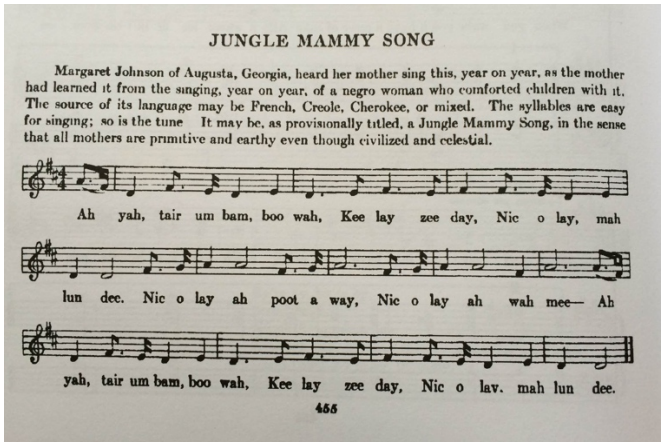
Tena, Too, Sings America: Listening to an Enslaved Woman's Musical Memories of Africa

Mary Caton Lingold, Virginia Commonwealth University
June 18, 2018

Mary Caton Lingold: Today I'm going to tell you a story – fragments of a story, really – about a song that I have been listening to and researching for several years now. The woman who originally sang the song was enslaved in Augusta Georgia, in the 1830s and 40s. She was known as Tena.

When I first learned about Tena, I had no idea what her name was and only the faintest idea of when she might have lived. I ran across her song in a book of sheet music called the *American Songbag* that Carl Sandburg had published in 1927. Tucked away in this huge volume of 280 songs, I happened to notice a piece with a startling title, "Jungle Mammy Song." I rolled my eyes, assuming that this was a holdover from minstrelsy and the racial stereotypes the genre helped to popularize. But looking more carefully, I saw that the song wasn't a stage number at all – it's in an unfamiliar language, and I read the headnote, which explains that "Margaret Johnson of Augusta, Georgia, heard her mother sing this, year on year, as the mother had learned it from the singing, year on year, of a negro woman who comforted children with it."



JUNGLE MAMMY SONG

Margaret Johnson of Augusta, Georgia, heard her mother sing this, year on year, as the mother had learned it from the singing, year on year, of a negro woman who comforted children with it. The source of its language may be French, Creole, Cherokee, or mixed. The syllables are easy for singing; so is the tune It may be, as provisionally titled, a Jungle Mammy Song, in the sense that all mothers are primitive and earthy even though civilized and celestial.

Ah yah, tair um bam, boo wah, Kee lay zee day, Nic o lay, mah

lun dee. Nic o lay ah poot a way, Nic o lay ah wah mee— Ah

yah, tair um bam, boo wah, Kee lay zee day, Nic o lay. mah lun dee.

455

Photo of *The American Songbag,* by Mary Caton Lingold.

So apparently this was a tune passed down by a white Georgia family, and perhaps a family whose children were cared for by the singer, hence, I surmised, the presence of the mammy iconography. Given the non-English lyrics, I immediately wondered whether or not the woman who originally sang the song had been a survivor of the Middle Passage, or perhaps a member of an enslaved community maintaining strong African traditions. With Augusta being so close to the Georgia Sea Islands and Gullah communities, that seemed plausible. If the singer had been enslaved when she sang the music, then this was a unique artifact, one far more interesting that Sandburg's racially coded title would suggest. You see, notated examples of music – and particularly vernacular music by enslaved women are exceedingly rare.

The textual trace of Tena's music immediately presented to me problems that are familiar to scholars of slavery – for so often the archival sources about enslaved people's lives come to us shrouded behind the prejudices and beliefs of white people who created the documents, people who were deeply complicit in the practice of slavery. Most bondspeople were explicitly forbidden from obtaining alphabetic literacy, and those who did manage to learn to read and write, and have the opportunity to have their works published and preserved, represent a small and exceptional group. By contrast, enslaved people participated in abundant expressive genres that were heard widely. These performance traditions revolutionized global music, and left their mark on innumerable traditions that span written, aural, and embodied arts across the African diaspora and well beyond. What I'm saying is that the legacy of

enslaved musicians is tremendous, but that the written historical record does not do it justice. I am in the process of writing a book on the literary history of African Atlantic music from about 1630 to 1830. It was this research that led me to explore Tena's song, but it is Tena's song and her story that have taught me how to listen to the stories I am trying to tell.

But, getting back to that moment when I first saw Tena's song, I was originally dismayed. Dismayed at the fact that her name was not recorded in the book and that her legacy was clouded by Sandburg's framing. I wondered, though, could the music itself—its sounds—teach me something about the song and its singer, what it might have meant to her. As I took up the task of trying to hear the music, I began a process that would ultimately lead me to discover traces of Tena's performance across voices and continents and archives.

Initially, the only way I could go about hearing the song was to learn to sing it myself. So here I am trying to work out the notes and lyrics, back in 2013.

A recording of Lingold singing the song somewhat slowly plays.

When I listened to myself sing the song in the recording I was frustrated with the limits of my interpretation, if not the limits of the notation more generally. You can hear my classical training in the recording, the way I use what's called a "clean attack" to begin phrases. But I enjoy singing the song, and especially the catchy first notes, "Ah yah," which feel a bit like sighing. There is a saying that lullabies are really about soothing those who sing them, rather than the children who listen, and I wondered if this song helped to soothe the singer as she labored. I wondered if she might have sung it to her own children as well. Knowing how often children perished under slavery, and how often mothers were separated from their kin, I wondered how the singing of such a song might bring up tender memories for the singer – perhaps of her own mother, or a child she had lost. Was the song a source of pain, of comfort, or even humor? Was it simply a way to shush pestering children or pass the time? I did not know.

At the time I happened to be teaching a singing class to young girls at a non-profit arts organization, the Walltown Children's Theatre, which is located in the historically black neighborhood of Walltown in Durham, North Carolina, where I was in graduate school at Duke. The theatre, which is known for its excellent dance program, is run by and predominately serves black and latinx young people. I decided to teach the song to my students, to see what they thought of it and how they would interpret it. I showed up to class with heavy research questions on my mind, but the girls quickly lightened the mood and took a playful approach to the music. They were all between the ages of 7-12. I didn't share Sandburg's disparaging title with the young women, but I did tell them that the song was sung by an African or African-descended woman to children in her care, and that she had probably been enslaved. The Spanish speakers laughed at one of the lyrics that sounds like a curse word, and we all wondered what "lundee" and "bam boo" meant. We had no translation whatsoever at that point, but thinking through the musical possibilities brought the sounds to life.

The voices of several young girls can be heard singing the song.

I made the recording because we were working on learning songs by ear and I wanted the students to hear what they sounded like and try to get on the same pitches – after all, it was a singing class. But later, when I listened to the recording back at home, I heard their "errors" quite differently, I came to see their missed notes as novel interpretations demonstrating the process of oral circulation in action. In the recording, the girls' pitch slides downward throughout the piece, as if their voices are determined to find a more comfortable key. They reach unison on certain notes and stray and wander on others. Their performance exemplifies music as a process, and how a single tune can evolve and yet stay

recognizably the same as it circulates across voices and time. Needless to say, I learned a lot from the students, and not just in terms of Tena's song. Sharing music with the young women in my classes taught me how to think about the act of musical creation as a powerful space of possibility.

After learning the song with the students, I published an essay in an online journal of experimental history called *The Appendix*. In that piece, I wrote about my experience with the students and reflected on using performance as a research method, writing "though she remains distant and opaque to me, hidden among the silences of history and the words framing her performance in the book, her music is frequently in my ears and on my mind. It may be that knowing her song means simply that, to know it… The song, then, is not a portal into an understanding of a particular woman's story, but an opportunity to witness something that her voice made known. Rather than repackaging the music and its creator like Sandburg did, this time. I'd rather just listen." Though I concluded that essay with an insistence on the value of listening to the historical subject, I had no idea at that time that her story would continue to speak.

To my great surprise, several months later, I received an email from a descendant of the family Sandburg had referenced in the description. I followed up with a phone call, and I learned from the woman named Maggie that the singer of the song was named Tena and that the family called the song "Tina's Lullaby." They had no idea where Sandburg had learned the music or that he had published anything about it at all. My hunch was right – the family enslaved Tena, and not only that – she was said to have lost a child, a boy who died during the Middle Passage, according to the family's oral history. For over 9 generations they have passed down her song, along with a handful of details about her biography. The descendant shared with me details about her family's ancestry which helped me undertake archival research to verify some of their claims and uncover other details, about Tena's life. I also learned that in 1961, a scholar had researched Tena's song and purported to discover her African origins. The woman I spoke to was unable to access this scholarship, which was locked behind paywalls (and that was one of the reason she had gone Googling, trying to find out more about his research.) Now that I knew the singer's name, I had better keywords and was quickly able to find an article written by a famous Africanist ethnomusicologist, Hugh Tracey, More on that, and the reception of Tena's song in parts of Africa in the mid-twentieth century, in a bit.

First, I'd like to talk about the family's oral history of Tena, and their practice of passing the song down among generations of their family. Their transformation of Tena's song into a kind of sonic family heirloom is a troubling story of its own, and like Sandburg, their family narrative is also shaped by the mammy stereotype, and the way it has helped to romanticize black domestic laborers for many white audiences, including white southerners especially. As a white southerner myself, I see in this family's characterization and storytelling of Tena echoes of my own family's complicity in the afterlives of slavery. I was indoctrinated from an early age in the Lost Cause narrative, and was taught not to see the profound racial inequalities in my rural southern community in my hometown of Marshall, Texas. It is my experience with these cultural narratives that motivates my scholarship and compels me to try to tell Tena's story in a way that does greater justice to her legacy and that of women like her. Women whose care and time and energy, and even music were taken up like possessions that could be owned and exchanged and inherited. There is no way to take out the violence from the story, to root it out and cast it aside. I am as bound up in it as Tena was. I am a part of that violence, even as I try to undo it, to make it plain. This fact has caused me to reflect endlessly throughout this project, and while I have no good solutions, I do feel certain that it is worth it to try to uncover narratives of enslaved women's lives, even when they are so irrevocably entangled in the work of white supremacy. I am inspired, in this regard, by the work of black feminist historians of slavery, in particular, who have taught scholars how to revisit the troubling archives and wring from them story after story bringing to life the struggles and survival of so many whom scholars long thought to be lost to history. I am thinking here of scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Jennifer Morgan, Marisa Fuentes and so many others who have raised the bar, rewritten the script, and illuminated worlds.

So here is Tena's story, as I have been able to piece it together. Some details come from the family's oral history, a good bit of which I have corroborated with archival documents. Many details remain speculative.

Tena probably was born on the African continent in the late 1700s or early 1800s. She was smuggled to the Americas at a time when the international slave trade was illegal, and because of that may have traveled through the Caribbean or the Gulf of Mexico before eventually being sold in Charleston before being sold to the Spencer family patriarch. It is said that she was a mother and that her only child, an eleven year old son, died during the Middle Passage. Little is known of her experiences before she was purchased by a man named Alexander Spencer. He died in 1831 and so Tena was purchased before then, and I believe, around the year 1830. Tena is remembered in family lore as being very tall and beautiful – the trader supposedly indicated that she had been a princess in Africa. Alexander Spencer was a Scottish immigrant, a merchant who lived in Augusta Georgia. He purchased Tena for his daughter, to take care of her two young grandchildren in his household. A household which included Alexander Spencer, his widowed daughter Isabella Bones, and 16 enslaved people. They are, along with Tena, Lewis and Maria and their 3 children, Charles, Jack, Celia and her child James, Henry, Washington, Mary, young Lewis, Clarissa, Harriet, Celia and Tamar. While enslaved by the Spencer family, Tena reportedly never learned to speak English and communicated using her own unique set of hand gestures a curious fact that has survived in the memories of the descendants. When caring for the children, Tena sang a song that became etched into their memories. Descendants of the Spencer family recall that she lived in the family's household long enough to nurse two generations of children, but I have been unable to confirm that. Despite my best efforts, I do not know when or how Tena died, nor whether or not she lived to be emancipated.

There are two surviving documents that mention Tena's name, and a few more that lend some insight into her story. All of these are found in Augusta, Georgia, and most in the Augusta Genealogical Society, where I have been fortunate to have had the assistance of some very kind and knowledgeable volunteer researchers. Just this past spring I traveled to the archive, where I stood side by side with Gracie, a society member who had poured over the records, hauling huge books off the shelf, looking for any mention of enslaved women named Tena. To be honest, when I traveled to Augusta and walked along the confederate monument lined Broad Street to the building where the AGS is housed, I expected to find an organization dedicated to the preservation of white family histories. I was pleasantly surprised to find elderly volunteers who were busy cataloging the names of enslaved people for their own database, which they are compiling to help make it easier for African American genealogists and anyone interested in learning more about enslaved people's lives. Just behind the Augusta Genealogical Society stands Springfield Baptist Church, which was founded in 1844, and is one of the oldest independent black churches in the south. It was also was the first home of Morehouse College. Although I don't have reason to believe that Tena was a member there, the presence of the congregation just beyond the walls of the genealogical society inspired me to consider the institutions and communities that Tena may have been connected with beyond the walls and archives that separate these worlds and their textual worlds, and also bind them. This is the story of the South – the story of America and its entangled histories. The work before us as scholars and cultural historians, I believe is to bring greater justice to the telling of our collective past, in particular by continuing to illuminate the experiences of African Americans, and especially women like Tena, who didn't speak English, who labored in the domestic sphere, who made music not on a stage, but for an audience of children – children who would grow up and lay false claim to her story and her sounds and to enslave her.

There are just two documents that bear Tena's name, they are the estate documents created after Alexander Spencer's death, where each of the enslaved people in the household are listed, along with their monetary value. Strangely, Tena is valued at $5.00, a very curious sum, given that each of her fellow slaves are valued at least $100 and many far more than that. Daina Ramey Berry has recently written a book, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* (2017), and when she explains some of the logic behind the prices given to enslaved people across different time periods, she writes that young children had the

smallest value as did infirmed, disabled, or elderly people. I don't have reason to believe that Tena was particularly elderly at this point, but I do know that she did not speak English, so I wonder if this was seen as detracting from her value? Or, was she intentionally devalued because the family intended to sell her within the family? Just a few years later, when part of the elder Spencer's estate was liquidated, and Tena is said to have been sold for a mere 12 cents. These details haunt me because they remind me of the way Tena's life was construed as capital, the way she appears to be have perceived as being of little value, even among a family who has so cherished her memory and her song.

After reading through some records held at the county court house concerning the divvying up of the estate among Spencer's two children, I think that Tena was purchased by Isabella from the estate in order to keep her in their household. This might explain the low value. I very much tried to find any evidence of Tena's existence after this sale. I considered also the possibility that she had been sold off elsewhere, and so I traced several Tenas who lived on other plantations. I even found another woman in records from a nearby family, who was also valued at a similarly strangely low sum, $0.00. Gracie, the society volunteer and I, wondered if this could be Tena, and if so she would have been sold to a very large plantation in the outskirts of the community, we found the location of this plantation and observed the large number of slaves who lived in this more rural, agricultural setting. I found myself hoping that this was Tena, that she had been sold to the large plantation – which may sound strange – but I realized that living in town with the merchant family, she would have been somewhat confined, and possibly far away from a community of others like herself. I had located the family's houses and they were each on the outskirts of town, so not a comfortable walking distance to the busy town center. I imagined that if she lived on the plantation she probably would have been tasked with caring for the children there, maybe even left largely alone as elders in enslaved communities sometimes were. But eventually, after chasing a lead for many days across numerous documents, I realized that the other plantation was home to a Tena long before the singer Tena would have been sold. Just like that, a good bit of Tena's possible biography vanished, and I was left to conclude that the family was right, that she had lived with them for several generations. But to emancipation? I do not know. And ironically, the major challenge to the archival research is that Isabella Bones and her husband, and their adult children all lived for a long time. Unless someone dies or slaves are sold and there happens to be a trace of the sale, or they are part of a large plantation with careful record keeping, they do not appear in the traditional archives.

But although the textual records of Tena's life are slim, she does not vanish. Her song traveled long after her life-ended, even making its way back to the African continent and to communities that may have been her homeland. The remarkable fact that parts of Tena's story were preserved as an accompaniment to her song tells us something about the way that her voice was heard, the way that it rang out, perhaps, amidst the comparative silence of her inability, or refusal to speak English. As the descendant suggested to me in a reflective moment, perhaps Tena's choice not to speak was her way of saying "you may own me, but you don't own my mind." Indeed. How ironic, then, that the family held on so tightly to the song for so many years. Was the sound of Tena's song like a burr that attached itself to the memories of her enslavers, traveling across eras and continents, determined to seed her story across the decades? But along with the sounds, her silence traveled too, a profound opacity that seems to frustrate those who would presume to understand it, including, I must admit, myself.

So, let us listen to yet another a trace of Tena's song, recorded here by a Spencer descendant. This is Mrs. Johnson, born around 1880 singing the song in the late 1950s. I'll explain more about the recording in a moment, but this woman, Mrs. Johnson, was the granddaughter of one of the grandchildren that Tena sang to.

An elderly woman's voice can be heard singing the sound at a faster clip, and with slightly different lyrics than the previous versions of the song from the sheet music.

At some point in the 1950s the Spencer descendants became curious about Tena's African origins, and so they reached out to a librarian, Ruth Bartholemew at Paine University, an HBCU in their hometown of Augusta. This librarian then wrote to Hugh Tracey, the British musicologist and immigrant to South Africa who founded the journal *African Music* and the International library of African Music (ILAM), where the recording you just heard is housed. His legacy is in some ways on par with a figure like Alan Lomax in the US in that he helped to constitute a field of study but did so as a white scholar who benefited financially from in some ways racializing the performance traditions of black musicians and he did so under apartheid South Africa. Tracey asked for a recording of Tena's song and so the elderly Mrs. Johnson, the granddaughter of one of the children to whom Tena sang her song, recorded the music as well as her family's recollections of Tena.

Tracey attempted to determine Tena's origins in Africa – an effort very much in tune with anthropological studies of African American culture of the day. He argued that she must have been from a Bantu-language culture in Eastern Africa, and crafted a Chimanyika translation of the song, placing Tena's origins in Zimbabwe or Mozambique.

There's a lot to be skeptical about Tracey's methods, but some of his assertions may have been valid. He does not note it, and it was Tsitsi Jaji who pointed it out to me, but Tena, short for Tinashe is a very common Shona name. It means "God is with us." Tracey wrote an article about the song and recorded a radio broadcast about it that is also now housed at ILAM.

Excerpts from Tracey's radio show can be heard.

Hugh Tracey: "Where did it come from, Tena's African Lullaby, now that was the question I was asked recently by a friend, writing from America. The next step was to listen very carefully to Mrs. Johnson and hear exactly how she pronounced her words. [Tracey slowly sounds out a series of phonemes. [The following song transcription is also in "Tena's Lullaby" in African Music 2.4 (1961), 99-101.]

E-e yat ta-rum-ba-mbo-o wa ki-de-zi
Yei ni-ka-lu-mai la-nda.
Ni-ka lu-u la-mi-I prr wa.
Ni-ka lu-u la-a-mi wa-a.

Now, the word "tarumba" makes sense, and so did "Nikalulami" if you turn it in to "Ndikarurami," with Rs instead of Ls. Now two of us here, at the Library of African Music, spoke the Bantu languages which are found between the Limpopo ?and Zambezi Rivers. Now I'd like you to hear those same words, spoken not by me, but by an African, by Daniel Mabuto, who speaks Chimanyika and comes from near that part of Rhodesia.

Mabuto:
Eya, tarumba mbambo wake tenzi.
Yei, ndikatumai muranda
Ndikarurami pari wo?
Ndikarurami wo-ye.

Tracey: "Yes, I ran quickly to his father, his chief, indeed, I have sent a messenger, and now, where shall I go to straight away? Then, I'll go straight away."

Tracey's research was later picked up and reworked into a feature in the leftist anti-colonialist newspaper *African Mail* published in Lusaka, which was at the time part of colonial Rhodesia and is now Zambia. A reader of the newspaper named W. Kasiwira later wrote a letter challenging Tracey's interpretation of Tena's song, claiming to have spoken with an old woman in Malawi who offered an alternate interpretation and translation of the lyrics. This woman claimed Tena as an ancestor of her people and said that the song means the following:

> *Be praised father of Dazi (name); I can go nowhere, mother, Poor I am where can I stay?*
> *Perhaps if can ---Where can I stay, mother? Nowhere.*

The Malawian elder offers a haunting translation. I can't help but think of Tena's displacement, as a survivor of the Middle Passage, living under slavery in a foreign land. *Where can I stay, mother? Nowhere.* The child in the lyrics also echoes the displacement of the diaspora, and the wandering of the song's meaning across the eras. We can no more verify this translation than we can verify any of the other details of Tena's life and song. And yet I know that it is true. I heard it in the song myself.

So, what's the take away? Above all, I think the story of Tena's lullaby can teach us that just because someone's life and experiences don't initially appear to be reflected in traditional sources, or even in public historical memory, it does not mean – not at all – that they did not leave a tremendous hlegacy. those legacies may be experienced in sound, in performance, in image, in practices of care, in religious expression, in landscape, in so many modalities that shape our lives, but that we need creative research methods to explore. So many scholars are undertaking this kind of work and especially those working on the eras of slavery. Bringing new questions and new methods to our research allows for a shift in perspective, so that even when our research fails to unearth and reveal stories and lives that have been lost, it can still reorient our own engagement with the world, and in fact it may be more important to tune into the things that we don't know and can't know than those that we do know. Many aspects of Tena's personal history are lost, there is a world of meaning yet told in her song.

And now we have as many stories to tell as there are versions of the song: the story of Tena's song as she sang it under slavery, and the story of its proliferation across equally racialized and troubling contexts in the twentieth century, from the Spencer's to Sandburg, the story of the song's reception in mid-century Apartheid South Africa and colonial Rhodesia. And of course the story of my own exploration of the music, with my students, with you. These narratives all intersect, of course, but they aren't the same. And perhaps it is impossible to mute the one story in the telling of the other. And yet ultimately the story is plain, and one that has already being told richly in song: the music-making of enslaved women in the domestic sphere and in the spaces of the plantation transformed the worlds around them. Women who helped to create the performance traditions of the African diaspora across the Americas, women whose names we do not know, but whose songs we know by heart, whose techniques and innovations proliferate, women whose stories have been preserved in the archives of sound in abundant and curious ways.

Acknowledgements

For their assistance and support with this project, I'd like to thank the Augusta Genealogical Society and especially Gracie Joyce, the International Library of African Music, Lee Watkins, Shiloh Marsh, Liezl Visage, and Diane Thram, Maggie McRae, Carson Holloway, Cynthia Greenlee, Louise Meintjes, Tsitsi Jaji, Alisha Hines, Allison Curseen, The Walltown Children's Theatre, especially my singing students and Cynthia Penn-Halal. I'd also like to thank Kristin Moriah, Jenny Stoever, Alex Black, Brianna Wells, my co-panelists at a recent ASA panel on "Race and Sound in the American Archive," and the editorial team at *The Appendix*, especially Benjamin Breen. I'd also like to thank the C19 podcast steering committee for this opportunity and for their editorial support, especially Kristie Schlauraff and Xine Yao.