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Recording Africa: Charles Ball's 1836 Narrative of Enslavement and Encounters

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Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Abstract: Charles Ball's 1836 slave narrative is not only an example of an autobiographical narrative of escape from enslavement, it includes narratives of Africans who have been captured and brought to North America. Ball's narrative records the heterogeneity of Africans arriving—from Muslim West Africans to those from the Congo, a ubiquitous term given more specificity in his narrative. Defining a distinction between an arrivant and someone, like himself, who may be a second generation enslaved person is Ball's purpose, suggesting he belongs to a new culture. Ball's descriptions parallel Zora Neale Hurston's description of Kossola, a record of the last African brought to North America as an enslaved person. Ball's role recording his encounters parallels that of Hurston as ethnographer and W. E. B. DuBois as a social historian.

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The publication, after eighty years of remaining unpublished and all but forgotten, of Zora Neale Hurston's transcription of the oral accounting begun in 1927 of Kossola—renamed upon his enslavement in the United States as Cudjo Lewis—warrants an examination in Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States. A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man*. Positioned to be published ninety years later, Hurston's account, titled *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* is remarkable as Kossola was the last living African who had been transported directly to the United States and sold into slavery at the time of Hurston's recording. Hurston's recording of Kossola's account is also notable in that it is not only the work of a student trained in Franz Boas's methodology of cultural anthropology, but that the ethnographer was a Black woman who had the ability, rare for any ethnographer, to understand and record the context of Kossola's account. It is also indicative of Hurston's vision that she refused to translate—to literally change words—Kossola's vernacular account into the antiseptic English that would be acceptable to most readers at the time. The publication of Hurston's transcript, like Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* some thirty years earlier, should compel us to reexamine the institutions of slavery and the logistical enterprises that facilitated the development of slave economies, particularly the experiences of the Africans who as captives

found themselves on these strange shores.

Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States. A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man* is a significant, but seldom discussed text—it has primarily been remembered for Ball's descriptions of service during the War of 1812 and his descriptions of the conditions of enslavement. What is most remarkable, however, is Ball's recording of encounters with Africans—distinct as Ball notes from those of African descent but born in the American colonies. Ball, in effect, prefigures Hurston as an ethnographer collecting histories or oral testimonies; he is also like Hurston in his multivalent interests not only as a witness to the predations of slavery, but as an abolitionist and as a social environmentalist. Like Hurston, Ball is witness to the profound effects of involuntary displacement even as he is subjected to abject treatment. Like Hurston, Ball as he records captive Africans who are negotiating the trauma of enslavement, witnesses the challenge of not succumbing to the disintegration of the self as well as the difficulties and the necessity of Africans to establish new social relations as Stephanie Smallwood describes in her *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (184, 195). As the episodes in Ball's narrative are primarily concentrated in the years just prior to the British prohibition of transatlantic trade in captive humans which in turn the United States prohibited, Ball was in direct and frequent contact with those who were transported from Senegambia, Guinea, and the Congo. Embedded in the narrative is another slave narrative which recounts the capture of an "African," his sale to Europeans (which constituted his first contact with this "ugly" people), and transport to the port of Charleston. Ball alludes to—in general terms—religious practices, including his grandfather's observance of Islam. Ball's narrative is important in that it is a material record—an archive—from the position of a New World African, to use M. NourbeSe Philip's term, of the presence of Islam amongst the enslaved, the persistence of African languages in the New World, the cultural distinctions between the "saltwater slave" and the native-born enslaved person, and an expression of the emergence of a new diasporic culture.

Unlike the iconic, and later published slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Ball does not begin with the assertion of the first person presence—"I was born a slave"—and a continuation of one's immediate doubled genealogy of parents and owners. Instead, Ball questions the understanding of those in the North of the "system of Slavery" in the very first sentence and attributes this lack of understanding due to a form of branding, where the brutal practices of slavery were masked if enslavers thought "their conduct [was] subject to the observation of person, whose good opinion they wish to preserve" (9). Throughout Ball's narrative the practice of surveillance is ubiquitous. While this may seem obvious—of course the enslavers surveilled the bodies they owned if not to register their productivity, then out of fear or suspicion of rebellion, or as preparation for carnal terrorism—Ball's noting at the onset of his narrative of surveillance indicates his own practices as witness and as a recording agent. Ball notes the differences between urban and rural enslavers, as well as the regional differences of treatment—it is much better to be enslaved in Maryland than in South Carolina or Georgia. But the pervasiveness of ownership in the South, where "every man, and every woman too, except prevented by poverty, is a slaveholder; and the entire white population is leagued together by a common bond of the most sordid interest, in the torture and oppression of the poor descendants of Africa" (10), implies a panopticon of surveillance where "no expression of resentment must escape his lips" unless one wishes to risk "perform[ing] his daily toil in an iron collar" (10). Describing the condition of enslavement in the first decade of the 19th century, Ball clearly establishes

the condition of the carceral culture of the south, and by extension, to use Christina Sharpe's metaphor of the ship and logistics, to consider that we are still very much caught in the hold of the ship that bears us and, always and already, that we are caught in the very wake of slavery.

In this essay, I wish to introduce two elements central to Ball's narrative. First, Ball's narrative expands the archive of the accounts of capture, transport, and enslavement. His work provides examples of "saltwater slave," or those Africans, as Stephanie Smallwood details in her *Saltwater Slavery*, who were transported to, rather than born in, the so-called New World. And secondly, Ball's observations of the environment illustrate the slow violence, to invoke Rob Nixon's term, that exploitative agriculture—that is agriculture that was being redefined as a capitalist industry—exerted upon the slaveholding states of the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. As Ball observes in detail the depletion of the land, the carrying capacity of the soil, is directly linked to the exploitation of enslaved humans: "So long as the land is new and rich, and produces corn and sweet potatoes abundantly, the black people seldom suffer greatly for food; but, when the ground is all cleared, and planted in rice, or cotton, corn and potatoes become scarce; *and when corn has to be bought on a cotton plantation, the people must expect to make acquaintance with hunger*" (italics in the original, 11). Ball seems at times an apologist for the very conditions he finds himself in, at other times he seems to seek to prove he is above the adversity he surveys, and yet at other times, he realizes the depth of betrayals slavery institutes and the brutality—the founding violence—of that institution. But Ball also writes from what we might now call an environmental social justice consciousness, for as an enslaved person he embodied W.E.B. Du Bois's observation in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "the slave stood near to Nature's heart" (172).

As in such narratives as those of Henry Bibb or Harriet Jacobs, Ball emphasizes the importance of the family: he introduces his genealogy beginning with his grandfather, who "was brought from Africa, and sold as a slave in Calvert county, in Maryland, about the year 1730" (11). Ball comments that he never knew the name of the ship; Ball does not state, and perhaps did not know or remember, whether his grandfather was directly transported to Calvert County, a tidewater county on Chesapeake Bay, or had landed elsewhere in the Americas and had been sold, as Ball notes, to a "family called Mauel, who resided near Leonardtown" (11). According to the *Antebellum Plantations in Prince George's County, Maryland* if Ball's grandfather was transported directly to one of the Chesapeake ports it is most likely he came from Upper Guinea (39)—yet that supposition is itself as ghostly as Ball's grandfather's name, "old Ben" (16), and a record of imposition (originating in Arab and then Portuguese renderings for 'black' people). While Ball does not comment on his grandmother, he does note his father "was a slave in a family named Hantz, living near the same place" and his mother "was a slave of tobacco farmer" who, in debt upon his death, had his estate sold off, including the four-year-old Ball, his siblings, and mother, in a public auction in approximately 1785. Through his father Ball subsequently learned that his mother had been sold to a Georgia trader. Ball provides us with two images of his mother: "the cries of my poor parent became more and more indistinct—at length they died away in the distance, and I never again heard the voice of my poor mother" (13). Ball balances this rupture with the memory of her as "a kind and good mother to me; had warmed me in her bosom in the cold nights of winter; had often divided the scanty pittance of food allowed her by her mistress, between my brothers and sisters and me, and gone supperless to bed herself" (13). Ball attempts to recreate the family as a functioning unit that sustains each member both materially and spiritually, as later sharing shelter with Dinah and Nero, or a cohesive family of laborers as Ball directs fellow enslaved men in

a fishing enterprise, or his own marriages which were themselves arbitrarily destroyed by the seizure and sale of each of his families over the course of his life.

Ball's grandfather is his first contact with Africa. With the forced removal of his mother, both Ball and his father, whom Ball said never fully recovered from being separated from his wife, began to frequent his father "old Ben." It is clear from Ball's text that his grandfather practiced Islam. Not only does his name suggest his Muslim background, in addition to his possible general place of origin, but also Ball's particular observations of "old Ben's" practices. Ball notes that his grandfather "always expressed great contempt for his fellow slaves, they being as he said, a mean and vulgar race, quite beneath his rank and the dignity of his former station" (16). This position is not adequately explained by his claim that he "was kindred with some royal family in Africa, and had been a great warrior in his native country" (14), nor is it fully explained by his status as a "salt water negro," a pejorative term Stephanie Smallwood explains was used by the native-born enslaved that expressed "their awareness of forced emigration" and that their continuing presence underscored "the traumatic echo of commodification" (7). Michael Gomez, who notes Ball's accounts of Muslim practices (74), observes that the presence of not insubstantial numbers of Muslims—thousands, if not tens-of-thousands in the early 18th century colonial North America—led to social stratification in the wider African American community (66). Yet, it also reflected the general social and political history unfolding in West Africa. Gomez notes three distinctive features that reflect or record the "Africa" of an enslaved Muslim in colonial North America: one, a refusal to incorporate shame, that is "the internalization of enslavement" pertains only to lesser ethnicities; secondly, "to live as a Muslim in 18th- and 19th-century West Africa was to live in an increasingly intolerant society" marked by the "establishment of Muslim theocracies, of self-purification and separation from practices and beliefs seen antithetical to Islam"; and thirdly, many of the Muslim slaves were from prominent families and were literate as they had received an extensive Islamic education (84-85).

The eighty-year-old "Old Ben," as Ball recalls, was granted "a small cabin of his own, with about half an acre of ground attached to it" by his master; there he practiced, as Ball records, "strange and peculiar notions of religion, prayed every night, though he said he ought pray oftener; but that his God would excuse him for the non-performance of this duty, in consideration of his being a slave" (16). "Old Ben" rejected Christianity, arguing instead, "that there could only be one true standard of faith, which was the case in his country" (17). Ball also reports that according to his grandfather, the tenets of his religion "were so plain, and self-evident, that anyone could understand them, without any other instruction, than the reading of a small book, a copy of which contained all the rules, both of faith and practice, necessary for any one to know or exercise" (17). Furthermore, "No one was permitted to expound or explain this book, as it was known to be the oracle of the true God" (17). Ball, without naming it, is certainly describing the *Qur'an* and "old Ben's" own, albeit limited, practice and critical literacy.

While Ball does not state how he came to learn to read and write, we might speculate that given his grandfather's attempt to preserve not only his religious traditions, but the critical practice of literacy, his grandfather may have attempted to pass on some element of his tradition. Yet, Ball also witnessed the cultural isolation of the New World African Muslim: slavery's economics impacted the significant dependency of progeny to whom cultural traditions could be transferred over generations within established Muslim families (Gomez 80). Ball's memory of his grandfather then becomes an elegy to a culture that disappeared into the creation of a new diasporic culture.

As Ball's exposition moves away from recording his eighty-year-old, African-born grandfather, he describes the practice of convening for public worship, the admonishment of any commentary or glossary on the *Qur'an*, "love of country, charity and social affection" were chief elements of the unnamed text, and those who "did not live according to its rules were deemed bad subjects, and were compelled to become soldiers, as being fit only for a life of blood-shed and cruelty" (18). As Ball provides a general summary, drawn from his childhood recollections and enforced by his grandfather's expression of "all the fondness which a person so far advanced in life could be expected to feel for a child" (16), Ball's own ethos unfolds. As he concludes this chapter, he notes that "tenderness to wives and children, was one of its [Islam's] most positive injunctions" (19). The influence of both "old Ben" and a generalized, or inherited, sense of self-agency guided and distinguished Ball from others. Indeed before he was twelve and sold out of Calvert County upon the death of his master John Cox, Ball was told by Cox, that "he intended to make me his waiter, and that if I behaved well I should become his overseer"; at that time, Ball recalls, these were the "highest points of honor and greatness in the whole world" (19) and imply his already present sense of self-realization, ambition, and social hierarchy.

On the South Carolina plantation that Ball was sold to, he meets various African-born men, including the husband of Lydia and Dinah's husband Nero. There are also present those "too old to take any part in our active pleasures, [but] beat time with their hands, or recited stories of former times. Most of these stories referred to affairs that had been transacted in Africa, and were sufficiently fraught with demons, miracles, and murders, to fix the attention of many hearers" (178). From these encounters, Ball distinguishes between the African-born enslaved and the "American negro" through the application of essentially a social marking system. Invoking a vertical hierarchy, Ball notes that,

The lower men are sunk, in the scale of civilization, the more violent become their animal passions. The native Africans are revengeful, and unforgiving in their tempers, easily provoked, and cruel in their designs. They generally place little, or even no value upon the fine houses and superb furniture of their masters; and discover no beauty in the fair complexions, and delicate form of their mistresses. They feel indignant, at the servitude that is imposed upon them, and want power to inflict the most cruel retribution, upon their oppressors [...]. (188)

It might be argued that Ball, here, has succumbed to being an Uncle Tom, and borders on offering an apology for slavery, and even prefigures social Darwinism through his invoking of terms such as primitive, civilization, and the idealization of white beauty. But his description may also be attributed to the influences of his grandfather who viewed other enslaved blacks as a "mean and vulgar race" (18), and perhaps to a larger community of displaced African Muslims he encountered as a child. What Ball performs is an attempt to distinguish the "African" from the reality he must survive in; thus as Smallwood writes, "The stigma of being a saltwater slave was not Africanness per se but rather the ignorance and inexperience that African birth symbolized in a world increasingly dominated by American-born, or 'creole' slaves" (202).

The native-born or "American negro," Ball writes, "knows nothing of Africa, her religion, or customs"; instead "all his ideas, of present and future happiness" are borrowed "from the opinions and intercourse of white people, and of Christians"; "he is, perhaps, not so impatient of slavery, excessive labor, as the native of Congo; but his mind is bent on other pursuits" (189). Ball, however,

distinguishes himself, much as his grandfather did, from the others, as he observes that “any of the men [on the plantation] did not understand trapping game, and others were too indolent to go far enough from home to find good places for setting their traps” (226). Ball implicitly compares himself to Lydia’s husband, an African-born man, “a native of a country far in the interior of Africa,” who had been “a priest in his own nation, and had never been taught to do any kind of labor, being supported by the contributions of the public” (227). I should note here, lest one think Charles Ball is a precursor to Omarose Manigault-Newman, one-time and perhaps sole black Trump aide, that he also argues for revolution as necessary as the Bible warns against those who live “in ease and luxury, at the expense of their fellow men” (190-191). Lydia’s husband “was a morose, sullen man [who] said he formerly had ten wives in his own country, who all had to work for, and wait upon him” (227). Ball records but fails to recognize the significance of the oceanic cultural differences; in part Ball is part of a different history of social hierarchy, and is part of an emergent new social hierarchy, both of which are alien to Lydia’s husband. Furthermore, Ball cannot recognize the extent of trauma Lydia’s husband experiences as Ball is in the process assuming the mythologies of colonial white America.

As Smallwood and Gomez discuss, the horror of realizing one cannot return to one’s homeland and that the ocean creates a potentially untransversable barrier between oneself and one’s ancestors represent the trauma Africans, who survive the barracoon and the middle passage must contend with. Socially isolated, they must craft a coherent system of surviving, otherwise, as was not uncommon, suicide—at least as the west would term it—was an outcome. Ball certainly witnessed this despair, for as he criticized Lydia’s husband’s “irritable” behavior, Ball also observed his despair upon the death of his infant son: Ball assists the family as they bury the child with

a small bow and several arrows; a little bag of parched meal; a miniature canoe, about a foot long, and a little paddle, (with which he said it would cross the ocean, to his own country,) a small stick, with an iron nail sharpened, and fastened into one end of it; and a piece of white muslin, with several curious and strange figures painted on it in blue and red, by which, he said, his relations and countrymen would know the infant, to be his son, and would receive it accordingly, on its arrival amongst them. (228)

As Smallwood notes in regard to this specific moment, this is not an example of the transmission and continuation of a specific African religion or funerary tradition, rather the inclusion of canoe, paddle, sack of meal, and painted sail “was a gesture that could only be understood by those who shared the memory of the slave ship” (190). This act, necessitating reverse migration in the afterlife not only across the ocean to one’s home country, but then to the ancestors, would not have been comprehensible to his community in Africa; in this way, Smallwood suggests, “the cultural practices of diasporic Africa could have meaning only outside Africa” (190). No doubt Ball was struck by the sorrow of the child’s father, yet he struggles with understanding the grief. Ball’s narrative, as it includes his recordings of Africa, attempts to provide, in Smallwood’s words, “a narrative continuity between past and present—and epistemological means of connecting the dots between there and here, then and now, to craft a coherent story out of incoherent experience” (191).

Perhaps most notable in Ball’s narrative is an embedded narrative of “the man who prayed five times a day . . . in a language I did not understand” (145). Ball later learns, reflecting within the text,

he “knew several, who must have been, from what I have since learned, Mahomedans; though at that time, I had never heard of the religion of Mahomed” (143). Through the narrator Ball introduces, in the briefest manner, the heterogeneity of Africans in terms of colonial marking—people whose “hair was not short and wooly,” people of a “shining black,” “yellow people” (145). Ball reveals the acute awareness of the economic Atlantic world that the continual arrival of Africans, despite their own commodification, impart to their New World counterparts, as the storyteller notes that as a captive, he “travelled a great way toward the rising sun; and came to a river, running through a country inhabited by yellow people, where the land was very rich, and produced great quantities of rice, such as grows here, and many other kinds of grain” (145). Ball’s own interest in agriculture, including the cultivation of rice, perhaps prompts him to include this detail in his recording of an otherwise suspenseful story. That the storyteller, however, provides the detail indicates his own awareness of the Atlantic trade and agricultural transfers.

This unnamed Muslim narrator “of a country, which had no trees nor grass upon it,” tells a story of capture, as a result of war, of being held a captive but not a slave, an inadvertent escape through becoming lost, surviving marauding lions, and eventually finding protection in a non-Muslim village, which is only overrun by another nation, and all the inhabitants taken captive, transported for three days down river, and sold to white slavers. Echoing Equiano’s 1789 narrative, the narrator exclaimed “I had never seen white people before; and they appeared to me the ugliest creatures in the world” (159). The narrator recounts being shackled in the hold, infanticide, and suicide before finally putting to sea. The narrative essentially ends at sea, with the narrator closing with the statement that he’s been at the plantation for five years. Much like the short narrative of Sibell that Smallwood reproduces (203), Ball’s unnamed speaker ends his narrative for all intents and purposes at sea, for this is where he has been left; he is unable to bring his narrative productively into the present and thus suggest a future. In many ways, the narrator’s dilemma of being stranded in a tree at a water hole patrolled by a lion turns from being a suspenseful tale, to a metaphor of displacement and isolation. The telling of the story to the assembled slave quarter is perhaps less about the bonding of a community—though that too is present—but for the individual the process of storytelling becomes a means of the reconstruction of a recording memory and cultivating receptive memories. As Smallwood notes, the experience of the slave ship at sea “reduced African captives to an existence so physically atomized as to silence all but the most elemental bodily articulation, so socially impoverished as to threaten annihilation of the self, the complete disintegration of personhood” (125). Ball’s narrative embraces the narrative of captivity and serves to offer it as a memory and to connect it to Ball’s own mnemonic production, that is his silent mapping of the landscape as he was force marched south to enable his future escape, thus the promise of a future.

Ball’s last recording of Africa, in approximately 1806, was deep in the woods when he encounters a “black apparition” (279). The escaped man, “entirely naked” and “his eyes wild and rolling,” wore an iron collar with a three foot iron arch with three bells attached. Emerging from in “the early twilight produced by the gloom of the heavy forest,” Ball thought he was in the “presence of an inhabitant of a nether and fiery world, who had been permitted to escape for a time, from the place of his torment” (278-279). As Ball was to discover, as “no sooner [I] heard a human voice than all my fears fled,” Paul was “a native of Congo, in Africa, [who] had been a slave five years; that he had left an aged mother, a widow, at home, as also a wife and four children” (280). While Ball is unable to release Paul

from the iron device, he promises to return with tools to free Paul when he is next able to; after a week passed, Ball returns only to discover that Paul, out of despair, has hung himself from a sassafras tree from a rope fashioned from hickory bark (287).

This episode is remarkable not only for cumulative violence that Paul endured, but also in that Ball situates it within a Gothic narrative setting—twilight, the deep gloom of the North American forest, in a haunted environment (two light-skinned enslaved men were executed earlier in the vicinity for abducting their white mistress)—and thus within a different narrative epistemology. In this setting, the natural world has become threatening in its excess of mnemonic pressures. Ball has at this point endured separations from his mother, siblings, his father and grandfather, the deaths of Lydia and her son, the torture and executions of David and Hardy, as well as witnessing daily whipping and torture. Despite his industriousness—hunting and trapping and sharing his game with others, his artisan efforts at manufacturing bowls—Ball’s descriptors of this place, “the night-breeze agitated leaves of the wood . . . moaned in dreary sighs” (284), suggest his own despondency. The wilderness—the woods beyond the bounds of the plantation—is only accessible at the end of the day and it is the only space in which he is free to move and to move without surveillance. His encounter with Paul, offering Paul the terrapin eggs he had gathered (another example of Ball’s knowledge of sustainable resources as well as his generosity), reveals Ball’s need for guidance as much as Paul’s need for assistance in gaining freedom. Ball states, “I felt anxious to become better acquainted with this man, who possessed knowledge superior to the common race of slaves, and manifested a moral courage” that Ball realizes he could learn from as Paul’s circumstances were not unlike his, except that Ball did not endure the middle passage. Ball’s sense of anxiety and the need to converse with Paul is unique in its urgency in this narrative—clearly Ball saw in Paul both the manifestation of terror and Paul’s resilience. In this space Ball sees nature, which has otherwise provided a sense of sustainability, turn against them, becoming a place—parallel to the ship’s hold—that isolates, and then provides the means for death. Nature is ambivalent as it becomes the means for exploitation (such as working as a field hand) or death (Paul’s suicide); it is also a place of isolation, a space one travels through to escape to freedom, or in Paul’s case, death.

Parallel to Ball’s recording of the presence of Africans—again, as distinct from those of African descent born in the Americas—is his observations of the human-engineered transformation of the Eastern Seaboard landscape. What Ball records—as a mnemonic mapping that he hopes will provide him with a way back northward when he escapes—is the “slow violence” that Nixon describes as forms of displacement, attrition, and an “environmentally embedded violence” (7). For example, Ball documents the destruction of agricultural land by tobacco planters: “This destructive crop ruins the best land in a short time; and in all the lower parts of Maryland and Virginia, the traveler will see large old family mansions of weatherbeaten and neglected appearance, standing in the middle of vast fields of many hundreds acres, the fences which have rotted away. . . . Many of these fields have been abandoned altogether” (42). Throughout Ball’s forced march south, he notes the equation between the exhaustion of the land, the exploitation of enslaved Blacks, and the immiseration of white slave-owners through their own exploitive practices. Ball’s escape and journey northward takes place significantly along the roadways, where he would hide and listen to news and directions from passing carters, and along the margins of farms, plantations, and towns. In his months of evading capture traveling northward, the wilderness was largely absent: the landscape was one that was subdued—indeed the wilder/ness was that of putative civilization or that global capitalism that had engineered a

regime of race-science and white supremacy.

As in the American environmental literary grain, Ball maintains meticulous observations; yet his narrative is also part of a tradition of travel writing infused with social criticism found later in the work of Frederick Law Olmstead (in his 1856 *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*) and then Du Bois (in *The Souls of Black Folk*, especially the chapter "Of the Black Belt"). Du Bois, like Ball, draws the direct relation between slavery and of the destruction of the environment: inept European plantation owners exploited both humans and the arable land for short-term profits:

This was indeed the Egypt of the Confederacy,—the rich granary whence potatoes and corn and cotton poured out. . . . Sheltered and secure, it became the place of refuge for families, wealth, and slaves. Yet even then the hard ruthless rape of the land began to tell. The red-clay sub-soil already had begun to peer above the loam. The harder the slaves were driven, the more careless and fatal was their farming. (86)

Du Bois figuratively records Africa, transposing Biblical Egypt upon the ravaged Georgia landscape in language that echoes Ball's earlier assessments of the depleted landscapes he was forced to travel through. Du Bois makes a final recording of Africa in the final chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The Sorrow Songs," when he transcribes the music and lyrics of a song that for "two hundred years . . . has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing the meaning of its music" (170). Du Bois is in fact re-memorizing his own genealogical or archived past, for what he recalls is the music of "My grandfather's grandmother [who] was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries . . . and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees" (169). Du Bois, like Hurston later and Ball earlier, gathers the liminal moment—the lament of passing through the doubled doors of no return, the barracoons of West Africa and the human markets of the Americas. Du Bois continues,

This was primitive African music; it may be seen in larger form in the strange chant which heralds

"The Coming of John":

"You may bury me in the East,

You may bury me in the West,

But I'll hear the trumpet sound in that morning"

—the voice of exile. (170)

Ball's inclusion of narratives of Africans is part of an archive of essential recordings of the "voice of exile." Ball's narrative posits a static dichotomy between the African who is an arrivant and the New World African, like himself, who has found a way to make way, to literally move through white spaces. Parallel to Ball's Africans, Kossola, the last African captive, retreats into his garden when the memories of loss overwhelm and silence him, causing Hurston to withdraw and return later when he returns from the space of mourning. Du Bois, however, considers the dynamic creation of a new American world and records the stages of transformation of those voices as music, as Du Bois explains, "The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land . . . In these songs, I have said, the slave spoke to the world" (171).

How much does Ball record of “Africa,” how does he hear? A few decades later, the slave narratives of which we are most familiar will not hear Africa, rather the narratives of Douglass, or Jacobs, or Bibb seek to make other claims; Ball’s narrative, while decrying the institution of slavery as corrupt, models his narrative after European travel narratives, where travelling becomes the accession of knowledge, but only through a process of dwelling in the landscape. As in travel narratives, one always leaves behind a past; Ball’s travels as he recounts his records of Africa symbolically leaves Africa behind. After all, Ball, though enslaved, has the possibility (through escape or manumission) of returning to where he began, unlike “saltwater slaves” who could never return home to Africa. Yet, there is despite Ball’s efforts, the sense that he too cannot not “return” as his condition, fraught with the desire to belong, cannot belong. As Ball, at the onset of his narrative states, “To acquire this knowledge [of the condition of Southern slaves], the traveller must take up his abode for a season, in the lodge of the overseer, pass a summer in the remote cotton fields, or spend a year within view of the rice swamps” (10). To travel, but not dwell, is to extend the empire’s apologies for slavery. Dwelling in the landscape or environment promises but does not guarantee, knowledge; nonetheless Ball draws together these three elements. And as Ball travels, as our guide, into the cotton fields and malarial rice swamps, he both builds an archive of origins and begins the construction of the New World African.

Ball’s narrative looks back, into the wake of the Middle Passage, and deep into the path the passage will take, as it exposes the violence that uncoils when both humans and land are exploited. Ball is positioned at a liminal moment: his narrative takes place largely during the decade leading up to the British 1807 prohibition on the transatlantic slave trade and the rapid increase of the internal slave trade in North America, which Ball experienced directly. He is also witness to the last large influx of forced immigrants—humans sold as commodities—from the African continent. In this sense, Ball becomes an Afro-futurist, mapping out the identity of the New World African, not as a continuation of cultures from the African continent, but as a re-construction as new cultures. We see Ball’s project continue, almost genealogically, in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and then, in the work of Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor and their future histories, and even, perhaps in the Afro-music infused poetic odysseys of Nathaniel Mackey and Will Alexander.

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