



'Profane language, horrid oaths and imprecations': order and the colonial soundscape in the American mid-Atlantic, 1650–1750

Daniel Johnson

To cite this article: Daniel Johnson (2021) 'Profane language, horrid oaths and imprecations': order and the colonial soundscape in the American mid-Atlantic, 1650–1750, *Social History*, 46:3, 255-277, DOI: [10.1080/03071022.2021.1932286](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2021.1932286)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2021.1932286>



Published online: 04 Aug 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 165



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



'Profane language, horrid oaths and imprecations': order and the colonial soundscape in the American mid-Atlantic, 1650–1750

Daniel Johnson

Bilkent University

ABSTRACT

One of the most important developments in the historical discipline in recent years has been the growth of histories of the senses, and studies of sound and soundscapes have made important contributions to this growing field. The relationship between a perennial early modern concern for social order and 'noise' has received relatively little attention, however. This article examines the formation of novel soundscapes between the 1650s and 1740s in the North American middle colonies, the most ethnically and culturally diverse region of the English Atlantic world. Placing special emphasis on the region's two largest cities, New York and Philadelphia, it argues that the mid-Atlantic's distinctive soundscapes posed significant problems of order for urban and provincial authorities during a period of elite Anglicization. Sound was more than a way to encourage new norms of politeness; it was a source of contestation between different cultural systems. Speech, music and other sounds were also instrumental in processes of class, ethnic and racial formation.

KEYWORDS

Early modern mid-Atlantic; soundscapes; disorder; festive culture; race; class; music

On the evening of 26 December 1701, music and laughter emanated from the tavern of John Simes in Strawberry Alley, not far from the Delaware River in the centre of the new town of Philadelphia. What distinguished this night from others was that revellers brought the festivities from Simes's tavern to the public space of the street, and from there to neighbourhood houses. John Smith, Edward James, Sarah Stiver and Dorothy Cantorill danced, revelled, wore masks and cross-dressed in Simes's establishment. Smith and Stiver strolled down Chestnut Street between Second and Third Streets, knocking on inhabitants' doors and bringing their celebration to other residents' dwellings. The city's Quaker authorities were scandalized by the merrymaking, and indicted celebrants as well as Simes for keeping a disorderly house. The Philadelphia grand jury claimed the 'dance and

Revell' brought 'Greef and Disturbance' to the neighbourhood, and propagated the 'Throne of wickedness' among the urban population.¹

Though scholars have puzzled over precisely what was going on in Strawberry Alley since the nineteenth century, the event was an example of 'mumming', or 'mummering'.² Mumming was a feature of Twelve Days celebrations, and involved men and women exchanging clothes and going to neighbours' houses in festive performance in exchange for gifts. The practice was long discouraged by English authorities, with the corporations of London, Bristol and Chester banning walking openly masked during the Christmas season in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.³ Yet the tradition persisted, constituting one example of the sort of popular practice early modern moral reformers sought to eliminate. In 1725, the Newcastle curate Henry Bourne published an ethnography of plebeian customs that described mumming as the partaking of Christmas cheer among neighbours through 'dancing and singing, and such like Merriments'. However, as a remnant of the Roman festival of Saturnalia, mumming received a 'deserved Blow' from the church in the middle ages. Yet according to Bourne the holiday was still practised, remaining an 'Occasion of much Uncleaness and Debauchery' in early eighteenth-century England.⁴

For urban magistrates and moralists like Bourne, mumming and similar forms of customary entertainment confirmed the belief that peoples on both sides of the Atlantic were living in an age of debauchery in the decades surrounding the turn of the eighteenth century.⁵ Historians have explored the development of 'civility', 'politeness', and 'gentility' from a variety of perspectives in recent decades. In the wake of scholarship of the 1970s that posited a widening gap between elite and popular cultures in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, historians of England have more recently emphasized the emergence of a 'middling sort' in the early modern era.⁶ Examinations of the middling sort generally correspond to studies of changing patterns of consumption, with some scholars arguing that a 'consumer revolution' in eighteenth-century Britain and North America created the first modern, middle-class

¹Presentments of John Simes, John Smith, Sarah Stivee, Edward James and Dorothy Cantorill, January 1702, Ancient Records of Philadelphia, 1702–1770, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP).

²J.F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia: Being a collection of memoirs, anecdotes and incidents of the city and its inhabitants* (New York, 1830), 257; J.T. Scharf and T. Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884* (Philadelphia, 1884), I, 157; S. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore, 2002), 231–32.

³R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The ritual year, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994), 8–9.

⁴H. Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares: Or, the antiquities of the common people* (Newcastle, 1725), 147–50.

⁵*Proposals for a National Reformation of Manners* (London, 1694); B. Colman, *A Sermon for the Reformation of Manners* (Boston, 1716).

⁶K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (Oxford, 1971); P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978); E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in traditional popular culture* (New York, 1993); J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, society and politics in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 1994); H.R. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1500–1750* (Oxford, 2007).

societies.⁷ Renaissance notions of civility filtered down from elites to the middling sorts, in this view, as increased access to consumer goods fostered a culture of bourgeois respectability. At the same time, of course, being a refined member of the ‘better sort’ made little sense without politeness’s contrary, the ‘vulgar’.⁸

One aspect of traditional culture especially troubling to moral reformers and proponents of refinement, but that has received little attention from historians, was that of ‘noise’. That disorderly plebeian soundscapes remain largely unexplored is notable considering the growing prominence of histories of the senses in recent years.⁹ Though receiving less attention than the history of emotions, histories of sound have been an important component of this growing field.¹⁰ While scholars of sound have not ignored colonies and non-elites, Europe has generally remained the centre of attention in histories of the senses, with categories and agents of change between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries framed by the Renaissance and Enlightenment.¹¹ This orientation has, explicitly or implicitly, corresponded to earlier studies of politeness and consumerism, making for a narrative of aural refinement among an increasingly prominent middling sort.

With a few notable exceptions, sounds’ subversive dimensions have gone unexamined.¹² ‘Noise’ was in fact a major contributor to social disorder in the early modern world, signalling disruption of the public peace and, if uncontrolled, the upending of established authority. Deferential language, not cursing or swearing oaths, obeying curfews and maintaining peaceable taverns were the everyday aspects of an aural order whose violation, authorities believed, portended licentiousness and ultimately anarchy. Yet whereas ideas concerning verbal or musical gentility were increasingly disseminated throughout the early modern British world in the abstract sphere of print, material soundscapes were necessarily local and shaped by social structure and custom. While polite sounds corresponded to quietness and private space, disorderly sounds transgressed spatial and temporal

⁷N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (London, 1982); R.L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, houses, cities* (New York, 1992); M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005).

⁸K. Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and civilization in early modern England* (New Haven, 2018).

⁹See the forum ‘The senses in history’, *American Historical Review*, 166, 2 (2011); C. Classen (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses*, 6 vols. (London, 2014); S. Ashbrook and M. Mullett (eds), *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense perceptions in Byzantium* (Washington, DC, 2017); D. Hacke and P. Musselwhite (eds), *Empire of the Senses: Sensory practices of colonialism in early America* (Boston, 2017).

¹⁰For emotions see W.M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A framework for the history of emotions* (New York, 2001); S. Broomhall (ed.), *Early Modern Emotions: An introduction* (New York, 2016); R. Boddice, ‘The history of emotions’, in S. Handley, R. McWilliam and L. Noakes (eds), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London, 2018). For sound see B.R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-factor* (Chicago, 1999); D. Garrioch, ‘Sounds of the city: the soundscape of early modern European towns’, *Urban History*, 30, 1 (2003), 5–25; R.C. Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, 2003); and the special issue ‘Sound politics: critically listening to the past’, *Radical History Review*, 121 (2015).

¹¹H. Roodenburg (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Renaissance* (London, 2014); A.C. Vila (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Enlightenment* (London, 2014).

¹²Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, *op. cit.*, chap. 4.

boundaries, offending (or pleasing) in an immediate and often public manner. Since few writers defended lower-sort speech, laughter or music, the persistence of traditional sounds is most often revealed in sources hostile to them. Yet the persistence of ‘noise’ in the face of reformers’ and official hostility suggests that sounds were important sites of early modern contestation.

A variety of soundscapes developed in the English Atlantic world after 1660. John Gay poetically captured the rattling coaches, creaking signs (whose noise ‘your ears offend’), chirping sparrows, street criers and ballad singers of early eighteenth-century London, while historians have recently examined ‘hubbub’ in early modern England.¹³ In the American colonies, the soundscapes of New England villages resembled those of provincial English towns – though speech was governed particularly severely in puritan North America.¹⁴ Scholars have frequently emphasized the importance of bells in early modern cities, and in colonial towns the ringing of church bells reproduced English soundscapes by announcing church times, curfews and special events.¹⁵ (Sound scholars have not commented on bells’ function in regulating work times, a practice originating in late medieval Europe also utilized by urban authorities in colonial towns like New York and Philadelphia.)¹⁶ Historian Richard Cullen Rath, and literary critics Mary Caton Lingold and Bruce Smith, have explored how musical practices brought by captives from West and Central Africa shaped cultural life on Caribbean plantations.¹⁷ By the late 1600s, in the new slave societies of the West Indies, the Chesapeake Bay and the Carolina Lowcountry, enslaved people gathered on holidays and, in the words of one observer, ‘according to their own country fashion they feast, dance, and sing (or rather howl like a beast) in an antic manner, as if they were all mad’.¹⁸

A case could be made, however, that the mid-Atlantic colonies of New York and Pennsylvania – and especially the growing port cities of New York and Philadelphia – best demonstrate how new colonial soundscapes were sites of sociocultural conflict in the British Atlantic

¹³J. Gay, *Trivia: Or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*, 2nd ed. (London, 1716); E. Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, noise, and stench in England, 1600–1770* (New Haven, 2007).

¹⁴J. Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The politics of speech in early New England* (Oxford, 1997).

¹⁵Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, *op. cit.*, 64; Garrioch, *op. cit.*, 9–10; P. Burke, ‘Urban sensations, attractive and repulsive’, in Roodenburg, *op. cit.*, 50.

¹⁶J. Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1980), 43–52; C.R. Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City, 1450–1750* (London, 1995), 247; E.B. O’Callaghan (trans. and ed.), *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638–1674* (Albany, NY, 1868), 20; A.C. Myers (ed.), *Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey and Delaware, 1630–1707* (New York, 1912), 262.

¹⁷Smith, *op. cit.*, chap. 10; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, *op. cit.*, 77–83; R.C. Rath, ‘African music in seventeenth-century Jamaica: cultural transit and transition’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 50, 4 (1993); M. Caton Lingold, ‘Peculiar animations: listening to Afro-Atlantic music in Caribbean travel narratives’, *Early American Literature*, 52, 3 (2017), 623–50.

¹⁸John Taylor quoted in S.D. Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the transformation of English society, 1640–1700* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 100. See also P.D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 524–25; J.L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and gender in New World slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004), 169–70.

world. Between the 1650s and early eighteenth century, religious radicals fleeing England, some with sonic appellations like ‘Ranters’ and ‘Singing Quakers’, arrived in large numbers in the region and fomented noisy controversy. In addition to English and Dutch (New Netherland became New York after the English conquest of 1664), numerous European, West African and indigenous languages were spoken in the mid-Atlantic. Loud and boisterous taverns in the region’s ports consistently frustrated colonial authorities between the 1680s and 1710s, and the relatively large populations of enslaved people in New York and Philadelphia contributed to the formation of African-influenced, creole urban soundscapes.¹⁹

Threats to aural order posed by ‘mixed multitudes’ persisted in the mid-Atlantic through the first half of the eighteenth century. Yet between the 1720s and 1740s, colonists’ importation of new metropolitan ideas and practices concerning politeness and refinement – a secularized and exclusive reformation of manners – altered mid-Atlantic soundscapes. A process of cultural Anglicization among urban elites included refined mannerisms and ways of speaking as well as patterns of consumption which served to distinguish the genteel from the multitude. The establishment of local newspapers and lively print cultures facilitated the circulation of ideas concerning ‘politeness’, while also providing an arena in which to ridicule plebeian sounds. This included the reproduction of African forms of speech and music, thereby adding another dimension to an evolving process of early modern racialization. At the same time, local presses also published ‘plain spoken’ criticisms of authorities, while autonomous urban subcultures expanded in the region. Sound was more than a way to impose new norms of politeness; it was a source of conflict between different cultural forms, and was instrumental in the making of ethno-racial and class identities in the American colonies.

Revolutionary and Restoration soundscapes in the mid-Atlantic, 1650–1700

In the summer of 1650, England’s new Commonwealth government passed the Blasphemy Act. The statute, which outlawed ‘Atheistical, Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions’, was directed primarily against Ranters, a group of libertarians allegedly advocating the ‘dissolution of all Humane Society’. In addition to blasphemy, drunkenness and various sexual transgressions,

¹⁹New York City’s enslaved population remained around 20% through the colonial period, while that of Philadelphia stood at between 10% and 15%. G.R. Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, 1999); G.B. Nash and J.R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its aftermath* (Oxford, 1991).

Ranters regularly cursed and swore oaths.²⁰ In their publications, Ranters Abiezer Coppe and Laurence Clarkson dissolved traditional metaphorical distinctions in Christian imagery between light and dark, and therefore good and evil. The auditory counterpart to such attacks against orthodoxy was the breaking of taboos against blasphemy. For Coppe, cursing had a purgative effect on the soul, and ‘God hath so cleared cursing, swearing, in some, that that which goes for swearing and cursing in them, is more glorious than praying and preaching in others’.²¹ Ranter profanity was also often accompanied by music. At one tavern meeting, a group of men and women sang blasphemous songs to the tune of metrical psalms; according to the puritan heresiographer Ephraim Pagitt, Ranters were ‘the merriest of all devils for extempore lascivious songs ... for healths, music, downright bawdry and dancing’.²²

Historians have long speculated about the relationship between the suppression of Ranters and the subsequent development of Quakerism in the 1650s. Many contemporaries thought the groups had shared origins – Thomas Collier claimed the doctrines of Ranters and Quakers were identical, though Quakers displayed a more ‘austere carriage’.²³ While the Society of Friends eventually adopted a devotional practice of quiet contemplation and a respect for political hierarchy, in the 1650s a regular form of Quaker agitation was the theatrical disruption of church services and the urging of parishioners to repent. George Fox proudly admitted to ‘uncivill railing’ against ‘hireling’ priests, for example.²⁴ Tracts by other early Quaker authors were equally uncivil: Edward Burrough and Francis Howgill called critics like the future Muggletonian John Reeve a liar, dragon, Jesuit, enemy of God, and a ‘dead Beast’.²⁵ After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Charles II’s government banned the publication of ‘heretical, schismatical, blasphemous, seditious and treasonable’ ideas, and dissenting sects like Quakers were prohibited from spreading sacrilegious ideas.²⁶

Repression led many Friends and other dissenters to immigrate to the Americas. The importance of sound (and its absence) to early Quaker

²⁰August 1650: An Act against several Atheistical, Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions, derogatory to the honor of God, and destructive to humane Society’, in C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait (eds), *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642–1660* (London, 1911), 409–12. *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/acts-ordinances-interregnum/pp409-412> (accessed 3 May 2020).

²¹A. Coppe, ‘A fiery flying roll and a second fiery flying role’, in N. Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings: Spiritual liberty and sexual freedom in the English Revolution* (London, 2014), 83–84. See also L. Clarkson, ‘A single eye all light, no darkness’, in *Ranter Writings*, 121–23.

²²Quoted in C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical ideas in the English Revolution* (London, 1972), 200–01. For Ranters and music see also Smith, *op cit.*, 29–30.

²³Quoted in Hill, *op. cit.*, 237. See also B. Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (New York, 1985); A. Davies, *The Quakers in English Society, 1655–1725* (Oxford, 2000).

²⁴[George Fox], *Several Papers; Some of them given forth by George Fox; others by James Nayler ... under the name of Quakers* (London, 1654), 10, 16, 17.

²⁵E. Burrough and F. Howgill, *Answers to Several Queries Put Forth to the Despised People called Quakers* (London, 1656).

²⁶Licensing Act, 1662, in A. Browning (ed.), *English Historical Documents, 1660–1714* (London, 1966), 66–69.

agitation was evident in the North American mid-Atlantic as early as 1657. In August of that year a ship approached the Dutch West India Company town of New Amsterdam at Manhattan flying no flag from the topmast, and no salute was fired before the fort, as was customary on ships' arrival in ports. When the company fiscal boarded the vessel, passengers tendered the official no honour or respect, and when the shipmaster appeared before director-general Pieter Stuyvesant he again offered no deference, and instead 'stood still with his hat firm on his head, as if a goat'. Stuyvesant had great difficulty getting any passengers to speak at all, being able to learn only that the ship left London eight weeks earlier. New Netherland authorities eventually discovered that the passengers were Quakers, and the following morning the ship hoisted anchor and sailed eastward for New England – probably, officials surmised, to Rhode Island, the 'latrina' of dissenting 'riff raff' from New England.²⁷

Company officials were unaware that two women from the vessel remained in New Amsterdam. After the ship's departure, and in contrast to the silent refusals of the previous day, the women suddenly 'began to quake and go into a frenzy, and cry out loudly in the middle of the street, that men should repent, for the day of judgment was at hand'. While the action was a common Quaker tactic in England, the mainly Dutch-speaking residents of New Amsterdam were utterly confused, with some running in panic while one 'cried "Fire", and another something else'.²⁸ Not long after, a stranger entered the centre of town 'and made terrible hue and cry in the streets and on the bridge, crying woe, woe, to the crowne of pride and the drunkards of Ephraim Repent – repent, as the kingdom of God is at hand!'. The man also entered the Dutch Reformed Church and 'made a great noise, for the purpose of disturbance, as their [Ranters'] manner was'. All three Quakers were flogged and banished from the colony.²⁹ In 1663 New Netherland made expulsion official policy when it banned Friends from the colony along with vagabonds and other fugitives.³⁰

Radical dissenters' hopes for Christ's imminent return abated with the Restoration, and George Fox's assumption of centralized leadership over Quakers led to the establishment of the Religious Society of Friends. In the 1670s and 1680s, the Scottish Friend Robert Barclay published pamphlets that distanced Quakers from Ranters and other revolutionary-era sectaries, and attacked the alleged licentiousness of previous decades.³¹ In the mid-

²⁷J. Megapolensis and S. Drisius to the Classis of Amsterdam, 5 August 1657 (postscript 14 August), in H. Hastings (ed.), *Ecclesiastical Records of New York* (Albany, NY, 1901), I, 399–400.

²⁸Hastings, *op. cit.*, 400.

²⁹J.F. Watson, *Annals and Occurrences of New York City and State, In the Olden Time* (Philadelphia, 1846), 165.

³⁰E.B. O'Callaghan (ed.), *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638–1674* (Albany, NY, 1868), 439–40.

³¹R. Barclay, *The anarchy of the Ranters, and other libertines, the hierarchy of the Romanists, and other pretended churches, equally refused and refuted in a two-fold apology for the church and people of God called in derision Quakers* (London, 1676); R. Barclay, *An apology for the true Christian divinity, as the same is held forth, and preached by the people, called, in scorn, Quakers* (London, 1678).

Atlantic, noisy controversies demonstrated hostility not only to Calvinists and the Church of England, but also to a new, more moderate Society of Friends. On Long Island it was reported that a group of men and women entered Friends' meetings 'singing and dancing in a rude manner'. A Quaker strategy to attack the Church of England involving sound and performance in the 1650s became a method of critiquing the Society of Friends' meetings, which by the 1670s encouraged silent contemplation until moved by the inner light. On their American tour Society leaders George Fox and William Edmundson were confronted by dissenting Quakers or Ranters in Rhode Island, East Jersey and Long Island.³²

Though J.C. Davis argued in the 1980s that Ranters as a group never existed, communities of self-identified Ranters inhabited the middle colonies into the eighteenth century.³³ In 1706, a poor man named John Pearce admitted to Woodbridge, New Jersey's Society that he previously belonged to a local party of Ranters. A repentant Pearce informed the local meeting that his group could be identified 'by their Speech, for they generally say to all sorts of people beware of the old Quakers, beware of Foxes [Fox's] Orders'. That Ranters would 'whisper in the ears of all people' criticisms of new forms of Quaker discipline is suggestive of the manner in which talk concerning Friends' alleged backsliding circulated in early America. Pearce's emphasis on the fact that local Ranters spoke to 'all sorts' suggests an egalitarian disregard of rank reminiscent of Quakers from a half-century earlier.³⁴

While accusations of backsliding against allegedly worldly Quakers would continue to be voiced by some mid-Atlantic Friends well into the eighteenth century, the agitational tactics of the early Quakers subsided at the end of the 1600s.³⁵ While groups of Ranters like that of Woodbridge may have persisted in the region, authorities viewed a different form of aural disorder as potentially more destabilizing.

Making a festive aural culture, 1664–1720

On his arrival as West India Company director-general in in 1647, Pieter Stuyvesant was shocked by the alcohol-saturated chaos he found in New Amsterdam. Workers insulted company officials, church attendance was minimal (at least in part because of language differences between French, Walloon and Dutch employees) and raucous taverns were a staple of the

³²Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, *op. cit.*, 134.

³³J.C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and their historians* (Cambridge, 1986).

³⁴At Nathaniel Ffytz Randolph's in Woodbridge the 19th day of the 10th month 1706, in B. McConville, 'Confessions of an American Ranter', *Pennsylvania History*, 62, 2 (1995), 238-48, here 244.

³⁵See the account of an elderly man recorded by the Quaker John Woolman in P.P. Moulton (ed.), *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (Richmond, IN, 1971), 139.

company town.³⁶ Though historians have emphasized Stuyvesant's imposition of order and New Amsterdam's significant growth in the 1650s, this unruly tavern culture persisted after England's 1664 conquest of New Netherland.³⁷ Three years after Pennsylvania's 1682 founding, William Penn celebrated that his colony was populated by settlers of 'French, Dutch, Germans, Swedes, Danes, Finns, Scotch, Irish and English' descent.³⁸ However, by the early 1690s disorderly taverns, townspeople's abuse of constables, public gatherings of 'Negroes & loose People' and other 'Wickedness' scandalized Penn and Philadelphia magistrates.³⁹

The people of New Amsterdam offered little resistance to the English invasion in 1664, and the Articles of Capitulation granted Dutch colonists significant privileges.⁴⁰ After a brief reconquest by the United Provinces during the Third Anglo-Dutch War in 1673, however, anti-English sentiment ran high. Dutch burghers complained to the States General in the United Provinces about the authoritarian rule of the new English governor, Edmund Andros, while ordinary townspeople uttered seditious words against local authorities in New York City.⁴¹ 'Cornelis the fisher' and David Ogden – the latter of English, not Dutch, descent – were indicted for uttering seditious words against the Crown in 1675; around the same time Jacob Kipp was presented for refusing to obey local constables, giving them 'ill Language' and saying he would 'not bee ruled by a company of fooles, etc'.⁴² Class and ethnic tensions in New York came to a head when townspeople rebelled against Governor Francis Nicholson after news of William of Orange's invasion of England reached the city in 1689. One hostile account of the rising employed a traditional discourse of 'murmuring' and 'popular clamours' when referring to the spread of false rumours among a credulous urban multitude. According to this anonymous author, the demagogic leader Jacob Leisler (who spoke with a pronounced German accent) inflamed the mob with his 'Billingsgate Rhetorick' – an expression referring to the coarse language of fishwives in London's Billingsgate fish market.⁴³

³⁶E.B. O'Callaghan and B. Fernow (eds), *Records of New Amsterdam from 1653 to 1674 Anno Domini* (New York, 1897), I, 255–56, 272; *ibid.*, II, 53; Hastings, *op. cit.*, I, 52–55, 217, 229.

³⁷O'Callaghan and Fernow, *op. cit.*, I, 242–43, 262, 298, 362–63; C.T. Gehring, (trans. and ed.), *New Netherland Documents Series: Council minutes, 1655–1656* (Syracuse, NY, 1995), 70.

³⁸Myers, *op. cit.*, 260.

³⁹E.B. Bronner (ed.), 'Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions and Common Pleas, 1695', *American Journal of Legal History*, 1 (1957), 79–95, here 90 and 92; Salinger, *op. cit.*, 184; P. Thompson, *Rum, Punch & Revolution: Taverngoing and public life in eighteenth-century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1999), 32–34.

⁴⁰'Articles of Capitulation on the Reduction of New Netherland', in E.B. O'Callaghan et al. (eds), *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York* (Albany, NY, 1853–1887), II, 250–52.

⁴¹*ibid.*, 738–44.

⁴²K. Scott (ed.), *New York Historical Manuscripts: Minutes of the Mayor's Court of New York, 1674–1675* (Baltimore, 1983), 14 (Kipp), 22 (Cornelis and Ogden). See also New York City Court of General Sessions, New York City Municipal Archives August 1694–February 1731, February 1695 (hereafter NYCMA); Bronner, *op. cit.*, 237–38.

⁴³Anon, 'A modest narrative', in C.M. Andrews (ed.), *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675–1690* (New York, 1915), 339. G. Hughes dates the expression to the 1650s in *Swearing: A social history of foul language, oaths and profanity in England* (London, 1998), 22–23.

Weekly markets were spaces in which, in addition to the cries of sellers and the clatter and dragging of goods, colonists emitted drunken insults, oaths and curses that disrupted the public peace. In 1702, the Philadelphia grand jury indicted the butcher and ‘comon swarer and a comon drinker’ George Robinson for swearing three oaths and cursing in the city market.⁴⁴ (Robinson had a proclivity for verbal offences: he was indicted for swearing in of 1695, and was called to appear again at the same session for calling fellow butcher John Beacham a ‘West Country Rogue’ and a ‘thieving dog’.)⁴⁵ It was likely in the market that the merchant William Wright publicly – and probably drunkenly – declared in 1718 that Jesus Christ was a bastard.⁴⁶ While the swearing of oaths in everyday discourse was a punishable offence in early modern England, in many localities it was considered evidence of ‘stout courage’.⁴⁷ In a colony ruled by Quakers for whom the taking of oaths was anathema, oath-taking and blasphemous speech were likely intended to provoke officials.⁴⁸ It was also in the space of the market, equally open to all, where verbal offences such as cursing and the swearing of oaths in violation of law were most public – and therefore threatening to the established order.

While mid-Atlantic colonists swore and uttered seditious and profane words on city streets and in local markets, taverns were the most consistent source of aural and other forms of disorder. As in Europe, colonists verbally and physically abused constables when they tried to disperse revellers from noisy taverns and ordinaries operating after curfew. Also like their European counterparts, mid-Atlantic watchmen refused to enforce unpopular laws and, if able, paid fines to avoid the watch altogether.⁴⁹ In 1695, Philadelphia watchman Thomas Morris received ‘very abusive Language’ from a group of men frequently found in alehouses after curfew. After attempting to clear the men from the public house of ‘Widdow Cox’, revellers called Morris ‘Rascall Curr, Beast, Impudent Dog etc’.⁵⁰ While entertaining servants and slaves was illegal, unfree workers regularly frequented waterfront taverns in New York and Philadelphia in the late seventeenth and early

⁴⁴Grand Inquest Presentment of George Robinson, 1702, Ancient Records, HSP.

⁴⁵Bronner, *op. cit.*, 88, 176; Thompson, *op. cit.*, 122.

⁴⁶Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, *op. cit.*, 309.

⁴⁷K. Wrightson, ‘Two concepts of order: justices, constables and jurymen in seventeenth-century England’, in J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds), *An Ungovernable People: The English and their law in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (New Brunswick, 1980), 25.

⁴⁸J. Smolenski, *Friends and Strangers: The making of a creole culture in colonial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 2010), 73–74.

⁴⁹A.R. Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in times past* (New York, 2005), 81–82, 250; C. Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire: A history of night in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), 171–72; Ancient Records, 1705, HSP; H.L. Osgood (ed.), *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1674–1776* (New York, 1905), II, 188, 273.

⁵⁰Bronner, ‘Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions and Common Pleas, 1695’, *American Journal of Legal History*, 1, 3 (1957), 236. See also *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, 1704–1776* (Philadelphia, 1848), 97 (hereafter *MCCP*); Mayor’s Court Docket (1759–64), 1760, 1762, Philadelphia City Archives; New York Court of General Sessions, 1724, 1727, 1737, 1740, NYCMA.

eighteenth centuries.⁵¹ Often run by unmarried women, these mixed-race lower-sort taverns were viewed by authorities as dens of iniquity in which proper social and racial distinctions were ignored.⁵²

While servant and slave drinking sessions were mostly confined to labouring-sort waterfront taverns, townspeople of all ranks witnessed the festive Sabbath celebrations of the enslaved. New York City's first race-based ordinance concerned not crime, flight from bondage or rebellion, but rather creolized African cultural practices. In 1681, magistrates complained of the riotous gatherings of 'Negroes and Indian Slaves' on Sundays. That their 'Rude and Unlawfull Sports and Pastetimes' disturbed the 'Peace and Quiet' of English subjects suggests that sound was as important as visual stimuli in fomenting urban disorder. The games and music that constituted enslaved inhabitants' day of rest also 'Drewed asside and mislead' Christian townspeople. Rather than attend church, colonists became spectators and even participants in the celebrations.⁵³ Though the enslaved population was smaller than that of New York, Philadelphia magistrates and grand juries also complained of slaves' tumultuous meetings in large numbers on Sundays. As in New York, enslaved people congregated in public squares in rowdy celebration with Europeans, especially youths and indentured servants.⁵⁴

Mid-Atlantic magistrates and grand juries complained of noisy public gatherings of the enslaved during the same years English visitors recorded their impressions of creolized African soundscapes in the Caribbean. The exiled royalist Richard Ligon represented the music of enslaved Africans in Barbados as early as the mid-seventeenth century. Comprised of kettle drums, fifes and choral singing, Ligon found enslaved people's music melodically simplistic but complexly timed. It was, in Ligon's characteristically ambivalent manner, both 'a pleasure to the most curious eares' and 'one of the strangest noyses that ever I heard'.⁵⁵ The Anglican missionary Morgan Godwyn commented in 1680 on the 'Idolatrours Dances and Revels' practised by enslaved people in Barbados. Though Barbadian masters allowed slaves to maintain their African customs, these were no longer 'heard' among slaves in Virginia, where they were now

⁵¹Osgood, *op cit.*, I, 85–86; Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions, May 1703, Ancient Records, HSP.

⁵²For indictments for entertaining 'Negroes' see New York Court of General Sessions, 1692 (Katherine Marehand), 1696 (John Wilkins), 1699 (Albertus Ringo and Richard Alstead), 1709 (Mary Lyndsey), 1710 (Catherine Elberts, Elizabeth Groon), New York City Court of General Sessions, NYCMA.

⁵³*Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1912: Proceedings of the general court of assizes, held in the city of New York, October 6, 1680, to October 6, 1682* (New York, 1913), 37–38; Osgood, *op cit.*, I, 85–86.

⁵⁴Bronner, *op. cit.*, 92; Grand Jury Petition to the Mayor and Commonalty, 1702; Petition of the Grand Inquest, 1717, Ancient Records, HSP.

⁵⁵R. Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados, Illustrated with a Mapp of the Island, as also the Principall Trees & Plants there, set forth in their due Proportions and Shapes, drawne out by their severall and respective Scales* (London, 1657), 48.

allegedly ‘forgotten by disuse’.⁵⁶ Later in the decade Hans Sloane wrote of how enslaved people in Jamaica, ‘although hard wrought’, gathered in the evening or on feast days to ‘Dance and Sing’ to songs which were ‘all bawdy, and leading that way’. Sloane also described the stringed musical instruments made from hollowed out gourds used by island musicians, and published the first transcription of Afro-Caribbean music.⁵⁷

Absent from accounts of West Indian soundscapes are fears of colonists being ‘mised’ or ‘seduced’ by raucous gatherings of the enslaved, which reflected the different social and spatial orderings of the mid-Atlantic. While English visitors observed the cultural practices of enslaved people on Caribbean plantations with detached curiosity, in the congested towns of New York and Philadelphia officials viewed slave gatherings in a manner more in keeping with traditional European fears of disorder. This is further indicated by the incorporation of enslaved people’s sounds and activities into an English discourse of lower-sort recalcitrance. New York City magistrates’ fears of free townspeople being deceived by disorderly African sounds were expressed in language similar to Queen Elizabeth’s concerns that the ‘vulgar sort’ were ‘seduced’ by unlearned preachers in the 1570s, or Essex authorities’ worries about Quakers ‘seducing and withdrawing’ people from ‘due Obedience to the good Government of this Nation’ in the 1650s.⁵⁸ Philadelphia magistrates referred to slaves travelling without permits as ‘gadding abroad’, a term traditionally applied to English servants.⁵⁹ At the same time, mid-Atlantic enslaved people’s closer proximity to non-slaveholding Europeans did not prevent people of African descent in New York or Philadelphia from creating a sense of collective identity through music and Sabbath-day celebrations.

European authors had represented African and Indigenous American peoples as similar to children and common people in mental capacity since the sixteenth century.⁶⁰ They also characterized women as naturally more susceptible to irrational passions, and more inclined to scandalous or scolding speech, than men – though Friends held unusually progressive

⁵⁶M. Godwyn, *The Negro’s & Indians Advocate, Suing for their admission into the Church: Or, a persuasive to the instructing and baptizing of the Negro’s and Indians in our plantations* (London, 1680), 144.

⁵⁷H. Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, &c.* (London, 1707), xviii–li; Lingold, *op. cit.*, 627–30; Rath, ‘African Music’, *op. cit.*; L. Dubois, *The Banjo: America’s African instrument* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

⁵⁸Elizabeth’s order for the suppression of prophesyings, 7 May 1577, in I.W. Archer and F. Douglas Price (eds), *English Historical Documents, 1558–1603* (London, 2011), 841; Davies, *op. cit.*, 11.

⁵⁹Hazard, *op. cit.*, I, 380–81; W. Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight treatises* (London, 1622), 617; ‘Gadding’, *OED* (1628); P. Seleski, ‘Women, work and cultural change in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London’, in T. Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500–1850* (Houndmills, 1995), 53.

⁶⁰N. Zemon Davis, ‘Proverbial wisdom and popular errors’, in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight essays* (Stanford, CA, 1975) 255; K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A history of the modern sensibility* (New York, 1983).

views regarding women's equality.⁶¹ As in puritan New England, however, in Pennsylvania women's speech acts constituted threats to social order. Though Pennsylvania's founding legal system famously rejected corporal punishments in favour of workhouses, restitution and individual reform, between the 1690s and 1720s Philadelphia grand jurymen – all Quakers – repeatedly requested a ducking stool to punish 'scolding women'.⁶²

If Philadelphia Friends continued to try to control women's unruly speech into the eighteenth century, non-Quakers – a growing percentage of the Pennsylvania population – expressed hostility to Quakers' alleged 'stiffness'. Barry Reay has noted that critics in England used the epithet 'stiff Quakers' as early as the 1650s.⁶³ Elizabeth Ashbridge, a Cheshire emigrant who arrived in New York by way of Dublin in the early 1730s, witnessed considerable dislike of Friends in Pennsylvania, who were identifiable by their speech as well as dress. Ashbridge's husband, a New England school-teacher named Sullivan, began to suspect Elizabeth of having converted to Quakerism in part because she sat in silence during Sullivan and friends' 'Diversion & reviling'. When Ashbridge addressed Sullivan with the Quaker address 'thee' on his return from a trip, he flew into a rage and exclaimed: 'the Devil thee thee, don't thee me'. While travelling in search of work, at a Philadelphia tavern Sullivan informed the company that though as a 'good Churchwoman' Ashbridge had loved to dance, as a 'Stiff Quaker' she now neither danced nor sang. When one of the patrons brought out a fiddle and began to play, Sullivan insisted on dancing despite Elizabeth's discomfort. When the musician noticed Ashbridge's eyes fill with tears as Sullivan swept her around the room, he stopped playing and said, 'I'll play no more, let your wife alone'.⁶⁴

Ashbridge's conversion and marital conflict, and the attempt to 'cure' her of her Quakerism through music and dance, testify at an interpersonal level to the importance of speech and sound to cultural difference in the early modern mid-Atlantic. Sounds were most socially prominent when they challenged authority and the social order, however. In the formative decades between the 1660s and early 1700s, novel mid-Atlantic social formations fostered the creation of soundscapes characterized by a profusion of languages and forms of expression. Such disparate modes of articulation posed distinct problems of order, as authorities worried over the ways old and new sounds transgressed ill-established boundaries and thus disturbed an ideal of orderly quiet. Those who made 'noise' also drew on customary

⁶¹Kamensky, *op cit.*, 20, 22, 156–58; C. Baker, 'An exploration of Quaker women's writing between 1650–1700', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5, 2 (2004), 8–20.

⁶²E.B. Bronner (ed.), 'Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions and Common Pleas, 1695', *American Journal of Legal History*, 2 (1957), 182–83; Ancient Records of Philadelphia (1717, 1720), HSP.

⁶³Reay, *op. cit.*, 70.

⁶⁴E. Ashbridge, *Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge*, in Daniel B. Shea et al. (eds), *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American women's narratives* (Madison, WI, 1990), 161–62.

understandings, though in their case – and whether of African or European origin – the recreation of traditional sounds constituted a crucial method of creating community and belonging in novel colonial environments.

Refinement and aural opposition

Efforts by colonial elites and imperial officials to bring European refinement and urbanity to English America began in the late seventeenth century.⁶⁵ The Boston physician Benjamin Bullivant commented on New Yorkers' and Philadelphians' recent construction of buildings after the 'English fashion' in 1697 (though some in New York retained a preference for the colourful red and yellow brick fronts inherited from Dutch builders).⁶⁶ While religious diversity would remain a notable feature of the middle colonies, the construction of Trinity Church in New York and Christ Church in Philadelphia in the 1690s, as well as the erection of new government buildings, gave physical expression to colonial authorities' desire to make their principal towns more English. Sonic, visual and spatial expressions of Englishness included, in New York, urban officials' swearing of oaths of allegiance at a new city hall, followed by a procession to Trinity Church where a sermon was preached. Authorities then marched back to city hall, where after the ringing of three bells additional oath-taking and public rituals took place.⁶⁷

It was in the decades between the 1720s and 1740s, however, that European ideas of gentility took root in the mid-Atlantic ports. While population growth, accompanied by construction booms and a marked increase in the importation of English goods, facilitated the adoption of metropolitan fashions, sound was also key to the development of class- and gender-based norms of civility. Quietness was a feature of politeness that connoted restraint and self-discipline; literature on manners therefore urged controlled, soft speech. In England, the conceptual shift in the first half of the eighteenth century that saw the male sex, rather than the female, to be naturally lustful, also encouraged women's passivity and silence.⁶⁸ While men and women attended the concerts, dances and plays that could increasingly be found in the colonial metropolises (though Friends kept the theatre out of Philadelphia until 1754), for fashionable women these were the primary spaces to be seen, and heard.⁶⁹ Colonists learned that women's

⁶⁵Bushman, *op. cit.*, xii; P. Musselwhite, "'This Infant Borough': the corporate political identity of eighteenth-century Norfolk", *Early American Studies*, 15 (2017), 801–34.

⁶⁶B. Bullivant, *A Glance at New-York in 1697* (reprint; New York, 1957), 9–13, 17–18.

⁶⁷Osgood, *op. cit.*, II, 91, 188.

⁶⁸L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, words and sex in early modern London* (Oxford, 1996); R.B. Shoemaker, 'The decline of public insult in London, 1660–1800', *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), 97–131, here 114–16 and 125.

⁶⁹C. Bridenbaugh (ed.), *Gentleman's Progress: The itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744* (Chapel Hill, 1948), 29, 44; D.S. Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

unique natural capacities included, in addition to the politeness necessary for a 'civil Life', a 'Voice and Way of speaking more musical and entertaining' than men's.⁷⁰

A crucial enabler of the transmission of ideas across the Atlantic was of course print. Colonial merchants had long imported European books; in the early eighteenth century bound collections of periodicals like the *Tatler*, *Spectator* and *Gentleman's Magazine* were especially popular among merchant elites.⁷¹ American newspapers regularly reprinted the essays of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, and it was in port cities like New York and Philadelphia that Addison's idealized tea table became a site of polite conversation in the colonies.⁷² Local moralists also sent letters to editors of newspapers that emphasized natural human distinctions – including in 'particular Sounds' and musical preferences.⁷³ As a segment of the mid-Atlantic urban soundscape became more refined, the colonial press advertised and described this transformation in local newspapers, themselves important indicators of gentility that promoted polite coffeehouse chatter.

Print also made possible the reproduction of vernacular speech patterns that challenged new standards of gentility. If the culture of the labouring classes continued to be characterized by singing at work, whistling, obscene language, bawdy jokes and laughter, the appearance of 'plain' modes of talking in the press lent legitimacy to plebeian speech.⁷⁴ During a pamphlet feud over provincial bills of credit in Philadelphia in the 1720s, for example, satirical dialogues and allegories contrasted plain-speaking figures like 'Roger Plowman' with grasping merchants like 'Robert Rich' and excessively learned 'Schollars' – a reference to the widely reviled Quaker intellectual James Logan.⁷⁵ New York authors similarly contrasted the convoluted speech of local merchant-creditors with the plain common sense of regional farmers and urban artisans like 'Timothy Wheelwright'.⁷⁶ Anonymous pamphleteers appropriated a medieval form of social criticism that celebrated the virtues of plain speaking producers, in contrast to verbose and luxurious merchant-creditors.

More common, however, were negative representations of speech that contributed to the formation of class, ethnic and racial stereotypes. Newspaper advertisements claimed fugitive Irish servants like Elizabeth

⁷⁰*Pennsylvania Gazette*, 20 June 1754. See also *New-York Weekly Journal*, 8 September 1740.

⁷¹F.B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker merchants of colonial Philadelphia, 1682–1763* (Chapel Hill, 1963), 177, 202–03.

⁷²'Catalogue of books sold by Garrat Noel, at the Bible in Dock-Street' (New York, 1754); 'Imported in the last Vessels from Europe, and sold by David Hall at the New Printing-Office, in Market-street, Philadelphia, the following Books, &c.' (Philadelphia, 1763); Shields, *op. cit.*

⁷³*American Weekly Mercury*, 9 December 1725.

⁷⁴Thomas, *op. cit.*, *In Pursuit of Civility*, 104, 107, 298, 303.

⁷⁵Anon, *A Dialogue between Mr. Robert Rich and Roger Plowman* (Philadelphia, 1725); [W. Keith], *The Observer's Trip to America, in a dialogue between the Observer and his country-man, Roger* (Philadelphia, 1725).

⁷⁶*New-York Weekly Journal*, 12 September 1734.

Cowren were noticeable by their 'loud and course' way of talking; Roger McDonalson 'stammers much in his Speech, and pretends to be a Saylor'.⁷⁷ The tailor John Makist, who fled the service of New York lieutenant-governor George Clarke, spoke 'broad Scotch, bad English'.⁷⁸ Yet newspapers also show how unfree workers and confidence men and women used linguistic knowledge to their advantage. The ability of enslaved people to speak French, Dutch or Spanish was often noted by masters in runaway advertisements; their assumption was that multilingual fugitives would easily find work aboard ships leaving the ports.⁷⁹ Men like John Mitchel of New Jersey and, more famously, Tom Bell of New England, 'counterfeited' genteel speech (in Mitchel's case a Dutch, or possibly German, accent) and appearance to swindle inhabitants of the region. That newspapers lamented that imposters like Bell were sheltered by 'some of Gay's *Monkeys*, who flock round him in every Place, *grinning Applause* to his *redundant Chattering*' suggests the importance of English literary culture in America (readers were expected to understand the reference to John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*), as well as the apparent popularity of tricksters like Bell.⁸⁰

The threat to order and – allegedly natural – social distinctions from absconding workers and confidence men and women was exacerbated by an inability to eradicate the noisy practices that had developed in the late seventeenth century. In the early 1730s Benjamin Franklin attempted to have the biannual Philadelphia fair abolished, arguing that the 'mix'd' gatherings of 'vicious Servants and Negroes' threatened the public peace as well as masters, since unfree workers conspired to flee service at fair time – or became so inebriated that they were unable to work for days afterwards.⁸¹ Franklin's campaign was unsuccessful, however, and through the middle of the eighteenth century grand juries regularly complained of the 'profane Language, horrid Oaths, and Imprecations' commonly heard in tippling houses and on city streets.⁸² If the language used by legal authorities to characterize lower-sort sonic disorder was identical to that used in contemporary England, some cultural practices remained distinctly colonial. In late summer 1741, the Philadelphia common council noted that it had received many complaints involving 'great Numbers of Negroes &

⁷⁷*Pennsylvania Gazette*, 28 December 1732; *ibid.*, 10 December 1747; *New-York Weekly Journal*, 22 October 1750.

⁷⁸*New-York Gazette*, 22 October 1739.

⁷⁹*ibid.*, 6 February 1739; *New York Weekly Post-Boy*, 21 January 1751; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 12 October 1752.

⁸⁰For Mitchel, see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 18 February 1735. For Bell, see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 16 June 1743; 12 July 1744; 14 September 1749 (quote); *New-York Weekly Post-Boy*, 5 November 1744; 14 April 1746; S. Bullock, 'A Mumper among the Gentle: Tom Bell, colonial confidence man', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 55 (1998), 231–58.

⁸¹L.W. Larabee et al. (eds), *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, (New Haven, 1959–), I, 211–12; D. Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2004), 93–94.

⁸²'Notes and Queries', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 22, 4 (1898), 497–98; MCCC, 314, 326, 342, 376–77; Presentment of the Grand Inquest, 'To the worshipful the Mayor Recorder & Aldermen of the City of Philadelphia, January 1735/6, Records of Philadelphia County, 1671–1855, Collection 1014, box 1, folder 14, HSP.

other[s]' who, at the end of the working day, gathered outside the courthouse in the centre of town. Turning milk pails and other work instruments into drums, they created rhythmic disorders 'against the Peace & Good Government of this City'.⁸³

By the time the Philadelphia authorities received this complaint, English colonists had long associated drumming with slave insurrection. Officials in Barbados and Jamaica banned slave drumming out of fear of the instrument's military association in Africa in the seventeenth century. During the 1739 Stono uprising in South Carolina, after arming themselves the enslaved marched towards freedom in Florida with colours flying and drums beating. Outside of Charleston, rebels used drums and singing to call others to join the rising. Richard Cullen Rath has suggested the growing importance of the fiddle and the decline of drumming in African American culture in the mid-eighteenth century was a result of colonists' fears of drums' martial signification.⁸⁴ Notably, however, in the urban environment of Philadelphia drumming constituted a form of street theatre after the working day. Rather than portending rebellion, drumming indicated the ability of the enslaved to push aural, spatial and temporal boundaries. Festivities that had been limited to the Sabbath in the seventeenth century had become, by the 1730s and 1740s, a daily practice that lasted well into the night.

The relationship between colonial gentility, racialization and disorderly festive culture was most clearly demonstrated in print in a satirical representation of a New York holiday in 1736. The *New-York Weekly Journal's* account of a local fair was authored by 'The Spy', ostensibly an English gentleman whose series of letters was modelled on Ned Ward's *London Spy* (1698–1700), the popular periodical that explored the London underworld. The longest essay also contains one of the earliest printed representations of slave speech in America. One morning the visitor to New York was awoken by his landlord's 'black Fellow' who was 'very busy at tuning of his banger', or banjo. The Spy, who was 'always delighted with Music, be it never so rustic', went to the kitchen and inquired of the man the nature of his merriment. With a 'blithesome Countenance' the man replied: 'Massa, to day Holiday; Backerah no work; Ningar no work; me no savy play banger; go yander, you see Ningar play Banger for true, dance too; you see Sport to day for true'.⁸⁵ The use of the terms 'Backerah' (later more commonly spelled 'buckra', a derisive southern African American term for white people) and 'Ningar' suggests the mixed, albeit race-conscious, dimension of the celebration. The Spy's emphasis on music and the parodying of the speech of the enslaved fostered racial stereotypes emerging not in the

⁸³MCCP, 405.

⁸⁴Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, *op. cit.*, 78–94.

⁸⁵*New-York Weekly Journal*, 7 March 1736.

nineteenth-century rural American south, but in the eighteenth-century mid-Atlantic public sphere.⁸⁶

His curiosity aroused, the Spy dressed and went to the field just outside town where the fair was held. It quickly became evident that the *Journal* letter was far more than a racist account of slave speech. The Spy was initially amused at the gathering of enslaved people divided into companies, 'I suppose according to their different Nations', and to the dancing and sounds emanating from a drum made from a hollowed tree trunk. Singing was accompanied by the banjo, drumming and 'the grating rattling Noise of Pebles or Shells in a small Basket'. Amusement gave way to discomfort, however, as African military formations were accompanied by excessive drinking and continuous 'cursing and swearing, and that in a Christian Dialect, enough to raise one's Hair an end'. The Spy left it to readers to judge whether all these 'confused Noises' so near one another 'didn't make a – chord'.⁸⁷ The claim that the enslaved gathered according to their 'different Nations' suggests the persistence of African ethnic and political identities in mid-eighteenth-century New York, despite colonial lawmakers' creation of racist statutes throughout the Americas. That they performed African-influenced music while also speaking – or rather cursing – in English was, for the Spy, particularly disconcerting.

In contrast to the accounts of visitors to American sugar plantations, according to the Spy cacophonous 'noise' was not confined to people of African descent. After finding a 'not very noisy' booth for a pint of beer, the Spy was shocked to see a 'mixt Multitude' in a place little better than a brothel. At the next booth there was another 'mixt Company', in this case gentlemen with mechanics; many of these were so intoxicated they were 'past making any Noise'. Among those able to emit sounds, however, 'Oaths, Curses and Blasphemies were roar'd out to such a Tune' that the Spy fled in fright. Evidently the Spy's haughty manner angered some revellers, for one gave him 'a knock to send me going' while another 'was so kind as to send a Curse after me, and tell me, I might be glad that my Bones were not broke'. Next, a cockfight was characterized by a 'clamorous Din' and constant 'Oaths, Imprecations, Curses, &c.' until, 'Tired with the Noise', the Spy made his way home.⁸⁸

Scholars citing the *Journal* letter have interpreted it as a representation of Pinkster, the Dutch Pentecost celebration that became a creole Afro-European holiday in New Netherland.⁸⁹ Unremarked has been the prominence of sound to the account, which holds important insights into how

⁸⁶The term 'buckraa' was evident in South Carolina by mid-century. T. Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the era of revolution* (New York, 1993), 112.

⁸⁷*New-York Weekly Journal*, 7 March 1736.

⁸⁸*ibid.*

⁸⁹Hodges, *op. cit.*, 88.

aural culture functioned in the early modern mid-Atlantic. Music from New York's enslaved population combined with alcohol to produce 'confused' sounds, a disharmony that offended the Spy's genteel sensibilities. Also offensive was the lack of deferential class relations, as demonstrated by artisans' verbal and physical assaults against the Spy. As he reflected on his experience, the Spy informed readers how 'irksome' it was to *hear* the impieties and *witness* the outrages committed every day on the streets of New York, 'not only by the Blacks, or the poorer Whites, but even by the genteeler sort'. Though the people of England were accustomed to holiday revels, the excesses evident in New York 'would hardly go down with our civilized Heathens'. The Spy closed his letter by informing readers that he had on several occasions been driven out of his quarters in the city 'by the confused Noise of a Horne, and the singing (or rather howling) of some half drunk Fellows; I am told that the Noise almost resembles the Indians *Kintekaying*'.⁹⁰ Portrayals of the town's alleged descent into indigenous barbarism served to warn elite New Yorkers against tolerating (and participating in) lower-sort revels, while implicitly reinforcing codes of polite behaviour.

Additional satirical literature testifies to the persistence of elite hostility to (and ridicule of) lower-sort noise through the mid-eighteenth century.⁹¹ Yet the very real existence of an urban subculture in which sound played a major role was revealed in the spring of 1741, when New Yorkers discovered an alleged slave conspiracy. In addition to demonstrating widespread knowledge among the enslaved of recent colonial and European political developments, the revelation of countless 'frolics' involving fiddling, singing and dancing in waterfront taverns (that included the 'scum and dregs of the white people') and in the homes of free blacks horrified respectable townspeople.⁹² The speech of the enslaved greatly frustrated the grand jury's investigation; according to chief justice Daniel Horsmanden, the language of the enslaved was incomprehensible. Most difficult was the accused's disregard for truth; many had 'a great deal of Craft', and their 'unintelligible Jargon' allowed them to successfully conceal their meaning – and greatly frustrate ostensible seekers of truth like Horsmanden.⁹³ Though Horsmanden's characterization of enslaved people's alleged inarticulateness and propensity to cunningly dissimulate contributed to an evolving – and contradictory – racial ideology in the eighteenth century, the grand jury's investigation also demonstrated the continuing

⁹⁰*New-York Weekly Journal*, 7 March 1736. 'Kintekaying' was a term used by Europeans for Native American feasts.

⁹¹For example, the poem from 'R.D.' in *New-York Weekly Journal*, 22 October 1750.

⁹²T.J. Davis (ed.), *The New York Conspiracy*, by Daniel Horsmanden (Boston, 1971), 2, 82, 94, 159, 209, 211, 224, 233, 256, 260, 268, 292, 411.

⁹³*ibid.*, iii.

importance of African ethnic differences within the town's black population.⁹⁴

Horsmanden's account of the emergency trials that resulted in the execution of 34 New Yorkers (30 of them enslaved), was published in 1744, the same year that Alexander Hamilton, a Maryland doctor originally from Scotland, visited the city. Hamilton found the mid-Atlantic towns of New York and Philadelphia to be uniquely demonstrative of cultural contradictions in Britain's American colonies. The growing cities linked the Americas to European civilization, while at the same time demonstrating a provincialism absent in 'polite nations'. Colonial cities were spaces in which genteel conversation could be found, yet they were also suffused with 'bawdy talk', ribald jokes and the excessive consumption of alcohol. They were places of 'learning and good sense', as well as sites in which plebeians with 'comical, grotesque phizzes' fit for 'a painter of Hogarth's turn' spoke confidently of politics, religion and trade – 'some tollerably well, but most of them ignorantly'.⁹⁵ For others, the condescension of men like Hamilton likely demonstrated a taste for luxury that many in England as well as America believed had overtaken the British world. More virtuous in this view were people whose speech was characterized by simplicity and plainness – those who preferred the discourse of 'honest Friends and Neighbours' over that of powerful magistrates, loan office trustees or the 'glib Tongues' and 'loud and noisy' clamours of crafty lawyers.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Looking back from the early nineteenth century, the antiquarian John Fanning Watson wistfully recalled a time of deference and social harmony in the mid-Atlantic prior to the American Revolution. Proper social distinctions were reflected in sound as well as dress. The 'politer class' in New York City and Philadelphia danced minuets and occasionally country dances, while among common folk the 'hipsesaw was everything'. In the 1730s, a dancing assembly in Philadelphia that partook 'of the aristocratic feelings of a monarchical government' excluded 'the families of mechanics, however wealthy'.⁹⁷ The 'boys and musical people' welcomed 'negroes from the slave states' who visited Philadelphia and played music for urban strollers for a few pence; their 'fine voices' were accompanied by home-made guitars crafted from gourds.⁹⁸ Watson also reminisced about

⁹⁴Specifically, Coromantee people from the Gold Coast of West Africa. P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, slaves, commoners, and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000), 184–85.

⁹⁵Bridenbaugh, *op. cit.*, 18, 29, 42–43, 47, 88, 186.

⁹⁶'Constant Truman', *Advice to the Free-Holders and Electors of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1735), 6–7.

⁹⁷Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, *op. cit.*, I, 276; Watson, *Annals of New York*, *op. cit.*, 248.

⁹⁸Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, *op. cit.*, I 220.

Philadelphia fair and holiday customs during which large numbers of enslaved men and women gathered at Washington Square or Potter's Field and danced 'after the manner of their several nations in Africa'.⁹⁹ In New York, 'negroes used to dance in the markets, where they used tomtoms, horns, &c., for music'; on holidays enslaved inhabitants from Long Island came to Brooklyn and 'held their field frolics'.¹⁰⁰

Few historians today would endorse Watson's romanticized image of a deferential social order in the colonial mid-Atlantic. Yet leading interpretations of early modern European and North American social change do suggest that an elite conception of gentility filtered down to the middle classes over time as the development of respectability coincided with new consumption patterns and tastes. Speech, music and other sounds were as important as dress, body carriage and manners to the making of eighteenth-century politeness, which evolved in the late eighteenth century into a modern middle class. This 'sinking theory' of culture, updated in recent years in works that emphasize the relationship between commerce and respectability, has provided a satisfying explanation for cultural change for some historians of the British Atlantic world in the century after the Restoration.¹⁰¹ In the American context, it offers a liberal narrative of political democratization and economic modernization that culminated with independence and the making of the modern nation state in the late eighteenth century.

Attention to a variety of sources, however, suggests that differences over what constituted legitimate sounds in the early modern world were regular sources of tension. While throughout Europe and the Americas emerging middling and elite notions of 'politeness' were dependent on the existence of the 'vulgar', the mid-Atlantic aural culture that developed between the 1650s and 1740s posed distinct problems for advocates of order. There, elites' traditional anxieties concerning the base passions of the lower orders were applied to enslaved people as well as free commoners, as the diversity of languages and places of origin of labouring people made the imposition of English cultural hegemony impossible. While advocates of refinement and morality portrayed lower-sort, and especially African, 'noise' as lacking taste and potentially dangerous, the sounds of festive popular culture retained their cross-class appeal. In the increasingly complex sociocultural environment of the mid-eighteenth century, cacophony was the rule, orderly quiet an unrealizable ideal.

Hillary Taylor has recently argued that historians' desire to celebrate the agency of labouring people understates how hierarchical early modern social structures coloured every aspect of plebeian existence – specifically

⁹⁹*ibid.*, 406.

¹⁰⁰Watson, *Annals of New York*, *op. cit.*, 204–5.

¹⁰¹For the 'sinking theory' see Burke, *Popular Culture*, *op. cit.*, 58–60.

how attributions of animal-like inarticulacy functioned as a form of violence that justified, and therefore reproduced, subordination.¹⁰² Yet studies of sound – music, murmurs, clamours, curses and other disorders – can also open up new avenues of historical inquiry that can aid in the exploration of non-elite social life, and of the ways in which dominant notions were challenged, appropriated or simply ignored. For migrants, music and language have long provided a crucial means of maintaining a sense of identity and community in the face of profound dislocation. Historians of the early modern Atlantic world might expand on recent work exploring African musical forms and examine how music and speech provided enslaved people with bonds of community before the much-studied nineteenth century. Scholars might also examine how the experiences of indentured servants were represented in ballads sung to popular tunes in England.¹⁰³ Without denying the power of attempts to silence the ‘inarticulate’, the musical forms, speech patterns, accents and keywords that informed plebeian life might provide insights into the ability of subordinate groups to maintain a sphere of autonomy beyond the reach of those in power.

Of course, and especially in historical periods before mass literacy, the bulk of documentation concerning sounds comes from sources hostile to plebeian ‘noise’. Yet reading sources against the grain might, first, provide clues as to the constitutive elements of aural culture and, second, help elaborate the dialectical relationship between social change and cultural formation. Ranajit Guha long ago argued for the importance of ‘visual and non-graphic verbal signs’ in the study of peasant rebellions.¹⁰⁴ Sounds, however, are as important in everyday life as in times of insurrection. In the early modern Atlantic world, soundscapes were as much products of colonial social processes as they were of cultural changes originating in the metropole.

Acknowledgments

Participants of the 2019 Bilkent University Medieval/Early Modern Working Papers Group provided helpful critiques of an early draft of this article. The author also wishes to thank an anonymous reviewer and the editors of *Social History* for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

¹⁰²H. Taylor, ‘“Branded on the tongue”: rethinking plebeian inarticulacy in early modern England’, *Radical History Review*, 121, (2015), 93–94.

¹⁰³‘The Trappan’d Maiden: or, the Distressed Damsel’, undated broadside; J. Revel, ‘The poor unhappy transported felon’s sorrowful account of his fourteen years transportation at Virginia in America’, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 56, (1948), 180–94.

¹⁰⁴R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC, 1999), 256.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Research support for this article was provided by Bilkent University, the University of Minnesota's Center for Early Modern History, and a William Reese Company Fellowship in the Print Culture of the Americas from the James Ford Bell Library.