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# Staging Aural Fugitivity through Nineteenth-Century Freak Show Archives

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Article abstract

This essay analyzes aural fugitivity in archives of nineteenth-century freak show performers Millie Christine McKoy and traces the difficulties in staging these archives for twenty-first-century audiences. Aural fugitivity couples theories of Black fugitivity with sound studies analysis of enslavement and nineteenth-century performance in order to explore the legacies of freak show and sideshow performers who were also enslaved. This essay, taking as an object of analysis the author's own creative work based on these archives, traces the biography of the McKoys alongside their performance strategies that resisted full archival capture through fugitive sound.

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## Staging Aural Fugitivity through Nineteenth-Century Freak Show Archives

Danielle Bainbridge

“I ‘member w’en I’s jes’ a li’l gal a-hearin’ bells in d’ night. D’ ol’ folks say dat some ‘r’ d’ run-a-way niggers from uder plantation. Dey put bells on d’ slaves, wel’ [weld] dem on so dey kaint gittum off ‘n’ dey kin hear dem iffen dey git ‘way in d’ woods.”

*[“I remember when I was just a lil gal bearing bells in the night. The old folks say that some are the run-a-way niggers from other plantations. They put bells on the slaves, weld them on so they can’t get them off and they can hear them if they get away in the woods.”]*

—Amy Domino, former Alabama slave, quoted in *The Sounds of Slavery*

### Introduction

In the epigraph of this essay, former Alabama slave Amy Domino recounts the soundscape of repeated enslaved fugitivity, the sounds of bells piercing the air as enslaved Black people who had previously attempted to self-emancipate ran to freedom once again. For Domino, the bells signalled both the attempt and the failure of freedom, possibilities welded shut like the devices clanging around the ankles of the enslaved. This sound of coupled truncated fugitivity and captivity became one of the major catalysts for my 2018 performance piece *Curio*, performed at the University of Pennsylvania Theatre Department and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe that same year. In it, I ask: what are the sounds of slavery onstage, and how does the excessive pathologizing and medicalization of the Black fugitive and/or free body contribute to these soundscapes? Although the bells Domino remembered were heard on the terrifying landscape of the cruel plantation, my interest in the bell stemmed from my own inquiries into the lives and nineteenth-century performances of enfreaked performers, most especially Millie Christine McKoy (Samuels 2011). Conjoined twins born into slavery in North Carolina in 1851, the McKoys spent their lives until their deaths in 1912 as sideshow and freak show performers, a musical singing duet, and virtuosic entertainers.

Before Emancipation, the McKoys’ lives consisted of semi-public medical examinations and publicity materials that centred on the nature of their attachment, which ran from their hips through their shared genitals. However, their performance strategies both under slavery and after legal freedom consisted of ways to centre their vocality, speech acts, and musical abilities in order to decentre the previous exploitative focus on the medicalization of their physical bodies. Yet there is evidence in the archive that even under the binds of legal slavery, the McKoys and their family spent a good portion of their childhood embroiled in both public custody and kidnapping claims, as well as private extrajudicial attempts to secure their earnings from their performance labour after Emancipation. Because this evidence of complex fugitivity also relates to the performance strategies the McKoys adopted after slavery that centred mental prowess, polyglot skills and song over their former physical exhibitions, I am terming this performance technique *aural fugitivity*.

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Building on Daphne Brooks' "spectacular opacity" (2006) and Uri McMillan's "sonic of dissent" (2015), aural fugitivity looks to how sound acts that refuse all-encompassing archival capture and recording are antithetical to the panoptic gaze of slavery's meticulous record-keeping and exist in the archive as an act of refusal by enslaved or otherwise oppressed performers. Therefore, the fragmentary nature of the McKoys' performance archive should be honoured and spotlighted in any attempts to recreate or restage it for contemporary audiences. To this end, *Curio* never allows the audience to become completely lost in the pure pleasure of visual observation and performance of the enfreaked body that defined the McKoys' act prior to Emancipation. Rather, every aspect of the staging and script is designed to highlight the qualities of aural fugitivity that the McKoys took part in onstage.

This essay will couple an analysis of the McKoys' aural fugitivity with an excavation of *Curio* in order to answer the opening question about slavery's sounds when they are thrust under the scrutiny of the stage. Through aural fugitivity, the Black enslaved performer is able to gain conditional freedom from an all-encompassing archival capture by using sound acts that defy accurate recording. The McKoys' aural fugitivity took the form of lyrics that exist in the archive without music (which served as the basis for *Curio*), as well as their improvisational speech acts that so delighted and astonished audiences that they failed to be dictated or recorded. Through improvisational and ephemeral speech and sound acts, the McKoys were able to maintain a fugitivity rooted in their uniquely untraceable and hard-to-define sound. Their articulations and music serve as the catalyst for my own artistic and scholarly exploration of the sounds of slavery onstage, leading me to contemplate the best ways to stage nineteenth-century aural fugitivity for a twenty-first-century audience.

Since the McKoys were enslaved until Emancipation but constantly either passively (as children) or actively (as newly freed young women) engaged in an ongoing struggle for freedom, I looked for ways to stage the aural fugitivity they perfected under slavery and continued to refine even after legal freedom. However, I soon realized early in the writing process that merely faithfully restaging the McKoys' shows would not illuminate the strategies of aural fugitivity that dictated the terms of their pre- and post-Emancipation performances. All the archival evidence that remains of their performance strategies exists in incomplete fragments: reviewers' praise of their singing voices, reports of them speaking to two people at once to prove they weren't one person, claims that Millie was an alto and Christine a soprano, evidence they always used the singular first person pronoun when referring to themselves, and lyric sheets that survive in their coauthored (auto)biographies sans music with the indication that some of the songs were written expressly for them and instructions that audiences should sing along.<sup>1</sup> It was out of these fragments of information that I began to interrogate how I could create a soundscape that encompassed both the complexity of the McKoys' performed world and also the social and legal conditions of aural fugitivity that were evident in their biographical information.

Therefore, I eschewed more faithful recreations of the McKoys' performances and evidence in the archive that indicated more conventional approaches in favour of a "critical fabulation" in service of the methods they employed during their lives (Hartman 1997). Namely, I chose to stage a historical and theoretical intervention by replacing the instruments they played in life (e.g., the piano and the guitar, which are mentioned in written and visual archival materials) with a set of handbells when I set their lyric sheets to music. I was drawn to the bells for a variety of reasons. First, their use in torture devices like the ones described in the epigraph and staged in the bell rack (below) meant that they were already a part of the accounting and property loss prevention methods well documented in slavery. These torture devices, as essential to the mechanisms of slavery as the plantation owner's

ledger and the whip, had an accompanying auditory function different from other methods of control: to make fugitivity heard when it could not be seen. Second, combining a fictional element like the bells with a historical fact like the lyric sheets allowed for a bridge between a faithful restaging and a complete reimagining of the archives. It allowed me to take what I could glean about the McKoys' aural performances and to fill the voids where I could not know (namely, the sound of the music that would have accompanied them in real life.) And lastly, by having the bells played onstage in *Curio* later transformed into a bell rack worn by the actresses playing the McKoys, the bells never allowed our audiences to become completely comfortable in the visual realities of the enfreaked and enslaved Black body onstage. The bells decentred physical awareness of the enfreaked body in favour of repurposed sound. I worked in close collaboration with undergraduate performers at the University of Pennsylvania (Duval Courteau, Aria Proctor, Breyasia Scott and Hannah Spear along with student composer Elias Kotsis), scenic designer Sara Outing, and our director Dr. Rosemary Malague. The result was a process born of mutual interrogation and creative discovery that helped to reimagine the worlds of enslaved and enfreaked performance around aural fugitivity. This essay interweaves analysis of *Curio* alongside biographical and (auto)biographical archival remains of the McKoys in order to excavate the ways they created their uniquely fugitive sound.



The bell rack. Courtesy of the WPA Slave Narratives online archive.

## Part One: The (Auto)Biographies of Millie Christine McKoy



Poster for Curio. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Theatre Arts Department.

My theorization of the McKoys' aural fugitivity rests on two critical stories in their archival biography. Although there are multiple stories of resistance in the McKoys' archive, I've marked these two as significant because they predate the twins' decision to eliminate semipublic physical and medical exams from their performances at fourteen. That shift from medical anomalies to purely musical and vocal duets and other sound acts (e.g., speaking to two people in two languages at once) marks an important transition from slavery to legal freedom and physical objectification to greater control of their act and earnings. I mark these predating events as significant in their formulations of performances under newly granted freedom because each story points to a complex interplay between legal freedom and extrajudicial methods used to keep Black people perpetually enslaved. Out of this mire of competing forces emerged a performance strategy that redefined the McKoys' relationship to both white audiences and their extraordinary physical bodies. The first comes from an 1883 reprinting of their 1871 (auto)biography.<sup>2</sup> This evolving document was likely coauthored by the McKoys and the white sideshow proprietors who helped to orchestrate their act (Frost 2009). The (auto)biography exists in many permutations in the archive with addendums, additional details, and advertisements changed to suit the specificity of the individual sideshows it was used to advertise.<sup>3</sup> Because the McKoys often collaborated with different showmen and travelling performances, the shifting details of the (auto)biography serve as a curious destabilizer of their personal narrative.

Additionally, these printed (auto)biographies were used to advertise the McKoys' act and also served as souvenirs for the eager audiences who came to see their shows. The (auto)biography also serves as the most complete archival record of the McKoys' lives and performance legacies. It combines biographical information about the twins' early lives and origin story with a fantastical account of their multiple kidnappings in their youth, medical reports about their conjoined bodies, and the lyric sheets that serve as the basis of *Curio*. Although the veracity of the document remains in question, it nevertheless remains the best jumping-off point for the analysis of the twins' performance strategies.

The second biographical source that serves as the basis of the twins' aural fugitivity is an 1866 letter written to the Freedman's Bureau on behalf of the twins' parents, Menemia and Jacob McKoy. The letter implicates the McKoys' final owner, Mrs. Smith, and famed showman PT Barnum in an alleged plot to keep the young McKoys enslaved after legal emancipation by having them perform without wages in Barnum's Museum in New York.

This narrative of forced performance labour combined with the (auto)biography's assertion that the twins were kidnapped multiple times in their youth because of their earning potential as racialized freaks create the conditions of fugitivity that defined the McKoys' act post-Emancipation. By purposefully shifting the focus of their act from the invasive semipublic doctors' exams and reports that defined their youth to aural improvisational performances that defied simple and all-encompassing archival capture, the McKoys were able to assert an aural fugitivity in the face of a system that sought to perpetually enslave them onstage. This enslavement was inherently linked to their race, disability, and exceptional talents.

Two versions of the biography printed in 1883 and not attributed to any particular author, held in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Yale University, serve as the basis of my analysis of the twins' ongoing attempts at some form of self-styling and limited liberation.<sup>4</sup> A later version of the twins' original 1871 (auto)biography is reprinted in Linda Frost's *Conjoined Twins in Black and White* (2009, 40–49). The major difference between the published biographies at the Beinecke and the circulated (auto)biography is a switch from the first-person singular to a narration written in the third-person singular (although both fluctuate between singular and plural pronouns, as most materials on the twins do). Interestingly, the versions of the biography and (auto)biography are almost identical in content, showing that the same story was circulated as a generic template and that there was also a conscious cultivation of the twins' public image and personal narratives. Only the autobiographical account, published in 1871, is credited to a direct authorial source: the twins themselves. However, considering that the content remains virtually untouched, it seems highly unlikely that they were the sole original authors of the text. Speaking about the role their autobiography has played in contemporary interpretations of the twins' lives, Ellen Samuels notes in "Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet":

I argue that contemporary attempts to recognize the McKoys' agency by treating this first-person narrative as an autobiography that speaks in their actual voice(s), and thus as a reliable historical source, have actually functioned to present the twins as collaborators in their own oppression. (Samuels 2011, 55)

Samuels goes on to note that the content of the autobiography falls into the category of "apologist slave narratives," seeking to promote its own form of supposedly "benevolent" slavery that is unsupported by contemporary historical evidence (2011, 55). I agree with Samuels' assertions that uncritically utilizing this first-person narration as a site of agency unwittingly casts the twins as coconspirators and willing participants in their own enslavement. Yet coupling these biographical and supposedly "autobiographical" accounts with additional resources regarding the twins' enslavement, freedom, and varying legal status does elucidate that they were highly conscious of their status as physical commodities. As a result, these texts, which focus heavily on the twins' movements and legal statuses, show the permeability of the various sites of emancipation they traversed as well as their ability to manipulate and navigate these legal statuses to their advantage.

The 1883 promotional biography begins by listing the eight known wonders of the world, with “Miss Millie Christine, the Carolina Twin” ranking in eighth place. The text itself is proclaimed to be a “Biography, Medical Description, and Songs” of the twins, effectively listing the three major selling points of their show. The biographical description goes on to note the twins’ birth in 1851 on the plantation of a minor slave owner named Alexander McCoy (from whom the twins took their surname). Born to Menemia and Jacob McKoy, the twins would later go on to purchase tracts of land near the plantation on which they were born for their elderly parents.<sup>5</sup> In turn, their father bequeathed this plantation to his children and grandchildren, with the stipulation in his will that the land could not pass to any other but his direct descendants (Martell 2000, 254). The biography notes that McCoy was a poor farmer, and when the twins were approximately fifteen months old, he sold them to a man referred to only as Brower for \$10,000. Because Brower was not in full possession of the cash amount, a Mr. Joseph Smith was then asked to secure the promissory note, after which Brower relocated the twins to New Orleans for a medical exhibit and freak show. Brower, however, proved to be a poor businessman. He met an unidentified self-proclaimed Texas millionaire. The man claimed to own “large tracts” of land in that recently formed US state. However, the would-be millionaire turned out to be a scam artist and quickly absconded with the twins to Northern states, where they were secretly put on public display (Biography 5).

As the story goes in the biography, when Joseph Smith is informed of the twins’ kidnap, he promptly pays the outstanding debt of \$10,000 to McCoy, gaining full legal custody of the disappeared girls. The author then notes this proviso in Smith’s agreement with McCoy:

He at once paid the purchase money in full to Mr. McCoy and took from him a deed which made him the exclusive owner, under then existing laws, of the person of Millie Christine. The proviso, “wherever he could find her,” was of course understood, and in order to quiet the mind of her mother and convince her that, whenever found, the child would be restored to her care, Mr. Smith at the same time purchased the father, mother and seven children, a transaction of course involving a large sum of money, all of which was dependent for its recovery on the recovery of Millie Christine herself. (Biography 6)

If ownership over the child is not the inherent right of the enslaved mother, Smith’s decision to claim legal responsibility over the twins’ entire family is more closely related to his proviso that he should be able to recover the twins “wherever he could find her.” It is at this precise moment the narrative diverges from the American context to take on a transnational scope. The twins’ bodies were being passed from hand to hand in American slaveholding states, and even throughout Northern states who were obligated under law to return escaped enslaved persons to their owners under the edicts of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (passed scanty one year before the twins were born). However, the spectrum of international slave law further muddled the waters of their legal status.

The twins were then secretly transported to Britain and were later discovered on exhibition in Glasgow, Birmingham, and finally London. According to the biography, Mr. Smith then transported the entire McKoy family, including Menemia, to London to reclaim ownership of the young girls. The twins were returned to the care of their mother. In the biography, the author ventriloquizes the ruling of the British judge presiding over the case, writing:

The child should be given into the custody of its lawful mother. If it was not the child of the defendants, then mother never bore a child. Every lineament, every feature, every look betokened it; every spectator in his inmost heart felt, yes, knew it to be her child, almost as certainly as though they had seen it every hour since its birth.” (Biography 9)

Because slavery had been abolished in Britain and its territories from 1833 onwards, Smith’s claims of ownership ended at US borders. Therefore, in Britain, the children’s legal status (and that of their parents, for that matter) was converted from enslaved to free. Yet the mandates of Smith’s ominous proviso reign dominant here. By purchasing their parents and moving them to London temporarily, Smith was able to circumvent British law and retain unlawful ownership of the entire McKoy clan. He then transported them back to North Carolina, supposedly at the bequest of Menemia.

After they returned to the US, the entire McKoy family remained under the legal ownership of the Smith family until the official abolition of American slavery. However, even following the abolition of slavery and the departure of their parents and siblings from the Smith household, Millie and Christine remained with the Smiths for many years in a dubious legal status somewhere between enslaved labourers and employed performers. This muddled legal status, in which they lingered somewhere between employee and enslaved, is further demonstrated by the 1866 letter to the National Freedman’s Bureau. The letter not only shows that there was ongoing conflict over the McKoys’ earning potential and custody post-Emancipation but also demonstrates the often-fraught relationship between legal ownership and parental custody. By this juncture, they had already begun to shift their performances away from semipublic and highly reported medical examinations to performances of aural virtuosity and dexterity. After age fourteen, the twins were never examined naked by a medical professional, with the exception of their 1871 visit to a Dr. Pancoast when they were treated for an abscess-like formation on their shared genitals (Samuels 2011, 66–69). And yet, despite their often-celebratory biographical writing about their lives under slavery (which included high praise for the Smiths in their (auto)biographical and biographical texts), the McKoys’ archive points to contradictory conditions of freedom, even after Emancipation, as evidenced by this letter. The letter, which predates both the (auto)biography and biography, notes a claim that the twins’ parents (Jacob and Menemia) brought against the widow of their former owner, a woman named Mrs. Mary A. Smith, on August 17, 1866, less than a year after the end of the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

In the letter, a Lieutenant Echelberry writes to General Allan Rutherford that he has met with “Jacob and Menemia McCoy (freed) and would respectfully ask if there can be any thing done by the military authorities to help them get possession of their children.” He goes on to note that Mrs. Smith, who was the owner of Menemia and Millie-Christine at the time of emancipation, “refused them their freedom, and by misrepresentations kept them in her service some time thereafter.” Through threats, coercion, and concealment, Mrs. Smith kept possession of the underaged twins, requesting that Jacob and Menemia sign over the custodial rights to their children in exchange for “one fourth of all she made by exhibiting the children.” The letter closes by saying:

Under these promises and threats, they signed the contract and Mrs. Smith kept possession of the children and has them now on exhibition in Barnum’s Museum, New York City. Mrs. Smith has not paid any money for the services of the children and the parents are very anxious to get possession of them again, and they are not able to follow Mrs. Smith and appeal to the civil authorities on account of not having money. From the character that Jacob and Menemia have among those that know



them, I think their statement true. (quoted in Samuels 2011, 63–65)

There appears to be the potential here to think of this move as an act of demanding labour reparations for the McKoys' time spent in Barnum's Museum in New York City. Here the distinction of custody and ownership over the twins' (both their enfreaked bodies and the earning potential of that unified body) remains in flux.

Both the McKoys' biological parents and their former owner maintain that they have a right to ownership of the girls and their earnings and look to exert those rights through this custody dispute. The fact that the girls at this point are teenagers (merely fifteen years old) only serves to heighten this legal battle. This comes at a point when just a year prior, the twins had begun to change the shape of their act by refusing to be exhibited or examined nude in public, and also following several internationally published kidnapping attempts in their early childhood, which are detailed in newspaper articles and their biographies.<sup>7</sup> So the conditions of their performances, even after we might assume legal emancipation, continued to bear the weight of unfreedom even into the latter half of the nineteenth century, similar to the narratives taken from the archives of the Freedman's Bureau detailed by Tera Hunter in her monograph *To Joy My Freedom* (1997).

## Part Two: Aural Fugitivity Emerges

After the twins began to deny or severely limit doctors' public and private access to their conjoined bodies (most notably their conjoined genitalia, which served as a point of continued examination and fascination), they began to engage in performance strategies that centred speech and sound acts over physicality. By withholding access to their bodies post-Emancipation, the twins set in motion a new way that they would be represented. The Smiths (their final owners) went on to teach the women multiple languages (in some cases, it is reported as four, in others five or seven), singing, dancing, reading, and playing musical instruments. Their act became a combination of these activities, with the medical reports and "verifications" limited to the texts of their promotional programs. Instead, they focused on performing the skills they learned in their traditional ladies' education. Reports of Millie and Christine speaking to two different people on two different subjects, often in two different languages, proliferate the archive as their new main attraction post-Emancipation, replacing medical exams altogether. And suddenly in the archive, there is song where there once were only silent observations, a marked shift upwards from the lower half of the twins' bodies to their faces that also moves us from visual material to aural material.

By identifying and amplifying the properties of music and sound in their archives, *Curio* first and foremost recreated a sense of their performance artistry and labour as it would have existed in real life. It also spoke beyond the contradictory and challenging speech present in their (auto)biographies to get to the heart of the conditions under which they performed as formerly enslaved and later free women. Because the McKoys' lyric sheets were meant to be sung and not read, there was something deeply dissatisfying to me in simply reading the work as written text without hearing them. Thus, I embarked on a journey to find the properties of the work and animate them in ways that foregrounded theatrical research and praxis in equal measure. Nineteenth-century enslaved performers like the McKoys in life and onstage were at once highly valued as spectacles (someone to be gaped and gazed at) and seen as abjectly valueless through the systems of traditional enslaved labour that deemed them unfit for "real work" because they couldn't bear children or enrich the estate through traditional manual or domestic labour. This is mirrored in the archive after death,

where we still focus on the spectacle of these performers because we assume they are abject or “unfit for bondage” (borrowing here from Dea Hadley Boster). But it is precisely the impulses of curiosity and pleasure that continue to drive artists, scholars, and audiences to these works. The conditions of bondage under which they were created (regardless of whether the bodies were deemed fit or unfit) continue to ensnare and condemn us as a result. By sitting with and through the discomfort of my own complicity in creating this piece, I aimed to recreate conditions that mirrored the painful legacies of enslaved or unfree performance with methodologies that amplified the virtuosity of the McKoys’ skills. This existed both onstage for the actresses portraying the McKoys and throughout the audience who came to witness the staging.

With details of their (auto)biographies informing the action of the play, I turned my attention to the McKoys’ lyric sheets sans music. I combined the conditions of unfreedom that permeated their archives prior to and immediately after Emancipation with my own theorizations and research into how their world onstage should sound for twenty-first-century audiences. In order to do this, I made a few tentative assumptions as a writer but not a composer and combined my assumptions and research with the efforts of student composer Elias Kotsis and the direction of Dr. Malague. The first assumption was that the McKoys’ musical legacies largely centred on their speaking abilities, vocal styling, and oral and linguistic dexterity. This assumption was confirmed by extensive archival research at Yale’s Beinecke as well as in the North Carolina collection of UNC Chapel Hill and the North Carolina State Archives. My second assumption about the lyric sheets sans music was that music usually delivered in this style has a few common characteristics that (as a nonmusician) I’ve anecdotally observed. They tend to be easy to sing and repetitive and are intended for singers and nonsingers alike to be able to join along extemporaneously. As a model for this, I thought of nineteenth-century parlour songs with rolling Southern pastoral themes and Black Christian gospel hymns. The imagery of the lyrics, with their idealized genteel antebellum South and traditional Christian themes, reinforced this feeling in me. In doing so, I wanted to recreate the space of the freak show stage, where the McKoys’ eager audiences (for an additional fee) could purchase souvenir programs like the one I previously discussed. But I still wanted to emphasize the conditions of unfree or fugitive performance in the archives of the McKoys. As a result, I was drawn to the handbell because bells were frequently used as torture devices to sound the alarm if fugitive slaves repeatedly attempted to escape.

Bell racks and devices like them were meant to not only protect slave owners from the loss of property but also dehumanize and pathologize fugitivity. Writings on methods of torture and control often stressed not only hindering escape through physical impairment but also through psychological torture meant to destroy the emotional resilience of the enslaved, attaching pseudoscientific terms to them such as “rascality,” “drapetomania,” and “sullenness.” Similarly, freak shows often centred on displaying the medical disabilities of enslaved performers. *Curio* explores the connection between the bell as both a signal of capture and a method of music-making. The piece is invested in unpacking the use (or refusal) of medicalization onstage in the nineteenth century by investing in theory and sound over the purely visual spectacles favoured in freak shows. In creating a performance piece out of the archival remains of the McKoy twins, I wanted to perform the methodological gesture of impartial observation that was so closely tied at its roots to the practice of displaying disabled and enslaved enfreaked bodies onstage. What occurred for these performers at the intersections of legality, disability, medicalization, and public performance? And what is our aim as scholars and artists when we reanimate these contentious performance practices for contemporary audiences?



Still from *Curio*. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Theatre Arts Department.

I became obsessed with the haunting resonance of the bell, both as it's sounded to make music and as it's used to capture and further enslave fugitive bodies. The devices like the ones described by Domino in the epigraph show a particular cruelty in their design. Not only were they meant to constrict the movement of the enslaved through the use of heavy and cumbersome metal structures, but they also made invisibility (one of the few protective postures of the slave) impossible through auditory means. Escape is most often thought of as an act that is dependent on invisibility or the act of not being seen. What this fixation of the visual ignores is that the sounds of escape needed to be equally undetectable in order to assure a fugitive body's safe passage. That these barbaric devices made you both more visible and more audible is their ultimate torture. The bells become transformed in her mind as connected to the process of thwarted escape. In this vivid recollection, the bell becomes both a method of capture, a way of ensuring the human property of plantations could not and would not make their repeated attempts at escape. The bell also unconsciously shows evidence of Black resilience and fugitivity, for why else would it be necessary to take these excessive measures if slaves were contented, as slave owners so often claimed?

This final question became particularly important in staging the lives of the McKoys post-Emancipation. The letter written on behalf of their parents to the Freedman's Bureau shows definitive evidence of attempted freedom and assertions of their rights to fair pay from their performance labour. This stands in direct opposition to the contented, almost familial relationship between the McKoys and the Smiths portrayed in the (auto)biography and biography. Similarly, their refusal to be examined again after being granted legal freedom demonstrates not only an awareness of their legal rights as newly minted free women but also an acknowledgment of the boundaries they could now create onstage between themselves and white audiences. In choosing to enliven the McKoys' performances for contemporary audiences, I drew attention to this knowledge of unfreedom coupled with the growing pains of Emancipation. Alongside this knowledge, I also had to reckon with the fact that in some ways, the freak show stage offered limited possibilities to exercise new freedoms for formerly enslaved Black subjects precisely because it was dependent on

an undergirding of medicalization and the objectification of disability. So even while I celebrated the McKoys' shift from physical display to more fully embracing the use of sound, I also recognized that this was a gesture with limited possibility for full freedom. Hence the bell became a symbol of their enslaved past, their newly won independence under legal freedom, and the limitations of those same freedoms under the weight of ableism and white supremacy.

### Part Three: Staging the McKoys for Contemporary Audiences



Costume design for *Curio*. Courtesy of Sara Outing.

When I began writing creative work out of the McKoy twins' archive, I drew inspiration from several artistic sources. The first (very surprisingly) was Audra McDonald's Broadway turn as Billie Holiday. During her critically acclaimed and transformative performance in *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*, Audra McDonald as Billie Holiday begins to recall her musical predecessors Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. Taking these iconic performers as her musical antecedent, Holiday recalls how she always admired Bessie Smith's "big sound," which she was never truly able to emulate because "my voice isn't that way." However, when speaking of Armstrong's ability to convey emotion throughout his vocality, she laughs when she recounts that she never understood why he didn't "sing no words." In this moment, both McDonald the performer and Holiday (the performer, the character, the persona, the myth, the memory) are at their signature funniest. The audience is in stitches recalling Armstrong's scat, a loose connection of sounds and notes and utterances that are as signature to his style as his most famous standards (e.g., "Hello Dolly" and "What a Wonderful World"). Here the performer takes an unexpected turn, lowering her voice to barely above a whisper, before uttering dreamily, "but I just wanted that *feeling*. You know?" McDonald's whispering raised for me a fundamental question of Black orality and musicality: what is mimicry

and what is signification? What are the attendant values of ownership and possession inherent in delineating these two categories of artistic agency? Additionally, how do we measure style, that which is ephemeral and transient, intangible, and essential? More specifically, how do these pieces encourage us to view modes of style as not only essential to performance, but also to a Black performance tradition? What exactly is “that feeling,” and is it familiar enough to all of us that Holiday’s soft questioning “you know” resonates with each of us the same? What does she ask us to know?

My own project in the McKoy twins’ archive focuses primarily on practices of consumption and performance labour as exercised by the McKoy family, both before and after legal emancipation in the form of aural fugitivity. In looking at the process through which a body can be categorized as “free” or “enslaved” and thinking about the ways the McKoys enacted subtle but strategic freedom through control of their performance labour practices, my project meets at the intersections of the “slave narrative” and emancipated labour, thinking of Fred Moten’s evocation of the “anti- and ante- slave” and Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley’s “anti- and ante- modern.”<sup>8</sup> But looking again to *Lady Day*, a moment in the production that struck me as particularly poignant was Holiday’s entreaty to the audience that parole officers always showed up to stop her club performances because she had no work card, which she was no longer eligible for because she was a convicted felon. Although early in the show she jokingly noted that a parole officer’s role was to stop her from “having too much fun,” here we hear a different refrain: “*they won’t let me work!*” How is this knife’s edge balance between pleasure and labour a constant mire for the Black female performer? What does an archive like that of the McKoy twins and Holiday say about the potential perils of these labour practices? What are the terms under which a Black performer’s body enters the national and international consciousness (as Farah Griffin so aptly notes in her 2004 essay “When Malindy Sings”)? And lastly, what insights do we gain from a moment like seeing Audra McDonald, an actress whose meteoric and sustained success on the Broadway stage has become the central plot point of her public persona, making her employability significantly less tenuous than her antecedent Holiday, uttering the frustrated words of *Lady Day*, “they won’t let me work!”? And how does Holiday’s insistence on performing until the end in spite of legality show a careful balance between an oppressive hypervisibility and a determined personal aural fugitivity so often expressed in Black performance?

The other side of my inspiration for the McKoy twins’ performance didn’t stem from music at all, but rather from the use of the bell in both torture devices and visual culture, as I mentioned earlier. At a point in my piece *Curio*, the two actresses (moving through the motions of an academic lecture) stop to tell the audience about the origins of the word “drapetomania.” Researchers 1 and 2 are embodiments of my role in the archive, while Woman 1 and Woman 2 are cast as storytellers and jokester characters that work to upend and unsettle the progress of the academic lecture. They say:

RESEARCHER 1: A footnote: *Drapetomania*. A fictitious mental illness coined by Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright. Theorized as the reason that enslaved blacks fled captivity. Scientific racism, roundly disproven. Was popularized in 1851 the year the McKoy Twins were born.

RESEARCHER 2: You said that already.

RESEARCHER 1: I did?

RESEARCHER 2: Yes.

Then about thirty minutes later, they return as different characters to note:

WOMAN 2: If Drapetomania is a mental disease, the insanity of the slave, then the Bell Rack is a medical device.

And finally, another few minutes pass, and they add:

WOMAN 2: A footnote: *Drapetomania*. A fictitious mental illness coined by Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright. Theorized as the reason that enslaved blacks fled captivity. Scientific racism, roundly disproven. Was popularized in 1851 the year the McKoy Twins were born.

WOMAN 1: Is it diagnosable drapetomania if you just *dream* of running away?

WOMAN 2: What?

WOMAN 1: If it's only dreaming?



Joscelyn Gardner, *Creole Portraits*.

So, when it came time to stage my versions of these songs, it was this impulse at the back of my mind, along with my research and images of Caribbean visual artist Joscelyn Gardner's 2012 work "Creole Portraits," which was commissioned by and appeared in *Small Axe* 37. Gardner couples detailed and colourful etchings of the abortifacient flowers reportedly used by enslaved women to end unwanted pregnancies alongside torture devices and almost ventriloquized pseudomedical/scientific language used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to classify and define the Black female body. It was Gardner's coupling of Western medical pathology with the shared knowledge of Black enslaved women (through the abortifacients and the tenderness evidenced by the intricate braiding designs) that drew me to take some dramaturgical licence when

setting the McKoy twins' lyrics to music. Since I already knew that I wanted to keep the parts of the songs that were irrevocably existent in the archives (the lyric sheets) in their original form, the music was a place for me to explore instruments that were more in service of the show than historically accurate.

After puzzling over the question of aural fugitivity and bells for about two to three years, I became interested in videos of all-girl handbell choirs online. At the time, I was looking for an instrument for my two actresses to play that would require all four of their hands to move in coordination, but without obstructing our view of their bodies or faces. I needed the songs to be simple, repeatable, and easily taught/learned. I wanted every prop that was written explicitly into the script to serve at least two functions onstage and signal the conditions of mixed freedom and unfreedom that the McKoys performed under. I already had the bells written in for the scenes of torture devices and the sounds of ringing bells and how that noise is (for me) haunted by their historical weight. But I found as I watched more and more videos of handbell choirs (most of whom were from the US South) that the bells also created a haunting and resonant ringing tone that aligned with the themes of *Curio* more closely than the piano or guitar. So, when the pieces sung in *Curio* were composed, our creative team looked to the handbells to provide insight into the complex conditions of freedom and aural fugitivity that the McKoys performed under while also capturing the otherworldly virtuosity of their live performances that reviewers and witnesses recount in reviews of their shows. The resulting performances of *Curio* demonstrated that the handbells were the most effective theatrical device in the show. While other segments felt strained or difficult for the actresses to embody (namely segments that mirrored academic lectures or focused exclusively on autobiographical material), audiences tended to be drawn in by and transfixed by the bells. The transition from musical instrument to torture device also proved to be one of the more instructive moments in the 2018 performance. It heightened audiences' awareness of the politics behind the McKoys' work while also providing another opportunity to hear the bell music in a different way when one actress (who was not wearing the device) reached over and rung the bell hanging high over her fellow cast member's head. The development of this moment came in collaboration with scenic designer Sara Outing and Dr. Malague as we discussed ways to make props more utilitarian onstage while also maintaining their dramaturgical functions.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the 2018 production and projecting ahead to future rewrites and restaging, I plan to amplify the use of the bell and decentre the use of more academic frameworks in the script of *Curio*. Although the work was and is intended as an excavation of an archival collection, I found the framing of a lecture somewhat restrictive in our attempts to illuminate the deeper theatrical properties of the McKoys' extraordinary lives. In future productions, I'll reinvest in the impulses that originally drove *Curio*: namely telling the lives and performance strategies of these remarkable women while also working to limit or restrict the amount of historical harm in the process of retelling. By examining the sites that we as historians and scholars are indebted to in order to retrieve the narratives of performers like the McKoys, this project offers a lens into the economies of pleasure and pain that still haunt both the margins and the centre of the McKoys' virtuosic legacies and aural fugitivity.

By concerning my research and theatrical staging with illuminating the properties of the archival materials rather than a strict historical reenactment, *Curio* offers a new critique of the McKoy twins'



archival remains and performance legacies. The piece itself owes a great deal to the collaborative efforts of the entire company, without whom I would not have been able to stage the archival properties of the McKoys' songs for a general audience. There remains work to be done to bridge the gaps between the traditional scholarship of performance theory and theatre history and praxis. I am deeply indebted to works of theatrical ethnography that paved the way for scholar-artists to find ways to enact and act upon our archives in innovative ways. The work I've done and continue to do with *Curio* lives in a world that intersects these ethnographic methods with artistic and scholarly praxis to create an ethnography of the archive through performance.

## Notes

1. "Clara Yeoman, their only surviving sister, has spent her life in Columbus County [North Carolina]. Her famous *sister* were older than her by about six years. Millie-Christine would have been almost eighty-three years of age, had they lived. When interviewed by newsmen on last Friday afternoon, one particular thing was noticed about Clara's conversation. *She always referred to Millie-Christine as one, and never in a plural sense*" (article on Millie-Christine McKoy, *News Reporter*, March 29, 1934, emphasis mine). See also *Wilmington Daily Herald*, letter to the editor, June 9, 1859; Touchaatout and La Fosse, *Trombinoscope* Paris, France, 1873; and reviews from the *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 10, 1912, and September 27, 1925, *Raleigh Register*, October 22, 1853, *New Berne Journal*, *Whiteville News Reporter*, December 10, 1925, and March 29, 1934, *Wilmington Daily Herald*, and *Wilmington Morning Star*. All sources cite the twins' multilingual performance skills as a central drawing force of their act and a primary mode of distinguishing one sister from the other.
2. Here, I mirror Daphne Brooks' (2006) gesture of "(auto)biography" in reference to the twins' autobiographical text.
3. In *Conjoined Twins in Black and White*, Linda Frost (2009, 16) asserts that at least five versions of the autobiography were printed and reprinted around the world during the McKoys' careers. The first came in 1871 in London and was updated by their then show manager Judge H. P. Ingalls. In 1882, another version, published in New York by Torrey & Clark, appeared during the twins' time touring with the Batcheller and Doris Great Inter-Ocean Show. Another three versions were published between the 1880s and the early twentieth century. Frost recreates a version of the text that appeared sometime between 1902 and 1912 and was published in Cincinnati by Hennegan & Co.
4. Millie Christine Bio Sketch, dated 1883, Archives of Millie Christine McKoy, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut. This biographical sketch of Christine and Millie features a fictionalized account of the twins' birth, early life, rise to fame, and travels. It follows a form commonly used in performance programs and publicity materials popular in American freak shows of the late nineteenth century. The program also includes several doctors' reports verifying the twins' conjoined status, lyrics from the songs they would perform (with instructions for the audience to sing along) and advertisements on each page for Merchant's Gargling Oil Liniment used for humans and animals alike.
5. The 1870 census notes that "Jacob McKay" owned \$250 worth of personal real estate and a personal estate valued at \$150 (Martell 2000, 136).
6. Original letter from L. Echelberry to General Allan Rutherford, August 17, 1866. Courtesy of the Freedmen's Bureau Collection, National Archives.
7. Millie Christine Bio Sketch, dated 1883, Archives of Millie Christine McKoy. Most versions of the (auto)biography list "receptions" that Millie-Christine held for public audiences and various European dignitaries as part of their touring routine.
8. "As we navigate the postmodern we must look for the fissures that show how the anti- and ante-modern continue to configure black queer broken-and-wholeness. At the same time, the meaningfully multi-blued



Atlantic tells us that we must continue to navigate our field *metaphorically*” (Tinsley 2008, 212); “(anti-, ante-[slave]) narrative fashion” (Moten 2003, 24).

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