

RE-IMAGINING SLAVERY IN THE HIP-HOP IMAGINATION

In the opening scene for WGN's television series *Underground* (2016), a black enslaved man named Noah (played by Aldis Hodge) is seen running through the woods at night. Noah crashes through the landscape, jumping over bushes and running in erratic patterns. He is looking for something. The camera cuts away to a white man carrying a torch and egging on a pack of dogs. Noah finds an abandoned wagon with a bell but is cornered by the patroller's dogs. The dog attacks and bites Noah's leg as Noah fumbles on the ground to find something to defend himself. He hits the dog over the head and hides in the forest underbrush, ramming his nose into the nook of his elbow and shirt. The scene ends with Noah being hit upside the head by the patroller and cutting away to the title of the series. The opening scene to the series is dizzying and heart-pounding.

While visually stunning—the scene does not hold back on the multiple types of physical and psychological violence endured by runaway slaves trying to escape north—*Underground's* opening is most jarring because of its use of hip-hop as an accompaniment to understanding Noah's desperation. Simultaneous to Noah's first appearance on screen is the sound of crashing cymbals and percussion from Kanye West's song "Black Skinhead" (2013). The cymbals and percussion used to open the track are also used to open the show. The viewer hears the cymbals and percussion in lieu of the actual sound made from Noah's body hitting trees and forest underbrush. Perhaps most striking is the looping of West's hollering and staggered breathing

The loose and polarized rendition of the plantation as the crux of understanding slavery parallels its position as not only a commodified space but a fetishized memory of white supremacy.

from “Black Skinhead” that symbolizes Noah’s own breathing. West’s succinctly placed hollers parallel Noah’s growing anxiety and frustration about finding a literal and figurative way out of the woods. As Noah hides, the background accompaniment completely fades out to only the breathing on the track as the audience watches Noah’s eyes frantically scan the landscape for the patroller or his dogs. The accompaniment breathes for Noah when he can’t breathe for himself. In another part of the scene, viewers listen to a pounding percussion and synthesizer accompaniment as Noah forces his nose into his shirt to hide his breathing. The percussion and synthesizers represent Noah’s pounding heartbeat. Further, while Noah attempts to silence himself, the viewer is reminded of the direness of Noah’s situation via the hip-hop track.

Additionally, the scene highlights particular verses from West’s track that doubly imagine both West’s known emphasis on hyper-materiality and Noah’s own race to freedom as a deemed piece of property: “I’m doing 500/I’m outta control/But there’s nowhere to go/And there’s nowhere to show/If I knew what I knew in the past/ I would’ve been blacked out on your ass.” Immediately before being subdued by the patroller, Noah’s last ditch effort is ‘mocked’ by West: “Come on homie what happened?/You niggas ain’t breathing, you gasping/These niggas ain’t ready for action.” The intentional (dis)placement of West’s lyrics to narrate Noah’s failed attempt to escape slavery are significant in that they bridge two culturally recognizable representations of black life: hip-hop and slavery. Further, the slight and recognizable background noises of what a slave chase may sound like, i.e. baying dogs, breaking twigs, and the faint tinkle of the escape wagon’s bell, bleed into the loudness and abrasiveness of the hip-hop track. The sonic realism of the forest’s disruption by the slave patroller’s pursuit and Noah’s flight paired with West’s lyrics as a mocking narration of Noah’s attempt to escape signifies upon the anachronistic approach of how contemporary (black) viewers believe they may act in a similar situation.

The use of “Black Skinhead” and other hip-hop in the *Underground* series is unexpected and jarring to the ear because of the immediate recognition of a contemporary sound to sonically annotate an otherwise historically entrenched moment of black life. The first season of *Underground* is set in 1857 Macon, Georgia while “Black Skinhead” is far more recent. The large temporal chasm between the historical time periods of nineteenth century and twenty-first century black experiences is bridged by hip-hop. The inclusion of twentieth and twenty-first century

black music to follow Noah and his group's attempt to escape slavery moves beyond being a mere way to engage a younger generation of viewers. Rather, hip-hop serves as an entry point for witnessing the horrors and complexities of enslaved black persons trying to maneuver the white supremacist power structures historically documented in the American imagination while plotting their own sense of freedom and agency. In essence, the sonic elements of hip-hop—both rappers' voices as well as their instrumental accompaniments—are used to validate the traumatic lives of enslaved blacks.

The use of hip-hop to annotate southern blackness serves as my entry point into this discussion, for there is very little in place about how hip-hop buoys representations of southern black life. The crux of hip-hop and hip-hop studies is dominantly northeastern and urban. Yet popular re-imaginings of slavery like *Underground* and other revisionist renderings of emancipatory narratives like *Django Unchained* (2012) are set in the rural American South and use hip-hop to sonically and culturally centralize a traumatic black experience. My interest lies in moving past restricting hip-hop's sonic aesthetics as an anachronistic bridge—life-saver—for contemporary consumers of popular culture to engage slavery as a southern black experience. Evoking contemporary sounds of black life and agency like hip-hop ruptures the visual representations of slavery offered to a contemporary and multicultural audience. Hip-hop lifts the slave narrative in a way that simultaneously tugs at and pulls away from the trauma of the slave experience. For example, the visual keystones of a modern retelling of a slave narrative—the southern plantation, tattered clothes, and dialect (in some instances sloppily extended for immediate recognition of *southernness*) remain in place. The sonic backdrop and other aural accompaniments are not tethered to historical boundaries. Although subtler in its purpose—I do not want to mistake subtlety for volume—the sonic aesthetics of slave narratives are ripe for questioning how social-cultural renderings of slavery remain the anchor for navigating historical and cultural scripts of southern black agency and experience.

In popular culture's presentation of slavery to a mainstream audience, Hip-hop serves as a tool of what Fred Moten describes as “defamiliarizing the familiar” (Moten 3). The use of hip-hop in performing slave narratives not only destabilizes the cultural markers assigned to slavery and its residual effects but also “illuminate[s] the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit[s] the shocking spectacle” (3). Mainstream

historical renderings of slavery are indeed shocking, focusing on the rash and more pronounced physical violence associated with enslaved black bodies. Considering this current hyper-traumatic social-cultural landscape that black Americans attempt to navigate, ‘contemporized’ slave stories become an extension of the familiar reality of lagging black agency. Still, the subtler and often overlooked aesthetics of slavery’s lasting impact—i.e. the sonic—provide an alternative method for engaging slavery’s lasting effects on the social-cultural markers of black life in America. I am interested in teasing out how hip-hop’s audio-visual aesthetic grounds readings *and* consumption of slave narratives. For example, how do the sonic markers of hip-hop heard in Quentin Tarantino’s film *Django Unchained* amplify and destabilize the American south as a space of reckoning for fugitive slaves and their desires to imagine themselves free? I am also interested in Edward P. Jones’ novel *The Known World* (2003) and how Jones’ rendering of black slave masters pushes past an alternative and difficult composition of southern blacks as strictly victims. These present day sonic re-tellings of slavery occupy an anachronistic popular space where race and identity politics found in popular discourses collide with historic truths. This essay seeks to tease out how hip-hop aesthetics provide context for engaging slavery as a physical, cultural, and sonic space of (southern) black identities.

HEARING AND SIGNIFYING UPON THE UNIMAGINABLE: SOUNDING SLAVERY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Growing up in my hometown of Albany, Georgia, being surrounded by plantation life and culture was common. It wasn’t until I was older and in graduate school that I started paying attention to how heavily invested the South remained in plantations, especially near my grandparents’ home: the small, often rickety metal signs plastered against ranch-style metal fences that warned about trespassing or pointed to plantation service entrances; the quaint wooden cottages and massive oak trees dressed in moss that dotted the front entrance of the plantation hid rings of trailers or shotgun houses with stout front porches where my bus would drop kids off from my school. Then vice-president Dick Cheney hunted quails in nearby Thomasville on the Historic Coalson (née Melhana) plantation and it made the evening news.

Plantation tourism is big business in the South. It is propelled by what Tara McPherson calls the “nostalgia industry:” people visit plantations to experience the life enjoyed by planters and their families in the

antebellum South. Tours, weddings, and historical re-enactments keep many towns and small cities in the South in business. In Georgia, for example, there is a “Road to Tara” billboard campaign that attracts customers who are interested in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and its setting, Tara plantation. As Karen L. Cox writes in *Dreaming of Dixie*: “The South of the imagination was, and still is, very often created by the industries of popular media . . . It was portrayed as a place where those traditions still had meaning, and where Americans, if they ventured South, might get to experience the Dixies of their dreams” (8). It is important to note that Dixie as “the South” offers a selective and white rendering of the South. Dixie is grounded in the antebellum plantation, a physical and cultural space that is sold as a universally southern concept but is a racially splintered relic of southern identity. For example, the upkeep of plantation homes to sustain their visual splendor of white columns, large porches, and groves of pecan and fruit trees conveniently boxes out the less-than-splendid reality of how visual beauty of the plantation came to exist in the first place. Slaves are conveniently overlooked as the means by which planters and their families enjoyed the luxuries of antebellum life. Their narratives are removed from tours or watered down to avoid casting planters and their families in a less-than-positive light. Selective memory of plantations as ethical farms filled with black and happy workers that stabilizes plantation narratives and ultimately tourist’s qualms about slavery position the plantation as the root of collective memory for life in the South.¹

It is in this rendering of the plantation as a meta space that popular culture situates its understanding of the South. The comfort of what Zandria Robinson argues is an “imagined plantation past” (30) produces a complicity surrounding (southern) black agency that is valued and upheld in America’s mainstream popular imagination. There is no room for blacks to question their discomfort or dismissal of the plantation as a site of agency. Saidiya Hartman’s theorization of “roots tourism” highlights the messiness of situating slavery through voyeuristic depictions in post-Civil Rights popular culture. She writes, “[y]et, what does it bode for our relationship to the past when atrocity becomes a commodity and this history of defeat comes to be narrated as a story of progress and triumph? If restaging scenes of captivity and enslavement elide the distinction between sensationalism and witnessing, risk sobriety for spectacle, and occlude the violence they set out to represent; they also create a memory of what one has not witnessed. [REDACTED]