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SONIC IDENTITIES / SHOUTING THE CITY

'Louder and More Discordant than Ever':
Afro-Jamaican women and the temporalities of
Soundscapes

Linda Sturtz

‘Louder and More Discordant than Ever’: Afro-Jamaican women and the temporalities of Soundscapes¹

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From ancient saturnalias to modern pre-Lenten carnivals, revellers have marked the passage of time through celebrations in which they turn the world upside down temporarily. In the context of the early modern Atlantic world, where racialized systems of slavery prevailed, exuberant carnivalesque events flourished during holiday seasons.² African-descended people took full advantage of the designated annual period of emotional release and freedom from labor to enjoy themselves and publicly create alternative worlds led by symbolic rulers they chose themselves. White enslavers tolerated or even encouraged these celebrations, but often experienced them as moments of threat as well as displays of merriment. Across the Anglophone Caribbean, bands of Afro-Caribbean masquerading men, often

1 I am grateful to Frances Botkin, Tamara Hamlish, Christine Jeanneret, Jakob Ingemann Parby, Pia Quist, James C. Robertson, Leah Rosenberg and Kesia Weiss for their insightful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this work.

2 J. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. (New York: 1996).

known as John Canoes, paraded at Christmastime and some practices have persisted to the present day.³

When women participated in these processions they were often in the minority or played subordinate roles. By the end of the eighteenth-century, however, separate women's organizations flourished in locations like St. Lucia, Jamaica, Trinidad, Surinam and the Danish West Indies. In Jamaica, these groups or "sets" of performers were known as the Set Girls, or simply The Sets.⁴ During Set Girls' performances, self-organized women seized streets, making music and dancing in major cities to amuse themselves and their audiences, often to the dismay of white authorities.

This paper examines how these Afro-Jamaican 'Set Girls' revelled during holidays and captured urban spaces in eighteenth and nineteenth century Jamaica through their music, song, and dance. It also considers how some white auditors heard this festive performances as enervating, or even intimidating 'noise' that threatened their own social and sonic order even as other whites enjoyed the spectacle. My argument is that through the interaction of music-making women and perplexed or anxious auditors, Afro-Jamaicans delineated spaces aurally and temporally – during holidays and market days -- as well as spatially.⁵ In their performances, women manipulated spaces through their dancing bodies and their music.

Clamorous sonic cultures permeated white and Black public life in the pre-emancipation Americas, where literacy was extremely limited. Enslavers used alarm bells, signalling horns and whips to regulate labourers' daily lives on estates while patrollers or *chasseurs* pursued freedom seekers with terrifying baying blood hounds.⁶ Whites also used public processions to commemorate political events

3 The spelling of 'Jonkonnu' has varied within Jamaica (Jonkunno, John Canoe for example) and across the Americas. I adopt the spelling 'Jonkonnu' here. J. McGregory, *One Grand Noise: Boxing Day in the Anglicized Caribbean World*, (Jackson, Mississippi, 2021). Even after it became a British colony, Trinidad has sustained a carnival schedule focused on Mardi Gras rather than Christmas. Although Montserrat, BWI, has a Catholic heritage, its masquerade triumphs at Christmas. L. Sturtz, 'Ladies Dressed As Men Dressed As Ladies: Collective Memory, "repertoire" and Innovation in Post-Volcano Montserrat Masquerade.' *Caribbean Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2016): 227-47. For mainland North American practices, see J. Dewulf, 'Rethinking the Historical Development of Caribbean Performance Culture from an Afro-Iberian Perspective: The Case of Jankunu.' *NWIG: New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 95, no. 3/4 (2021): 223-53.

4 The names of the women's groups varied by island, unlike the common term of Jonkonnu (with spelling variants) for the men's groups.

5 For a discussion of Kingston's Spring Path cemetery as a location for audible market-day gatherings among Afro-Jamaicans, see L. Sturtz "Beyond the Nation Dance: Collective Memory as Archive in Olaudah Equiano's Kingston, Jamaica" in K. Horn, L. Lippert, I. Saal, & P. Wiegink, (eds.) *American Cultures as Transnational Performance: Traces, Bodies, Commons, Skills* (Routledge, 2021): 175-198.

6 S. White and G. White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston, 2005): 5-8. T.D. Parry, C.W. Yingling, 'Slave Hounds and Abolition in the Americas', *Past & Present*, v. 24 (2020) 69-108. Sara E. Johnson, "'You Should Give them Blacks to Eat': Waging Inter-American Wars of Torture and Terror,' *American Quarterly* 61, (2009): 65-92.



A 'Jaw-Bone' Band showing the cured jaw bone of a horse or mule being used as a percussive instrument (at left). The musician in the centre plays a goat-skin-covered gumbay being carried by a child. Both the Jaw-Bone and the goombay were often used to accompany Set Girls Bands. This and the following illustrations all from I. M. Belisario: *Sketches of Character*, 1837. Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

that affirmed their authority, like the arrival of a new Governor from Britain and the beginning of a legislative session, as well as to parade the militia during mandatory musters. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century whites' public spectacles normalized their own noise and felt reassured by their thundering military presence and deployed sound to celebrate their authority over the island, relying on their drums and cannons to dominate the soundscape, raise the spirits of the whites, and instil fear and awe during tense moments.⁷ They used threats of violence, as well as its enactment, to establish an atmosphere of pervasive fear. Even when the whip was not actively wielded, its menace was ominously manifested. Meanwhile, enslavers

7 J.C. Robertson, "Here his Grace ... resides": the Royal Governor in English Jamaica, 1661 - c. 1720'. Paper presented to the Reading Conference in Early Modern Societies, Authority and Authorities, Reading University, 3 July 2009, pp. 6-7, 11-12. *United Services Journal*, (London 1833), 30. Later, at emancipation, sonic intimidation from warships was turned on the planters when Governor Sligo used these same tactics to stare down white Jamaicans who threatened violence against their freed labor force. He sent a new-fangled steam ship to intimidate the planters of St Ann's parish and ordered the ship's guns fired 'as supposed for a Pilot, but really [the percussion] conveyed to all the district where the disturbance existed the information that a man or war & troops had arrived.' Lord Sligo Private Letter Book 1834, National Library of Jamaica, MS 281, 136. On the militia and the crowd at the arrival of a new governor, see The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA UK) Colonial Office (CO) 137/183, f. 19. From Mulgrave at Kings House, 6 Aug 1832.

perpetually feared revolts and listened for sounds that might signal threats to their order.

Africans in the Americas relied on music and the sonic world to commemorate their own traditions, remember the dead, heal the infirm, build communities, and to cultivate spiritual life. Africans' knowledge about musical instrument construction skill in music-making and crossed the Atlantic. Drums such as the gumbay (also spelled goombay) and tamboo as well as drumming styles that relied on distinctive rhythms were recreated in the Caribbean. Instruments like jaw-bone (a percussion instrument), the banjo, and the mysterious merry-wang were adopted and then re-adapted to compose creative new forms of musical expression.⁸ Horns like those made from Conch Shell and the Abeng (made from a cow horn) became popular symbols of Afro-Caribbean culture.⁹ These instruments and musical styles were significant to the development of creole cultures that enthralled, entertained, and terrified Jamaicans. White auditors were often perplexed by what they heard: to European ears, the music, singing and shouting at funerals sounded incongruously joyous as communities celebrated the return of the deceased to the land of the ancestors.¹⁰ White fear of drumming as a means of long-distance communication led many colonies to enact strict laws against it from the very earliest years of settlement. The constant re-enactment of the statutes suggests success in enforcement was limited.¹¹

Chronology and context

After the British captured Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, they turned to sugar production as the economic foundation for their colony, enslaving thousands of Africans to operate the brutal estates. By the middle of the eighteenth century, en-

8 A. Clerk, 'The Music and Musical Instruments of Jamaica' *Jamaica Journal* 9, (1975): 59-67. Hans Sloane's account of Jamaica, one of the earliest published sources, about African Jamaican culture explores the musics of various 'nations'. He includes transcripts of music and lyrics, drawings of musical instruments, and descriptions of the events in which they were used. H. 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, etc. of the Last of Those Islands . . .*, 2 vols. (London, 1707-1725) II: plate 232. R.C. Rath, 'African Music in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica: Cultural Transit and Transition', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50, (1993), 700-726. M.C. Lingold, 'Peculiar Animations: Listening to Afro-Atlantic Music in Caribbean Travel Narratives', *Early American Literature* 52, (2017), 623-50. L. Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2016). H.H. Roberts, 'Some Drums and Drum Rhythms of Jamaica', *Natural History* 24 (1924), 241-251.

9 J.H. Currents, 'Symbolic Ecologies: A Conch Shell Poetics for the Haitian Imaginary', *Journal of Haitian Studies* 27 (2021), 4-32, esp. 7. 11. K. Wilson, 'The Performance of Freedom: Maroons and the Colonial Order in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica and the Atlantic Sound', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2009): 45-86. For an analysis of how fear operates, see S. Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text*. 22 (2004), 126-7.

10 Sturtz, 'Beyond the Nation Dance', 181.

11 Sloane, *Voyage* v. 2, p. Lii.

slaved Afro-Jamaicans constituted a significant majority of the island's population and outnumbered whites 9:1.

Population of Jamaica¹²

	Enslaved black	white	Free persons of colour	Total population
1750	127,881 90% of total 1750 pop.	12,000 8.5% of total 1750 pop.	2,119 1.5% of total 1750 pop.	142,000
1820	319,074 84% of total 1820 pop.	18,903 5% of total 1820 pop.	40,073 11% of total 1820 pop.	378,050

West African languages and cultures prevailed in these new settings, albeit in new forms. Through spiritual beliefs and expressive culture, communities of enslaved people, African-descended persons sustained collective memory and developed community cohesion for themselves as people who had been brutally stolen from their native lands and transferred to the Americas as property. Communities developed processions that flourished at Christmastime, including John Canoe parades and Set Girls performances, incorporating remembered West African traditions and European consumer culture.¹³

The Set Girls

The Sets first appear in written records in the 1770s, they flourished until the 1820s, and they declined after "full-free" emancipation took effect in Jamaica in 1838. After 1838, expectations about Afro-Jamaican women's respectable public behavior changed and only few Sets continued to perform. The Sets were revived during celebrations in the years surrounding Jamaica's independence from Britain in 1963 when they were re-cast as a heritage phenomenon and national symbol.¹⁴

Hearing the Sets for the first time stunned newcomers from Europe. Even before seeing the Sets, a white newcomer to the Jamaican port city of Falmouth, was startled by an unfamiliar 'uproar' of 'drums, fifes, tambourines, fiddles, and voices,

12 B.W. Higman, "Economic and Social Development of the British West Indies, from Settlement to ca. 1850." *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States*, edited by S.L. Engerman and R. E. Gallman, (Cambridge, 1996), 302.

13 C. Ryman, 'Jonkonnu: A Neo-African Form' parts 1 and 2 *Jamaica Journal* 17 (1983-4) 13-23, 50-61. K. Bilby, 'Gumbay, Myal, and the Great House: New Evidence on the Religious Background of Jonkonnu in Jamaica', *African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica Research Review* 4 (1999) 47-70. For the ongoing symbolic significance of Jonkonnu in Anglo-Jamaican culture, see Z. Smith, *The Fraud* (New York, 2023): 265-7, 289, 308, 316.

14 For the Set Girls in the Rex Nettleford's National Dance Theater of Jamaica (NDTC) production of *Plantation Revelry*, see S. Sörgel, *Dancing Postcolonialism: The National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica* (Bielefeld, 2015): 114.



'The Red Set Girls': The Red Set was identified by the red-coloured dresses, ornaments and accessories worn by the Set. This Red Set from Kingston is accompanied by a man disguised as a "Jack-in-the-Green" figure who paraded with them.

la, la, la.' Two weeks before Christmas, he was jolted awake in the pre-dawn hours by 'a very unusual sound of mirth'. A local informant explained that 'a parcel of black women,' were 'marching up and down, beginning the Christmas racket' that animated the four days the enslaved had 'entirely to themselves.' Intrigued, he 'followed the sound of the hurricane that was nearest me,' suggesting that several Set Girls' parades were underway simultaneously, 'and met the Blues plump in the face.'¹⁵ He was perplexed by the meaning of the sounds, describing them alternately as mirthful and intimidating, highlighting the dual character of the celebrations. This Set had woven emotional disorientation into the character of their music.

The importance of sound in the Sets' transgressive occupation of space emerges in a 1796 essay by an anonymous Anglo-Jamaican who fumed: 'The *Sett-Girls*, already greet us with their matin song, ... we shall behold ranks..., parading our streets.' He complained that they entered private homes and were accompanied by their musicians, an 'escort of violins, thrum-thrums, tambourines'.... '*Goombas, Banjas, Fiddles, Drums, Flutes, Jaw-bones*' which he characterized as 'instruments

15 *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, (London, 1824), III: 10-1.

of thunder and of terror.¹⁶ By marching into white townspeople's homes, these women's groups extended the public spaces of public streets into domestic settings normally prohibited to them. The Sets 'de-territorialized' white private space and 're-territorialized' it into a place they possessed themselves and infused with the shared history of their communities, a place they were not permitted to control in a white-dominated plantation society founded on violence.

The white perception that Afro-Jamaican's resistance was linked dangerously to loud, festive gatherings was apparent in 1831, toward the end of British slavery, when some of the enslaved engaged in direct efforts to free themselves in what has been called 'The Christmas War' or the Sam Sharpe Rebellion. In his journal detailing that year's tensions, one white observer recounted the strident music he heard in town even after martial law was proclaimed. He specifically named the Set Girls as guilty parties. They 'paraded the streets with their horrid din'. Their music, 'louder and more discordant than ever' led him to speculate that they had a covert, revolutionary purpose. They were 'perhaps feigning indifference, to divert suspicion' from the uprising occurring across the island.¹⁷ Even though the women of the Sets might appear to be intriguingly benign, white auditors heard a message of surreptitious threat in their revelry.

Celebration, sound and security

The brutal system of slavery operated during fifty-one weeks per year while the Christmas festivities lasted at most one week. Nevertheless, the overwhelming sonic presence of the enslaved during this fleeting period carried significance that far exceeded any quantitative measures. These moments revealed the convergence of people, place and meaning-making.

Here, I suggest we can consider how holiday performers captured space sonically as a parallel to how contemporary Jamaicans perceive the space of 'captured land'. Legally, 'captured land' refers to a plot that has become associated with an individual or family who lives there, cultivating the soil, planting trees, raising crops or building homes. A form of land tenure that might be called 'squatters' rights' in the U.S. or 'vinde hævd' ('vested interest') in Denmark, captured land acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between the land and its people.¹⁸ 'Capturing' loca-

16 *Columbian Magazine* (1796), 445-6.

17 H.M. Waddell, *Twenty-nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa: A Review of Missionary Work and Adventure, 1829-1858*, (London, 1863), 58.

18 According to Jakob Ingemann Parby, Danish possession by "vinde hævd" which translates into "vested interest" offers a comparable practice. "It refers to the fact that somebody can gain the right to a piece of land if they cultivate it for a while without no one else claiming it." Personal correspondence, December 11, 2023.



'The French Set Girls', one of the distinctive bands of Set Girls performing in Kingston in 1838.

tions through sounds in appointed times likewise produced a relationship between people and place that was more complex (and more contested) than simple formal ownership.¹⁹

In the era before Emancipation (1838), white planters forcefully dominated geographic spaces including sugar estates, commercial wharves and naval dockyards. However, even when Afro-Jamaicans had no permanent legal claims to spaces, they temporarily 'captured' significant locations with sounds, especially drumming, singing and speaking. Pivotal gathering spots that were only controlled temporarily included the cacophonous weekly markets, established at rural crossroads and urban centres, or at the quieter small plots called provision grounds that they cultivated for themselves and to generate income. Holidays such as Mardi Gras and Christmas provided the most stunning examples of how people throughout the greater Caribbean employed sound to control spaces at agreed-upon moments.

19 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 'Gender and Land Rights Database' Jamaica, Section iii, https://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/country-profiles/countries-list/land-tenure-and-related-institutions/en/?country_iso3=JAM accessed 11 June 2023.

Afro-Jamaicans created a sense of temporality and common experience shaped by these 'own time' moments. Planter-historian Edward Long described how enslaved people conceptualized this time.

[They are] so sensible of their right to these [days off], and their leisure-hours of each day in the intervals of work, that they call them emphatically their own time. Nor is it ever borrowed from them but in some very particular emergency, when they are either paid for it, as may be agreed upon, or allowed an equal portion of time on some other day.²⁰

Backed by the law, enslaved people guarded their own time and insisted on compensation if it were to be infringed upon. During the holidays, however, the enslaved Afro-Jamaican population not only guarded their own time, they also proceeded to capture and possess public spaces by parading in thoroughfares, blocking traffic and forcing the rest of the population including the white slave owners and their families to retreat to the edges of the dusty streets or onto private verandas. Although there were no visible boundaries to these 'captured' urban locations, celebrants temporarily conquered and transformed the meaning of urban space using the sounds of singing, drumming and marching feet for the reconfiguration. Unlike the officially surveyed and legally recorded outlines of sugar estates in deeds, these sonically demarcated places existed at the convergence of time, place and sound. In capturing urban soundscapes, African Jamaicans seized custody of the space through the transitory means of sound.²¹

Conclusion

The complex relationship between sound, time, and space, reveals the performers' agency. For Jamaicans, a fine, sometimes blurred line divided festivity from resistance, demonstrating the significance of temporality, space and sounds in shaping events and collective memory. Because the African-descended population vastly outnumbered Europeans and white creoles, white colonizers relied on both violence and appallingly uneven 'negotiation' to display and preserve their hegemony. White officials attempted to regulate what they heard as terrifying or merely exasperating 'noise', but also recognized that they needed to acquiesce

20 E. Long, *The History of Jamaica...* (London, 1774), II: 491.

21 E. Dennis, 'Spatial Responses of the African Diaspora in Jamaica: Focus on Rastafarian Architecture', in M.A. Gomez (ed.), *Diasporic Africa: A Reader* (New York, 2006), 147-170. The distinctive way sounds are deployed in Jamaica has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines. Sonjah Stanley Niaah has traced 'performing geographies' of Afro-Jamaicans from the 'slave ship to [the] ghetto' arguing that they claimed and continue to 'claim space and identity in urban streets through their performances'. S.S. Niaah, *Dancehall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto* (Ottawa, 2010), 70.

to enslaved people's desire for celebrations. As a result, enslavers and enslaved engaged in ongoing though unequal negotiations and confrontations over how, when and where sounds were permitted. Authorities believed regularly scheduled holidays placated labourers but still feared that Afro-Jamaicans could initiate war through audible signals. Enslavers gambled when they grudgingly permitted spaces to be captured; the measure could easily backfire. Indeed, major moments of resistance occurred during holidays. Sounds (drumming, Abeng horn blowing, shouting), emotions (joy, terror, excitement) and resistance could be linked. The line between thunderous but benign celebrations on the one hand and open rebellion on the other remained frighteningly imperceptible.

As a result of the compromise, whites grudgingly ceded the streets and soundscapes to African Jamaicans during holiday periods. Some whites joined in or sponsored bands while many others vociferously complained about the enervating noise. In moments of fear, officials sometimes outlawed celebrations and attempted to control music, but they did so at their own risk. Temporal boundaries limited African Jamaicans' freedom to control the soundscapes to specific moments, but performers still took full advantage of their customary rights to dominate the streets with their own sounds during their own time. At other times of the year, the whip might crack, the drivers' insistent horn sound and the sugar cane mills grind, but like their access to their provision grounds, African Jamaicans demanded their right to their own space in time.

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