The archives of the Black Atlantic, in all their multimodal forms, offer a particular set of opportunities and challenges for digital scholarship. This is particularly true concerning the history of sound and performance during the period of slavery. These are deeply fragmentary archives, episodic and evanescent, and almost exclusively textual. The records that do exist come to us with all the familiar problems: they are generally written by European colonial elites whose ability to see and hear what enslaved performers were doing was not just constrained by ignorance but also channeled through a racialized vision that led to the repetitive use of tropes and disparaging representations. Yet that is not the whole story, for there were moments, and observers of such moments, that led to the creation of extremely precious artifacts of performance. The musical notation in Hans Sloane’s Jamaican travel narrative is one such artifact. What is particularly compelling about the transcription of performances by enslaved musicians in Sloane’s *Voyage to the Islands* (1707) is that it provides an avenue to listening in and re-creating the sound of Jamaican life in the 1680s. Our website *Musical Passage: A Voyage to 1688 Jamaica* (www.musicalpassage.org) brings the story of this musical notation into the present, with the goal of creating future opportunities for exploration and performance.

We envision digital scholarship as a performance of its own that can draw together textual, visual, and sonic ways of knowing to create experiences that more richly reflect the knowledge traditions of the Black Atlantic. Our project aims to address the silences in the historical document while amplifying the artistic expression of the enslaved musicians whose performances echo within the text. In practical terms, the website makes a rare musical document more accessible by making it intelligible to scholars who do not read music as well as available to publics beyond the academy and across the African diaspora, including living musicians in Jamaica to whom the cultural artifact rightly belongs. In a broader sense, we wanted to put
our thumb on the scale, to even out the weight of history so that the musicians who were unnamed in Sloane’s elegant folio volume might have the opportunity in some sense to step out from the page and have their story more justly preserved. In so doing, we join other digital humanists and archivists thinking about “digital repatriation” as a means to restore cultural artifacts to the communities that created them.\(^1\) This is particularly relevant in this case because the vast collections that Sloane began to build in Jamaica eventually became the material basis for the creation of the British Museum.\(^2\) Traditionally, repatriation efforts return physical objects from colonial institutions; digital repatriation brings this same ethic to immaterial artifacts like sound recordings and performance practices. Scholars working with Indigenous African and American archives have noted that digital repatriation presents both potential solutions and new problems. For instance, some cultural groups do not want their histories distributed widely online, whereas many communities around the world, especially in the Global South, have limited access to the devices and streaming services on which media-rich websites depend. Thus, digital humanities ideals of “open-access” must be rethought and reimagined in terms of a broader project of decolonization.\(^3\) Although we did not initially view *Musical Pas-sage* under the rubric of repatriation, the framing offered by scholars in museum and archive studies has helped us reflect on the reception and interpretation of our site’s materials in Jamaica, a point to which we return.

We sought to create a website that would stand as a calling card for our broader efforts to circulate the musical notation Sloane identifies as being made by a man named Mr. Baptiste to a wider community. We knew that to begin conversations with scholars, performers, and other interested publics in the United States and abroad, we first needed to simply make the historical artifact legible and, most importantly, audible. So we set out to design an interface that would demonstrate the capaciousness of the original document: we wanted the site to illuminate the fact that—embedded in a single set of pages from Sloane’s book, in the finite notes transmitted—there are actually a multitude of songs and infinite possibilities and interpretations. The digital, we dreamed and continue to dream, might allow us to circulate knowledge in a way that more justly and aptly represents the expressions and experiences of the musicians whose legacy we hope to better understand.

One of the things that we and others find fascinating about the notation authored by Baptiste is the way in which it captures an important moment in the emergence of diasporic cultures in the Black Atlantic. The titles of each of the pieces, “Angola,” “Papa,” and “Koromanti,” all refer to regional identities within slave-trading West and Central Africa at the time. This was a moment when people from various linguistic, cultural, and musical traditions were being forced to comingle. As Richard Rath emphasizes in his work on the notation, the music represents an important documentation of those complex processes out of which the cultures of the African diaspora were born.\(^4\)
The musical notation in the Sloane work, then, is a trace of a much larger and profoundly vital historical process: the passage of knowledge across and between the communities that found themselves together in the midst of the plantation world. What we hoped to do was to use the digital not only to acknowledge and celebrate that history but also to participate in its continuation. Digital technology, we hoped, could enable new forms of transmission and sharing of knowledge and insight, in multiple modalities that combine textual and visual interpretation with the understanding that comes from sound and musical interpretation.

**Designing Musical Passage and Centering Sound**

“What if our page was just this page?” one of us—David Garner—asked during one of the many meetings we had trying to conceptualize what became Musical Passage. As we debated how to interpret what we saw there, we also debated how to offer users of our site a way into doing so along with us. The discussions we had about the formal properties that the site should have ultimately altered our interpretations of the document itself. As we learned, the process of creating a digital project collaboratively nourishes new ways of thinking and analyzing the archives of the Black Atlantic. The collaborative nature of the process, the sustained reflection on design as a medium of analysis and communication, and the fact that sound, image, and text occupied equal power and importance all sustained a practice of thought and representation that could not have happened without the digital. This process allowed us to think outside and beyond the limitations of the textual colonial archive, which so often stands to represent merely the experiences of the elite Europeans who authored it. As we sought to transform the page onto the multimedia space of the screen, we struggled with questions about not only how to transparently display the original artifact but also how to open it up to new interpretations.

We decided that we wanted users of our site to look at the page and spend time with the text on it as well as the notation—to think through its materiality and architecture. But we also were interested in having them move quickly to sound. The question became how to sound out these fragments of notation in a way that was both true to what was on the page and did the work of opening it up to experience and the possibilities of imagining and interpreting the past.

The first step was to figure out how to provide contextual information without taking people away from the core page. We wanted to insist on people reading the words printed in Sloane and, in doing so slowly and carefully, to model the sort of close reading and close listening we were engaged in ourselves. There is a great deal of nuance packed into the seemingly simple sentences that introduce Baptiste’s transcriptions: “Upon one of their Festivals when a great many Negro Musicians were gathered together, I desired Mr. Baptiste, best Musician there to take the words they sung and put them to Musick, which follows. You must clap Hands when the Base is played, and cry, Alla, Alla.”

5
We had spent many hours going over these words ourselves, parsing and analyzing them, and in some ways getting more and more confused the longer we thought about the passage’s multiple possible meanings. What, for instance, did Sloane mean by describing the event as a “festival?” We also spend a great deal of time considering the question of the identity of the transcriber “Mr. Baptiste.” Previously scholarship assumed that he was a European colonist, but after carefully analyzing the passage, we began to feel more certain that he was more likely have been an Afro-descendant, perhaps a free person of color from a nearby French or Spanish colony.6

These are the sorts of questions and ambiguities that we wanted to highlight and explore in the site without foreclosing them. We had to ask ourselves again and again who our audience might be as we sought to determine how best to wade into important academic debates about the passage, without alienating potential visitors and overburdening the site with our long-winded analysis. We strove to create context that would not only be useful to a classroom of middle schoolers but also interesting and substantive for scholars familiar with the topic. This goal directed our design decisions as we sought to create a user-friendly interface that was intuitive enough for anyone to navigate immediately. We were also committed to a design that would allow users to browse the object in a nonlinear fashion, similar to how one’s eye jumps around when reading Sloane’s pages. Such a schema works against more conventional text-oriented web design that borrows from the conventions of prose by following clearly from beginning, middle, to end. One of the most time-consuming tasks in creating the site was editing our narrative explanations to the bare minimum, restraining ourselves from becoming too wordy and potentially alienating some of our target nonacademic audience. This challenge pushed us to carefully choose descriptions that could be read relatively quickly and could stand alone.

We were in a sense, actively working against the design characteristics of a site that we had earlier created together: Banjology (sites.duke.edu/banjology). There, we had pursued a more utilitarian design aimed at gathering an ever-expanding body of text, as well as images, musical notation, and recordings connected to banjo history, that we wanted to share with interested readers. Though this project had been successful, notably as the basis for a workshop on banjo history at Tulane University, we wanted to produce something where design and content were better matched. We looked to other digital projects for inspiration, including Vincent Brown’s Two Plantations project (http://www.twoplantations.com/), which offers a unique and innovative format for presenting archival media within a broader narrative. One of us, Mary Caton Lingold, had also developed a site, Provoke!: Digital Sound Studies (www.soundboxproject.com), that aims for a sound-centered experiential design.7 We decided to hire Marc Harkness, a graphic designer who had collaborated on Provoke! to help manage the design and development process, along with his collaborator, developer Dave Mello. Marc’s professional eye helped translate Sloane’s beautiful bound volume to a website, as he guided us through
storyboarding and visioning that enabled us to achieve a coherent vision for the project. To blend sound, text, and image meaningfully, we needed a design schema that could bring unity to what might have otherwise been a confusing set of features. Without Dave Mello’s custom programming, we would have been unable to realize some of the interactive capabilities that we felt were necessary to illuminate this particular artifact. Rather than conforming the project to an existing content management system like WordPress, as we had in the past, we sought to execute a more playful and original interface better suited to the story we hoped to tell.

We planned to incorporate the visual aesthetics of the original book into the web design, so we invited Marc to join us to view an original copy housed at the Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University. His interest in the period typeface inspired us to replicate a design cue from eighteenth-century print culture in our site’s navigation. When visitors hover over a particular word that we highlighted in red, a note in the margins prompts them to click the hyperlinked word for further information about the topic. This interactive feature made it possible for us to embed our narrative interpretations into the passage itself, so as to allow for close reading and self-directed discovery of the document. We aimed to provide some echo of what engaging with the original book would have been like, while also creating a meta-commentary that would invite users to read and reflect on the sentences. The boxes that appear with our interpretive text are meant to supplement whatever interpretations the users bring, and when they are closed, the users once again return home to the original page.

We were inspired by broader questions about whether digital environments can be used to cultivate practices of slow reading and listening, so central to humanistic work. The digital can tend toward centrifugal proliferation. This can be productive and pleasurable, of course, and, in some cases, is just what is needed. Yet we also need to cultivate heterogeneous experiences online that offer variant temporalities and pacing. For our project, this was important in part because we wanted people to dwell in the complicated fragments we were offering, both of text and sound, thereby creating possibilities for opening up to much larger and complex worlds of multisensory experience that help inform the document. By resisting linearity and comprehensiveness, might we communicate in the present some of the ways in which a fragmentary archive can nevertheless offer some hint or echo of fullness in the past? In a sense, this digital experience was meant to offer what, in textual form, a narrative operating on a few different levels at once—symbolic, tactile, interpretive, aesthetic—might offer.

DIGITAL IMPERATIVES AND MUSICAL INTERPRETATION

The digital project gave us the incentive to try to do what we had not dared to do before: to re-create the music as best we could. In this sense, the collaboration provided the opportunity for a richer, historically inflected musical analysis. It is
one thing to try to write about the music and the way it may have sounded. It is another thing entirely to try to create and record those interpretations. This task presented many difficulties, one of the most serious of which was to figure out how to best represent and interpret the cryptic and sparse music notation recorded by Mr. Baptiste. Musical notation is itself a technology that is situated culturally and historically within a specific context to specific ends. Thinking about musical production across writing technologies and platforms is important for disrupting the biases and assumptions that go along with the conventions of Western notation. The transcriptions in Sloane’s narrative could never be an accurate reflection of what was performed in Jamaica. What is more, we do not know whether Mr. Baptiste was transcribing the tunes or composing his own. The task of musical interpretation involved all three of us, but was spearheaded by David Garner, a composer with extensive experience transcribing music outside the Western art tradition. We circled the same problems again and again in a paralyzing dance, desperately trying to find cues in the text for how to make decisions. In which key or pitch center should the recordings be made? What is the best tempo for each tune? What instrument should the tunes be recorded on, and even if we choose a banjo, what type of banjo? With what kind of strings? What technique of playing should be used for each tune? Should there be any accompanying instruments added to the banjo? Each of these questions, and many others we confronted, raised issues both of interpretation and aesthetics. How could we traverse the insurmountable gap between the written notation and the experience of listening today?

We have a great deal of records, scores, instruments, and treatises on music in the Western art tradition to draw on to inform the decisions a musician makes when attempting to re-create a historically informed performance of, say, a Bach sonata. But we do not have the same resources and records for historical vernacular music, and particularly that of Africans and the diaspora. These traditions are not organized around writing practices and therefore did not generate textual archives. However, a perceived insufficiency of records should neither inhibit a serious study of these music histories nor an effort to imagine and try to understand what these important performances sounded like. At the same time, we knew from the outset that we would not be able to reproduce the tunes as they were heard in seventeenth-century Jamaica.

We realized that, even though recording the one true version of a given tune would be impossible, simply making some decisions and recording a version of the tune would be enough to spark conversations, interest, and perhaps even a few challenges to our interpretations. Armed with this minimal confidence, David set out to record something. He recorded dozens of practice takes on his smartphone as he crafted the optimal approach, a technique that has only recently become possible by the ease and quality of recording and sharing. The final recordings were made using professional audio equipment, but the immediate feedback of iPhone recording while learning the tunes shaped the results. The process began with making a
couple of straightforward decisions. Because another engraving in the text portrays
the earliest image of a banjo, we decided to use it as a primary instrument. David
began playing the tunes over and over, allowing that repetition to vet an optimal
approach. Instead of trying to choose a technique, banjo, string, and tuning that
were most historically informed, he allowed the resonance of the instrument and
his fingers to make those decisions. The decision was made first about which instru-
ment to perform on, but the other decisions were mostly organic and embodied.
When David would share his recordings with the rest of the team, we were sur-
pried by how many opinions we had about what the music should sound like.
Mary Caton, in particular, who has immersed herself in literary representations of
early Afro-Atlantic music for her personal research, offered insights about instru-
mentation and rhythmic accompaniment that even she herself did not know that
she held. The act of attempting to re-create the music brought forward historically
specific interpretations that otherwise might have remained dormant and murky.
Simply put, we did not imagine how much we did know about what these perfor-
mances might have sounded like until we set out to play them.9

We discussed the fact that Sloane’s text explicitly invokes the presence of percus-
sion through his injunction: “You must clap your hands when the Base is played.”10
From our broader knowledge of Afro-Atlantic music it seems certain that the “festi-
val” documented here would have involved percussive instruments. Yet the notation
did not clearly offer a sense of what an accompanying rhythm might entail. Using
Digital Audio Workstation software and MIDI samples of percussion instruments
from around the world, David was able to try out a number of different percus-
sion sounds, timbres, and grooves, finally settling on rhythmic layers that comple-
mented the character of each tune. Incorporating percussion involved a new layer
of imagination and interpretation, so we decided to offer two versions for each of
the songs, one that hews relatively close to the notation on the page and another
that adds percussion or, in the case of Papa, uses a very different instrument—the
mbira. This doubling serves several purposes. First, it allowed us to create a fuller
interpretation, one that reaches toward the sound of the songs as they likely were
played. Second, it highlights the very process of musical interpretation, so that lis-
teners can understand explicitly how the notation has been turned into sound and
also how two different interpretations, done according to slightly different princi-
pies, lead to a very different kind of musical experience and feel.

Just as the process of musical creation was informed by our use of digital tech-
nology to share and create musical sounds, we also considered the technologies
that anchored the performances of the enslaved musicians in Jamaica: their instru-
m ents. In an effort to approach a more historically informed sound, we commis-
sioned banjo-maker Pete Ross, who specializes in making gourd banjos based on
historical documentation and images, to create a “Sloane banjo” for us that we could
use to record new versions of the song. We now have the instrument, crafted to be
as close as possible to the banjo depicted in the Sloane engraving, and we anticipate
Dubois, Garner, and Lingold

going through the same process using this banjo to re-record the songs. Its smaller size, higher pitch, and period-specific setup will inform new decisions and likely take the interpretation in a much different direction, perhaps requiring vastly different tempos, techniques, and approaches.

This process confirmed what we already understood as scholars who have all studied “traditional” or “folk” music. Tunes or songs in such traditions do not have a single authoritative version. Instead, the “real” ur-tune exists as a ghost, floating somewhere between the thousands of notations, recordings, and performances, its identity being informed and molded by each one. One version or one realization of “Papa” is far from a true representation of the work. However, with each new version of “Papa” that is created by musicians from varying backgrounds, tastes, and approaches, we take one tiny step in the direction toward understanding a bit more of what the tune really is.

MUSICAL PASSAGE IN CONTEMPORARY JAMAICA

The possibilities for ever widening interpretation became vividly clear during workshops in Jamaica in which musicians responded to the recordings from the Musical Passage website. These events confirmed our hope that by creating initial interpretations, we were simply opening up a process rather than offering a definitive presentation of the music. Organized as a collaboration between the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the Institute of Jamaica by historian Matthew Smith and Jamaica Music Museum director Herbie Miller, the first musical workshop took place on March 17, 2017. It was led by legendary reggae guitarist Earl “Chinna” Smith and his band Inna da Yard, along with guest artists Anthony “Sangie” Davis, Maroghini, Vivian “Scotty” Scott, and Samuel “Time” Williams. The musicians listened to the recordings from our website while on stage, having never before heard or seen the pieces. They began to rapidly learn and improvise on them live in front of an audience. The remarkable open-endedness and complexity of the interpretations that emerged from this one moment underscore that ongoing musical interpretations will be vital as a form of analysis of the texts themselves. During the workshop, we could see at work some of the very processes of listening and exchange that shaped the gathering documented in the Sloane book. Recordings of the event, which are now available on YouTube, document the musicians’ process of interpreting the music. This initial workshop was followed by a second event on the UWI-Mona campus in the following year. During this workshop, hosted by the Department of History and Archaeology on July 10, 2018, the University Chorale studied the song “Angola” and embarked on the process of developing an arrangement of the piece for the ensemble’s repertoire. Chorale director Shawn Wright built on Inna da Yard’s interpretation of the piece as he and collaborators explored using different Afro-Jamaican drumming patterns under the vocal music. In April 2019, the Chorale performed “Angola” at its tenth anniversary concert. These workshops have
yielded important new insights about the historical inflections of the pieces and how they are heard within contemporary Jamaican musical settings.\(^{12}\)

It is worth pointing out that it was not our digital intervention that brought about these performances in Jamaica; “Chinna” Smith and his band Inna da Yard never stumbled across our site online. Instead, human connections brought about the collaborative musical opportunity, thanks to the vision of scholar Matthew Smith and the institutional support from UWI-Mona and the Institute of Jamaica. At the same time, the recordings generated for the website were key to making it possible to transmit the songs easily to the musicians. Thus, we already saw the original site doing some of what we hoped it to do: generate new forms and spaces of interpretation. These, in turn, now have lives as digital objects of their own, connected to the *Musical Passage* website but also making their own way in the world. We now have to struggle with new questions, notably about whether to alter the original site based on new insights we gain or to allow it to remain as it is, while embracing proliferations and multiplications of the version. This is a difficult question, because from the beginning we also intended for people to dwell on and in the page, to slow down, to listen, and to take it in.

Creating a multimodal digital inscription of Sloane’s notation allowed us to perform the fragmentary and networked nature of the historical text and to open up new conversations, both musical and scholarly, about the document. The website was reviewed and published through *archipelagos*, an innovative digital journal created by Alex Gil and Kaiama L. Glover. Their interventions into scholarly publishing created an additional opportunity to invite voices from a variety of experts, initially during the review process, but especially later, when we revisited the project one year after its launch using the hypothes.is platform (web.hypothes.is), which allows for public commentary on websites. Through the metatexual capabilities of that platform, we were able to invite feedback and engage in rigorous debate with historians, musicologists, literary scholars, and others whose expertise collectively far exceeds our own. The resulting conversations changed our perceptions of the pieces yet again, provoking new insights and many new questions.\(^ {13}\)

The key here is that digital media allows us to simultaneously address the silences and the possibilities of this particular document. Sloane’s notation is a frustratingly scant fragment of what we know to be widespread and diverse musical performances by enslaved Africans in the Americas. It is a distorted window into a vast world. But despite frustrating limitations of the relatively brief notated inscription, shaped by enslaving colonists, it still testifies to the profundity of these traditions. The page of music, then, is a glinting part of a larger constellation of processes by which enslaved Africans transformed global music. Thinking of it in this way—and presenting it in digital format—allows us to understand that, even though Sloane’s book may initially seem like a static thing, embedded within it were the labors of many, many individuals. There, on the page, is not only the work of the engravers and printers, yes, but also that of Mr. Baptiste, and from there the musicians who
surrounded him, and, around that, the broader world of religious leaders, of healers, of those who shaped, nurtured, and protected the community of the enslaved.

The same is true of the music that Earl “Chinna” Smith and his collaborators and the UWI-Mona University Chorale created when they drew on song upon song, artist upon artist, traveling across eras in sound when they interpreted the music. Music-making is a collaborative activity. This is why it was so rewarding to examine and explore the text together and attempt to transform it into an interactive interface that would allow for various inconclusive and performative explorations of the original source. Digital design allowed us to make plain what we normally have to strain to articulate: the centrality of these traditions and the important role of the artists in creating the modern world—from the British Museum, to the banjo, to living music cultures—and also the deeply collaborative and expansive modalities through which knowledge is created, shared, and contested outside of the print-centric linearity of Western historicism. Whatever new forms Musical Passage takes, as both a digital project and a part of a broader network of forms, what is most important for us is that it continues to act as a link both backward and forward, a connector of sorts, and a reminder of the processes of exchange and creation that are at the root of culture and therefore of life.

Notes

1. For discussions of “digital repatriation” of sound recordings in African contexts, see Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub, “The Audible Future”; Thram, “Performing the Archive,” and Nannyonga-Tamusuza, “Written Documentation of the Klaus Wachsmann Music Collection.” On a project that aims at a repatriation of the audio archive of Radio Haïti-Inter, see Wagner, “Nou Toujou La!” Collections such as the International Library of African Music, the Association for Cultural Equity, and Columbia University’s Center for Ethnomusicology have all been working to promote discussions of this issue.


4. See Rath, How Early America Sounded, for groundbreaking work on the notation in Sloane. See also Rath, “Ethnodigital Sonics,” for a discussion of Rath’s extensive digital methods for exploring the sounds of the performances.

5. Sloane, A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, 1–li.

6. For a fuller investigation of Baptiste’s background, including a discussion of archival records supporting the idea that he had African heritage, see Lingold, “In Search of
Mr. Baptiste.” Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*, I–II.

7. For discussions of this project and a broader theorization of work at the intersection of sound studies and digital humanities, see Lingold et al., *Digital Sound Studies*.

8. On the use of musical notation in Caribbean travel literature, including works by Sloane and John Stedman, see Lingold, “Peculiar Animations.”

9. See Geoffroy-Schwinden, “Digital Approaches to Historical Acoustemologies,” on digital performances of historical music. She argues for the importance of historically informed listening practices in the creation of modern representations of sonic history.


12. For more information on the workshop and links to a playlist of videos of the event visit https://fsp.trinity.duke.edu/projects/musical-passage. On a discussion of the historical insights and relevance to digital humanities scholarship on slavery, see Lingold, “Digital Performance and the Musical Archive of Slavery.”

13. The project team discusses the *hypothese.is* event in “The Caribbean Digital & Peer Review.”

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