterranean islands and on Madeira and the Canary Islands, located off the coast of West Africa. 'The use of Black slaves to cultivate sugarcane therefore did not begin in the Americas, but in the Mediterranean and on West African coastal islands' (Gomez 2005: 62). Columbus's 1492 voyage to the Americas 'set in motion a process that . . . transferred a system of slavery from the Old World to the New' (Gomez 2005). Portugal and Spain began to transport enslaved Africans

to the Americas to toil in mining and agricultural industries. Other nations, including Great Britain, the Netherlands, France and Denmark, quickly began to seize Indigenous lands in the Americas and established colonies to produce cash crops using the labour of enslaved Africans. Portuguese-held Brazil received the most Africans during the slave trade, with huge numbers going to British, French, Dutch and Spanish colonies as well. In the early 1600s, the establishment of tobacco as a cash crop in the Virginia colony triggered early British settlers to bring in large numbers of European indentured servants and enslaved Africans as free labour. The plantation economy in North America mushroomed to eventually include other cash crops, like rice, indigo, sugar and cotton. Scholars estimate that 305,326 Africans were trafficked into the pre- and post-revolution United States.² The brutality that enslaved Africans were subjected to cannot be understated. Yet, they resisted bondage in many ways, especially through escape, either to the northern United States and Canada (after slavery was abolished in these areas) or to Spanish-controlled Florida.

When escape was not possible for enslaved African Americans, surviving slavery depended on knowing when to speak and when to be silent. It is well documented that songs performed by African Americans during slavery were used as methods of resistance. Velma Maia Thomas (2001) confirms that spirituals such as 'Steal Away' and 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' were often publicly performed on plantations as code songs used to secretly signal escape plans to freedom.³ Larson (2004) records that Harriet Tubman publicly sang 'Bound for the Promised Land' to communicate to her family an encoded message of her plans to escape:

I'm sorry I'm going to leave you,
Farewell, oh farewell;
But I'll meet you in the morning
Farewell, oh farewell;
I'll meet you in the morning.

The 'Promised Land' lyric meant going either to heaven or to freedom in the North. Tubman also used spirituals with coded messages to help others escape during her return journeys South. She would sing an appropriate spiritual to warn her party of danger or to guide them to the next safe place (Larson 2004). These spirituals not only communicated escape messages but also asserted slaves' humanity, contesting their chattel status and the declaration in the US Constitution that they were only 'three-fifths of a human being' (Constitution of the United States, art. I, §2, cl. 3).

While scholarship on code songs is plentiful, less discussed are the contexts of secrecy and silence in which they were often performed. African Americans created spaces of refuge called hush arbours,⁴ which were secret night meetings that often involved singing and religious worship. The study of early African American hush harbour practices is imperative to understanding the sonic history of African America under occupation via settler colonialism.

Tuck and Yang (2012) provide a useful framework for understanding the way in which settler-colonialism operates in the United States. Their analysis serves as a prismatic lens through which to better understand how African Americans used survival silence, via the hush harbour, to resist it:

Settler Colonialism operates through internal/external colonial modes simultaneously because there is no spatial separation between metropole and colony. . . . The horizons of the settler colonial nation-state are total and require a mode of total appropriation of Indigenous life and land, rather than the selective expropriation of profit-producing fragments. . . . Settler colonialism is different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain. . . . Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth. . . . Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and *source of capital*. (2002: 5, emphasis added)

The land alone that formed the early United States had little value to the settler-colonial enterprise other than to provide homesteads and subsistence farming. However, British colonists had come to North America looking for profitability. The land could only be used as capital when paired with the labour that was necessary to produce cash crops of value in European markets. For example, the Virginia colony, settled in 1607, was a failed enterprise until the English settlers there began to raise tobacco as a cash crop that could be sold in England. They began to use tobacco as a form of currency and in other kinds of financial exchanges (Morgan 1975: 90–1; Berlin 2003: 13). With this in mind, we can understand the United States as an occupied settler colony that was executed through the interdependent colonization of both Indigenous land/people and the Black bodies of enslaved Africans who could make the land produce wealth through a cash crop economy. Therefore, freedom for Africans literally meant self-determination of their bodies, which had to be liberated and relocated away from slave plantations. Resisting occupation meant defying ‘slave owners’ attempts to control Black movement – and indeed, most aspects of black bodily

experience’ – this ‘created a terrain on which bondspeople would contest slaveholding power’ (Camp 2002: 534).

The context of this form of occupation – the colonization of African bodies, which were legally owned by slave masters as chattel – led Africans and their African American descendants to create a culture that had both an internal and external *modus operandi*. It was a culture that was essentially closed to dominant others and led to distinctive, bifurcated auditory environments and music culture that operated symbiotically. Secret hush arbour meetings, and the sonic practices that were central to those meetings, reveal one of the major ways that Africans resisted the colonial occupation of their bodies. When temporarily relocating to secret ‘freedom spaces’, African Americans spoke and made music in these meetings using their bodies, their voices and with body percussion, such as handclaps. These sounds can be seen (or heard) as ‘silence’, not only because they were hushed to avoid discovery but also because they were concealed from, and unheard by, colonial powers. Even though they were legal chattel, enslaved Black people asserted their personhood by choosing what their bodies would and would not sound in front of, and away from, slaveholders/landholders, who were in this instance an occupying force.

Building on historical research in African American studies on hush arbours (e.g. Nunley 2011; Harding 2007), I argue that strategies of silencing and sounding employed by African Americans under colonial occupation were equally important as methods of resistance. In this chapter, I excavate the WPA Slave Narratives (held at the Library of Congress) and African American autobiography as primary sources of recorded oral history to historically establish hush arbour practices. I will also examine the hush arbour imagery that is featured in Toni Morrison’s highly acclaimed novel *Beloved* and in the film adaptation of this novel. I also draw on the anthropological work of Zora Neale Hurston, as well as Maya Angelou’s autobiographies, which document Black American southern life during the Jim Crow segregation period, to find examples of hush arbour iterations after slavery that manifested as survival silence in African American culture.

Hush arbour as sanctuary

Fo’ de war when we’d have a meetin’ at night, wuz mos’ always ‘way in de woods or de bushes some whar so de white folks couldn’t hear, an when dey’d sins a spiritual an’ de spirit ‘gin to shout some de elders would go ‘mongst de

folks an' put dey han' over dey mouf' an some times put a clof in dey mouf an' say: 'Spirit don talk so loud or de patterol break us up.'

(Becky Elzy, age 87, born 1848, Avery Island, Louisiana,
in McIlhenny 1933: 31)

Mrs Becky Elzy documents with her oral testimony the hush harbour meetings that she participated in on the Louisiana sugarcane plantation where she lived. What stands out is the symbiotic relationship between sounds and strategies of quieting that she describes. Enslaved Blacks like Mrs Elzy gathered during these secret prayer and song meetings to make sound that was not intended for slave owners' ears. Yet, their sounds still had to be hushed with a hand or a cloth to avoid discovery and to keep the meetings secret. I start with this example to demonstrate how in African American life during slavery, sound and silence seem different but were closely related. They were two sides of the same coin. As R. Murray Schafer argues in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of Our World*, there is really no such thing as silence, only the temporary absence of certain sounds (1977: 256). In the African American vernacular, when an elder says to someone 'hush' or 'hush your mouth', especially to a youngster, the command indicates either a lack of propriety or even the danger of the spoken words. In this sense, African American survival silence really means sounds that are hushed, secret and withheld until the proper time.

Hush harbours were the genesis of survival silence in African American culture. In African American studies, and theories of power, survival sounds and silence are sometimes called coded language, double entendre or the 'hidden transcript' – a term coined by James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). Scott defines the 'hidden transcript' as the non-hegemonic, subversive discourse generated by subordinate groups and concealed from certain dominant others (Scott 1990, cited in Nunley 2011: 11). Scott juxtaposes the hidden transcript with the 'public transcript' – information that is deemed safe to reveal to the dominant group.

During slavery, African Americans were a people under occupation by British colonists who became 'Americans' after the United States was declared an independent country in 1776. The British first imported twenty Africans into the Jamestown Colony in Virginia in 1619 (see Figure 2.1). Due to their participation in the triangular slave trade, the population of Africans, in what eventually became the thirteen colonies, rapidly increased (Gomez 1998: 19–20). It is important to note that these Africans were not citizens of the colonies or of the United States. They were considered to be property and non-citizens.

Figure 2.1 ‘Landing negroes at Jamestown from a Dutch man-of-war, 1619’, c. 1901. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-53345.

According to the 1857 Dred Scott Decision, they had ‘no rights which the white man was bound to respect’.⁵

The colonial slave owners had intimate familial and financial ties to Britain. Indeed, George Washington’s English family crest forms the basis of the current design of Washington, DC’s flag. In another example, anthropologist Joseph Opala has revealed the relationship between Richard Oswald, principal partner of the London firm Grant, Sargent and Oswald, and Henry Laurens, an American slave trader, as a key example of the British-American colonial occupation that was tied to slavery (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Oswald’s firm took over Bunce Island, located off the coast of what is today Sierra Leone, and turned it into a ‘slave factory’ (see Figure 2.4). Through their business dealings, they forcibly supplied South Carolina’s plantation owners with huge numbers of enslaved African men and women to undertake the laborious job of rice

Figure 2.2 ‘Henry Laurens Esq’r, president of the American Congress 1778’, c. 1782. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-01421.

planting. The forced migration that came of this business has resulted in the Gullah culture of the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands (Opala 1987). The fortune that Henry Laurens made by slave trading financed his political career, making him a key player in the American Revolution. His ill-gotten wealth led to him becoming president of the Continental Congress in 1777.

George Washington, Henry Laurens, Thomas Jefferson and all other plantation owners were the occupying force, the ‘dominant others’, that kept Blacks under constant surveillance. White slave masters were assisted by overseers and men who were called ‘patrollers’. Patrollers were usually poorer white men who appointed themselves as guardians of southern rural roads. They often stopped and questioned Blacks about their travelling passes, searched for runaways, kidnapped and sold Blacks, lynched people and imposed general harassment.

Figure 2.3 ‘Benjamin Franklin and Richard Oswald discussing the Treaty of Peace, Paris’, c. 1898. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-55181 (image depicts events of 1786).

The dichotomy of guarded and open speech among African Americans was literally the sound of their occupation: coded speech by day and secret meetings in hushed tones by night. Keeping hush arbour meetings hidden from this occupying force of patrollers, overseers and slave owners was of the utmost importance, because, after the Stono Rebellion in 1739, colonies/states instituted ‘slave codes’, which criminalized unsupervised gatherings of Blacks in order to prevent conspiracies of escape or rebellion. In many instances, religious gatherings of the enslaved were also against the law or not allowed by slave masters. One WPA interviewee shared that when a hush arbour meeting he attended was discovered by a patroller, the man, while beating the group with his whip, declared ‘we brought you here to serve us, not God’ (Levine 2007: 42).

The religious nature of hush arbour meetings is an especially significant point when considering the sound of colonial occupation, because historical evidence

Figure 2.4 ‘To be sold, on board the ship *Bance Island*, . . . negroes, just arrived from the Windward & Rice Coast’, c. 1940–60. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-10293 (photograph of newspaper advertisement from the 1780s).

shows that British-American slave owners exerted particular surveillance when slave preachers spoke to Black congregants on their plantations. At this point, white plantation society had developed its own settler-colonial version of Christianity. Their religious beliefs rationalized occupation and their rule over Indigenous land, and included justification for slavery. They told enslaved Blacks that their only way for ‘salvation’ was to ‘obey your masters’ and to be so-called good slaves (Escott 1979: 113). Escott asserts that formerly enslaved Blacks ‘rejected white religion’ as propaganda, even while slave masters either forced Blacks to attend their churches, where such erroneous doctrines were preached, or made Black slave preachers parrot these messages. When this happened, slaves of course dismissed what slave preachers repeated under white surveillance as ‘hogwash’, but they did not dismiss the preachers. Knowing the constraints that affected them, ‘slaves understood the preachers and appreciated services that they were able to perform in secret’ (Escott 1979: 68).

It is the role of slave preachers that serves as a pivot point into the secret lives of enslaved Blacks. Slave preachers often led hush arbour gatherings (see Figure 2.5). The meetings were almost always for the purpose of practising Christianity away from the scrutiny of white masters or to plan escape to freedom. Oftentimes, the two were intertwined. According to *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South*, 'African American perceptions and practice of Christianity had always emphasized freedom, community and the judgment day to come' (Cornelius 1999: 202). As historian Erskine Clarke contends (2015), they saw in biblical Christianity 'Jesus the Liberator'.

My research in African American autobiographies on hush arbour oral history reveals two key testimonies. Maya Angelou wrote in *Singing, Swinging and Getting Merry Like Christmas* (1976) about the oral history passed down by her paternal great-grandmother: 'My great-grandmother (who had been a slave), told me of praying silently under old wash pots, and of secret meetings deep in the woods to praise God. . . . Her owner wouldn't allow his Negroes to worship God (it might give them ideas) and they did so on pain of being lashed' (1976: 28). William Ford III, a Texas-based African American minister, has a hush arbour 'prayer pot' or 'prayer kettle' as a family heirloom (see Figure 2.6). In his writings, Ford (2007, 2015) shares the hush arbour legacy in his family:

Figure 2.5 'A negro camp meeting in the South', c. 1872. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-63867.

Figure 2.6 Ford family prayer kettle, c. 2017. Copyrighted to William Ford III and used with permission.

It begins with a 200-year-old black kettle pot, used by my Christian slave forbearers in Lake Providence, Louisiana. While used for cooking and washing clothes during the day, this kettle was secretly used for prayer. Forbidden to pray by their slave master, my ancestors were beaten unmercifully if found doing so. However, in spite of their master's cruelty, and because of their love for Jesus, they prayed anyway. At night, sneaking into a barn, they carried this cast iron cooking pot into their secret prayer meeting. As others looked out, those inside prayed. Turning this pot upside-down on the barn floor, they propped it up with rocks – suspending the pot a few inches above the ground. Then, while lying prostrate or kneeling on the ground, they prayed in whispers underneath the kettle to muffle their voices. The story passed down with the kettle is that they were risking their lives to pray for freedom for ensuing generations. One day, freedom did come. (Ford 2015)

As Angelou and Ford described, hush arbours often took place deep in woods that abutted southern plantations or in cabins, and were always at night (Cornelius 1999: 9). In these sanctuaries, enslaved Blacks could speak, sing, pray and preach freely, without using coded language, but they had to do so softly. Loud sounds had to be mediated into silence to avoid discovery by white patrollers. Participation in hush arbours was thus a form of resistance. Resistance in this context meant staying alive, being non-compliant with slave codes that

forbade Black gatherings and holding onto the desire and determination to be free. Escott argued that ‘the slaves’ religion helped them to see themselves in a context removed from the slave owners’ crippling perspective, thus sustaining mental resistance when physical opposition was not always possible’ (1979: 115).

I have examined the WPA Federal Writer’s Project Slave Narrative Collection, which are transcriptions of interviews conducted from 1936 to 1938 in twenty-six states, with over 2,000 members of the last living generation of Blacks who were formerly enslaved. My excavation yielded numerous accounts that confirmed that hush arbours were a common part of daily life. Raboteau (1978) and Ford (2018) also confirm that hush arbour meetings among enslaved African Americans were frequent and that they often used kettles to conceal their prayer meetings. ‘The most common device for preserving secrecy was an iron pot usually placed in the middle of the cabin floor or at the doorstep, then slightly propped up to hold the sound of the praying and singing from escaping’ (Raboteau, 1978, as cited in Ford 2018: 97). In an article in *The Atlantic*, historian William R. Black problematizes the WPA Narratives that were ‘often filtered through the racism of white interviewers and their supervisors’. However, I use the narratives simply to confirm that Blacks engaged in these night meetings all over the South and to understand what usually happened during such gatherings.

One interviewee observed during slavery times that someone singing ‘Steal Away to Jesus’ signified that there would be a religious meeting that night ‘in the woods, way down in the swamps’ (Escott 1979: 111) (see Figure 2.7). The meetings usually took place in a four-part format: ‘After the first hymn or spiritual came prayer, a major focus of the hush arbour service . . . (prayer) was an essential community action . . . prayer had overtones of liberation’ (Cornelius 1999:11). Many narratives revealed that ‘any member of the congregation could lead prayers, but the lesson and sermon were conducted by a preacher, chosen by the community for ability to interpret the sacred word’ (1999: 11). ‘After the sermon came the ring shout’ – ring-shout lyrics performed in hush arbours, like ‘Lay Down Body’, often dramatized death and ascension to heaven, judgement for slave masters and escape to freedom. Silvia King was interviewed when she was 100 years old for the WPA Slave Narratives. During her interview, she described the ring shout: ‘Dey gits in de ring dance . . . (it was) jes’ a kind of shuffle, den it git faster and faster and dey gits warmed up and moans and shouts and claps and dances . . . sometimes dey sings and shout all night’ (*Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938. Volume 16. Texas Narratives: Part 1 and Part 2* 1972: Part 2, 294).

Figure 2.7 ‘The sunny South – A negro revival meeting – a seeker “getting religion”’, c. 1873. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-117140.

The WPA Slave Narratives bring to life the real people who participated in these meetings and who witnessed the silencing or ‘hushing’ that was necessary to continue with them. Amanda McCray testified that on her Florida plantation there were praying grounds where ‘the grass never had a chance ter grow fer the troubled knees that kept it crushed down’ (*Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938. Volume 3 Florida Narratives* 1972: 212). Andrew Moss remembered that on the plantation where he grew up all of the slaves had their private prayer grounds: ‘My Mammy’s was a ole twisterd thick-rooted muscadine bush. She’d go in dar and pray for deliverance of de slaves’ (*Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938. Volume 15 Tennessee Narratives* 1972: 49). Patsy Larkin recalled that on her plantation the slaves would steal away into the cane thickets and pray in a prostrate position with their faces close to the ground so that no sound would escape (Levine 2007: 42). On a Louisiana plantation, enslaved Blacks would gather in the woods at night, form a circle on their knees and pray over a vessel of water to drown out the sound (2007: 42). Richard Carruthers remembered the following:

Us (negros) used to have a prayin’ ground down in the hollow and sometime we come out of the field, between 11 and 12 at night, scorchin’ and burnin up with

nothin to eat, and we wants to ask the good Lawd to have mercy. We puts grease in a snuff pan or bottle and make a lamp. We takes a pine torch, too, and goes down in the hollow to pray. Some gits so joyous they starts to holler loud and we has to stop up they mouth. I see (negros) git so full of the lawd and so happy they draps unconscious. (*Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938. Volume 16 Texas Narratives: Part 1 and Part 2* 1972: Part 1, 199)

Kalvin Woods, a slave preacher, described how women would take old quilts and rags and soak them before hanging them up in the shape of a small room, 'and the slaves who were interested about it would huddle up behind these quilts to do their praying, preaching and singing. These wet rags were used to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air' (Cade 1935: 87).

Building on these eye-witness accounts found in the WPA Slave Narrative Collection, Toni Morrison vividly illustrates the function of resistance in these gatherings, as well as the sounding/silencing dichotomy, in her novel *Beloved* (1987), as well as in *Beloved*, the film (1998). The book is an epic and dark tale of the main characters' lives during and after slavery: Sethe, Paul D and Baby Suggs. The story is set in a free Black community just outside of Cincinnati, Ohio, between 1861 and 1865. It is told in flashback to heighten the mystery of a baby ghost, Sethe's dead daughter, who haunts her home. Morrison brings to life the gruesome realities that African Americans had to endure during slavery. In this case, these realities took place in the lives of the main characters on a slave plantation in Kentucky that is ironically named 'Sweet Home'.

It is sometimes hard for us to envision what it meant to be considered a chattel. Morrison was inspired to write *Beloved* by a woman named Margaret Garner who, in 1856, escaped from slavery with her family, but after being tracked down by the slave catchers, killed her own child rather than allow her to be captured. With *Beloved*, Morrison seeks to answer one simple question. What were the conditions of slavery that drove this recently escaped Black mother to kill one child, and attempt to kill three others, in order to avoid recapture? Through the stories of each of her characters, Morrison forces us to know the egregious extent of the warped mind of the slaver and the physical, psychological and emotional damage done to the enslaved. Yet, amid all of this very real brutality, Morrison uses the African American hush arbour tradition to show us hope and freedom through the character of Baby Suggs, who is Sethe's mother-in-law and a spiritual leader in the community. Baby Suggs, who died eight years before the story begins, only appears when Sethe visits her through memory. Sethe's musings on the elder woman precipitate the first hush arbour scene in the film:

because slave life had 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,' she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name . . . she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. . . . Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing – a wide-open place cut deep in the woods. . . . In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees. (Morrison 1987: 43)

In the film, Sethe takes her two daughters to the 'Clearing' where Baby Suggs led outdoor church services in the woods – hush harbour meetings. The book and film bring to life what the tenor of these meetings might have been like. The film literally enacts the African American sound under occupation. Portrayed by the powerful actress Beah Smith, Baby Suggs fulfils the preacher role of the hush harbour tradition. With 'her great heart' she encourages the free Black community to celebrate themselves.

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, 'Let the children come!' and they ran from the trees toward her. 'Let your mothers hear you laugh,' she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then 'Let the grown men come,' she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. 'Let your wives and your children see you dance,' she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet. Finally she called the women to her. 'Cry,' she told them. 'For the living and the dead. Just cry.' And without covering their eyes the women let loose. It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. (Morrison 1987: 43)

This scene in the book and film brings a vision of antebellum hush harbour meetings into sharp focus. In this case the meeting takes place in a homogenously free Black community and is therefore held during the day. However, the kind of reclamation of their humanity that Baby Suggs facilitates with her preaching was only safe to happen outside of the surveillance of whites, who in the book and film are the main employers of the Black community. The book and film also rightly depict this meeting as an expressive and emotionally cathartic experience

with dancing (in ring-shout formation) and weeping, just as they are described in the WPA Slave Narratives.

The final scene of the film depicts the second half of the hush arbour scene in the book:

‘Here’, she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them . . . hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize’. Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh. (Morrison 1987: 44)

Two things stand out in this passage. Even though this is a private meeting in a closed Black community, the hidden transcript is also duplicitously a public transcript because her words are sounded in the open during the day. Baby Suggs’s choice of words ‘hushes’, in a sense, her declaration of the atrocities perpetrated by whites upon her Black congregation – atrocities they must still endure as non-citizens with no legal protection. She never names them or openly accuses them of the lynching and labour exploitation that she alludes to in her preaching. She simply uses the ambiguous word ‘they’, who the gathering’s cultural insiders know refers to exploitative whites. The scene in the film once again envisions the emotional and transformative function of African American hush arbours, intensified for the viewers by the vocals of the *African Children’s Choir* who sing Morrison’s description of the ‘long notes held in four-part harmony’. Beah Richards employs the intense, heartfelt preaching style that is traditional with many African American pastors. The documentary *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks* (2003) reveals that she learned this delivery from her father who was a pastor. The passionate ‘amens’ and ‘halleluiahs’ exclaimed by Richards, as Baby Suggs, and the African American actors as congregants reveal the emotional fervour of the meetings described in the WPA Narratives that required muffling with pots, kettles, clothes, hands and quilts.

The hush arbour church services embody the interdependent relationship between African American survival silence and sound when they were under occupation during slavery. The public and hidden transcripts became mirror reflections, or an interchangeable double jeopardy, that occurred at the same time. During the day, open and hidden communication moved back and forth between seemingly innocuous acquiescence to encoded speech and song at normal

volumes. At night, true feelings, plain speech and messages of liberation were shared openly but had to be quieted. This 'twoness', as termed by W. E. B. Du Bois (1997: 2), or continual code switching, reflected the constant state of precarity in which enslaved Blacks had to live. In reaction, they created sanctuaries. Through hush arbours, they gained temporary physical freedom from plantations by making geographically distant closed cultural spaces. The hush harbour allowed them to claim freedom in their lives by making personal choices with their time spent outside of forced work through participating in all-night meetings, if they wanted to. The hush harbour also allowed them temporary emotional and psychological freedom by giving full voice to their feelings and enabling the free practice of their religion. Their Christianity allowed them to see themselves as children of God and not the chattel property of slave masters.

African American survival silence under racial apartheid (Jim Crow)

Hush harbour survival silence set a precedent for the continued operation of African American hidden and public transcripts during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, from 1865 to the early 1960s. Jim Crow draws a dark parallel to the South African apartheid system. Even though the thirteenth and fourteenth constitutional amendments abolished slavery and granted citizenship to all persons born in the United States, many Blacks, especially in the South, still lived with few civil rights and no legal protection. In many cases, their livelihoods still depended upon what was spoken, or more importantly, what remained hushed, when under white surveillance. During this time in history, 'white surveillance' meant the presence among Blacks of anyone who supported and upheld the segregation system, and the idea of white supremacy and Black inferiority. This especially meant those who held power over Black lives, including white employers, landowners, public officials, law enforcement officers and even ordinary citizens who often deputized themselves to police Black behaviour.

From the late 1800s to the mid-twentieth century, African American cultural survival sounds and survival silence are well documented in proverbs, folklore, poetry, African American autobiography and in the anthropological work of Zora Neale Hurston. In *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston's ethnographic book on Black folklore, she documents the so-called Uncle Remus folktales that abounded in early to mid-twentieth-century Black life. These were coded stories about the clever wit of Brer Rabbit (or Brother Rabbit) who always tricked larger and more

dominant animals as a symbol for Blacks who outsmarted dominant oppressors. In the same work, Hurston also describes the ‘hidden transcript’ that manifested in 1930s Black Eatonville, as a ‘feather bed of resistance’. Hurston describes a cultural form of ‘hedging’ done by Blacks in her hometown, Eatonville, Florida, in response to direct questions posed by whites: ‘the theory behind our tactics: “All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing, but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song”’ (Hurston 1935: 2). She goes on to say, ‘we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries’ (Hurston 1935: 3).

Maya Angelou also documents this survival silence, which can also be thought of as the unsaid. In her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1977), she quotes an African American proverb to describe a mechanism that was employed by many Blacks in Stamps, Arkansas, the racially oppressed, segregated town in which she grew up. This proverb is: ‘Ask me where I am coming from and I will tell you where I am going.’ In other words, avoid sharing information with the untrusted that can be used against you. Angelou also witnessed as a child in the early 1930s survival silence strategies used by Blacks in Stamps who still made a living in the post-slavery agricultural economic system as sharecroppers and day labourers in cotton fields. Trucks used her grandmother’s store as a pickup point to transport Black workers to the white-owned fields. Angelou witnessed in these community members two very different modes of conduct: one that was a self-deprecating acquiescent, smiling pretence in front of whites, and another that was relaxed, natural, sassy and even proud when only Blacks were around. The smiling show for whites confused and disturbed Angelou until she read a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, a turn-of-the-century African American poet, that she said helped her understand. During an interview with Bill Moyers (*Going Home with Maya Angelou* 2014), she quotes Dunbar’s 1896 poem:

We wear the mask that grins and lies
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

In Black life during the Jim Crow era, the hidden transcript of survival sounds and silence took form in coded stories, hedging, deflecting and masking. As Angelou so eloquently explains, masking was self-silencing. This cultural pattern stemmed from the subordinate–dominant relationship carved out between Blacks and whites during slavery times.

Conclusion: The hush harbour legacy

While slavery has been over for more than 150 years, the hidden transcript in African American culture remains. Nunley (2011) investigates the contemporary manifestations of the hush harbour as safe places for Black people to speak openly. He argues that many African Americans still tend to moderate what they say in front of whites. He contends that contemporary iterations of the hush harbour remain in African American culture in Black barbershops, front porches and other insider cultural spaces that facilitate uncensored Black speech, which he calls ‘African American hush harbour rhetoric’ (Nunley 2011: 1–2).

This study is important for considering ‘sonic histories of occupation’ because it examines auditory environments in circumstances, like African American slavery and racial apartheid, that are not often considered under common definitions of occupation. It speaks to the question of survival silence and sound under the conditions of British/American settler colonialism. With this in mind, this study opens the possibilities for similar work in sound studies concerning other Black populations, like those in South Africa, that have also been subjected to settler colonialism and/or occupation. If African Americans formed the hush harbour tradition, and an internal hidden transcript of survival silence in these circumstances, then it might be possible to use this as a basis of comparison with other communities or societies that may have formed similar auditory environments in resistance to occupation.

To conclude, however, I ask that we consider another legacy of the hush harbour. What I have found so far suggests that the impact of this practice continued into the twentieth century, and beyond, transforming silence into loud, amplified sound that openly contested the Jim Crow system and reverberated all over the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. After emancipation, hush harbour congregations became free Black churches. Many still met in outdoor ‘brush harbours’ on Sunday mornings, just after slavery ended (Cornelius 1999: 9). These hush harbour congregations, which scholars call ‘the invisible institution’, became the blueprint for the Black church, which became the highly visible foundation

Figure 2.8 Martin Luther King, Jr, at a freedom rally, Washington Temple Church, 1962. Photo by O. Fernandez. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-111157.

of the African American Civil Rights Movement. Pastors of Black churches were the leaders of the movement. The Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, descended from a lineage of preachers that began during the hush arbour era. His maternal great-grandfather, Willis Williams, was a slave-era preacher (National Archives and Records Administration n.d.) (see Figure 2.8). Considering how profoundly the Civil Rights Movement changed the United States as a nation, and infused generations who came after with an ethos of justice and equality, further historical research might suggest that we all have been affected by the prayers for liberty uttered by hopeful enslaved Blacks in the hush arbours of old.

Notes

- 1 See www.slavevoyages.org, an online platform where scholars of the transatlantic slave trade contribute the most current research findings. This database details the

timeline of the slave trade, the nation states involved, specific voyages and other statistical information.

- 2 According to www.slavevoyages.org, the United States received lower numbers of enslaved Africans, an estimated 305,326, compared to other New World countries such as Brazil, which received the most at an estimated 5,848,266. However, these numbers must be understood in the context of the systems of slavery and the agricultural enterprise in operation in these countries. Sugarcane plantations dominated Brazil, which involved gruesome working conditions and back-breaking work, and importation numbers were higher there because it was less expensive for plantation owners to brutally work enslaved Africans to death, and then replace them with others because the distance between the east coast of Brazil and west central Africa was relatively short. The average lifespan for enslaved Africans in Brazil was seven years. During the time of the slave trade, tobacco was a dominant cash crop in North America (the cotton boom came after the legal end of the US slave trade in 1808). The cost was much higher to import Africans into the United States, because, among other things, the distance was longer from West and west central Africa. However, the lower importation numbers in the United States did not mean that the population of Africans was necessarily less than that of other New World countries, because the African population in the United States was the only one in the New World to reproduce itself (Berlin 2003).
- 3 See *Underground Railroad: The William Still Story* (2018), [Film] USA: PBS.
- 4 Hush arbours are also often referred to as 'hush harbours'. The term 'arbour' references a roof formed by a close grove of trees. These spots were chosen because tree branches effectively muffled sound.
- 5 Taney (1856).

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