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"Act[ing] Riotously": Theatre and Performance in Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

Theatrical culture in early nineteenth-century Jamaica attests to tense relationships between tradition and innovation, acceptance and resistance. The early nineteenth century has not, however, received much in-depth treatment by historians of the Jamaican stage, who have tended to focus, instead, on the establishment of formal theatre in the eighteenth century or its revival in the post-emancipation years. In its attempts to recover the bustling auditoria that distinguished Jamaica's most popular playhouses in the 1810s, this essay details who attended the theatre, and what kind of rules regulated their behaviour. It examines how theatregoing practices reflected the inequalities that characterized Jamaican society; assesses efforts to enforce segregation within the island's playhouses; and investigates the entertainments that existed beyond them, especially those associated with the members of society least represented or altogether excluded from the island's theatre auditoria—Jamaica's free black and the majority of enslaved men and women.

On Wednesday 23 December 1812, John Overd and Andrew Edmeston were sentenced by the Magistrates' Court in Kingston, Jamaica to 30 days in the common gaol. The two men had attended the Kingston Theatre on the previous evening, where they were accused of having 'smoked segars, and acted riotously' in violation of the recently imposed byelaws.[1] This was not the first instance of unruly audience behaviour at the Kingston Theatre, nor would it be the last. Two months earlier, when the Kingston Theatre re-opened its doors following months of extensive renovation work, the new managers had published an Ordinance 'for the purpose of

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1 *Royal Gazette*, 26 December 1812, volume 34, issue 52. I could not find further biographical information for either John Overd or Andrew Edmeston, but in 1817 a William Edmeston was listed as agent of the Mount Vernon Estate (St Mary's, Jamaica). See *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership Database* <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146646555>. On the wider culture of cigar-smoking in Jamaica see Abraham James's satirical print, *Segar Smoking Society in Jamaica!* (12 November 1802), *Yale University Library Digital Collections* <https://findit.library.yale.edu/catalog/digcoll:2782663>. Accessed 19 March 2021.

preserving order in the Theatre'. By these means, 'persons, found guilty of riotous and indecorous conduct' were liable to be fined 'from 10*l.* to 50*l.* or to imprisonment for ten days or two months, as the case may require'.[2] The sentencing received by Overd and Edmeston gives some indication of the extent of their 'riotous' actions, but what else might their arrest reveal about theatregoing in colonial Jamaica? Who went to the theatre? Where did they sit? What did they watch? And how and why did audiences so frequently misbehave?

Jamaica enjoyed a rich history of theatrical entertainments with English language performances that dated back to the seventeenth century. Plays were regularly staged not only at Spanish Town (the island's capital and seat of government until 1872) but across its main urban centres. In *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (2014), Elizabeth Maddock Dillon makes a powerful case for Jamaica's cultural importance: 'located at the center of the Anglo-Atlantic performative commons, rather than assimilated to British imperial, U.S., or even African traditions, Jamaican theatricality stages the colonial relation in its most unmitigated, contradictory form'.[3] Marlis Schweitzer has also underlined the ideological importance of the island's theatres as sites that facilitated collective alignment with the 'ideals and aesthetics of the "mother country"' and enabled white playgoers to stabilize hierarchies of difference in times of crisis.[4] Here, however, I am more interested in the potential for mis- or deliberate un-alignment with imperial 'ideals and aesthetics'. Schweitzer focuses on the theatre's operation in the aftermath of full emancipation, when local businessmen and amateur groups invested greater money, time and energy into the island's dramatic culture. I focus, instead, on the early nineteenth century. This is a period that Schweitzer identifies with the theatre's decline but which, I argue, needs to be re-assessed. There may have been less theatrical activity then, but the theatres did not, crucially, cease to operate during the years that marked Haitian independence, the abolition of the slave trade, the Anglo-American War, several attempts at local rebellion and a final end to the Napoleonic Wars. Even if the repertoire during this period increasingly leaned toward more spectacular, rather than strictly dramatic, entertainments, from Montego Bay to Kingston, Jamaica's theatres continued to cater to mixed audiences that included planters, overseers, merchants, Freemasons, sailors and domestic servants. Such plurality invites further consideration of the degree to which theatregoers represented the wider population of colonial Jamaica. To this end, this essay also investigates the cultures that existed beyond, but not always entirely divorced from, the island's playhouse repertoires, and asks, more specifically, how these entertainments might have spoken to and for the enslaved communities excluded from theatregoing practices.

2 *Royal Gazette*, 24 October 1812, volume 34, issue 43. 'Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Theatre in Kingston'. Item 7 of the Ordinance stipulated 'that smoking in any part of the house be strictly prohibited'.

3 Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, 2014), 22.

4 Marlis Schweitzer, '"Too Much Tragedy in Real Life": Theatre in Post-Emancipation Jamaica', *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 44 (2017), 8–27, 9–10.

I. INSIDE THE PLAYHOUSES

Who went to the theatre?

By the early nineteenth century Jamaica was an island of paradoxes; at once of great 'historical significance to Britain and [a] simultaneous failure as a settler society'.[5] The settler society that Oliver Cromwell envisaged for Jamaica in 1655—the year the English army successfully took the island from Spanish forces—was never realized. Instead, as Trevor Burnard explains, Jamaican society was 'characterised by large imbalances between the sexes and especially between races, by the widespread absenteeism of many of the most influential members of society, and by continuing population instability and slowness in developing a recognizably home-grown creole consciousness'.[6] In such an unequal society, this essay asks what kind of limited democracy (if any) the Jamaican theatres offered their patrons.

The cost of admission to the Kingston Theatre ranged from 13*s*. 4*d*. for a box seat to 7*s*. 6*d*. for the pit, and 6*s*. 3*d*. for the gallery.[7] But other forms of theatrical entertainment were also available. In 1790 advertisements were placed for tightrope performances and a pantomime at Dallas's Long Room in Church Street,[8] while in 1801, a circus opened at the Dragoons' Quarters in Spanish Town, where the prices of admission were listed as 20*s*. or 13*s*. 4*d*. (for 'people of colour').[9] The parallel existence of legitimate and illegitimate entertainments is important to note: theatrical culture in Jamaica was not homogeneous and, as the different admission costs attest, neither were audiences. Maria Nugent, who moved to Jamaica in 1801 when her husband, George Nugent, was appointed as the island's Lieutenant-Governor and Commander-in-Chief, observed that theatre audiences in Spanish Town 'were of all colours and descriptions; blacks, browns, Jews, and whites'.[10]

Sephardic (Iberian) and Ashkenazim (Eastern European) Jews had been in the Caribbean since the seventeenth century and could claim strong connections to its social, political and economic landscapes.[11] Many of Jamaica's Jews were either planters or worked as merchants. As Errol Hill underscores, in Kingston, the Jewish community was 'most active in promoting professional and amateur productions and maintaining a proper functioning playhouse in the city'.[12] The presence of Jews within the auditorium thus indexes a body of spectators as influential behind the scenes of the island's playhouses as before them. But if Jamaica's Jews enjoyed relative

5 Brooke N. Newman, *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (New Haven, CT, 2018), 7.

6 Trevor Burnard, 'A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica', *Journal of Social History*, 28 (1994), 63–82, 65.

7 Errol Hill, *The Jamaican Stage, 1655–1900: Profile of a Colonial Theatre* (Amherst, MA, 1992), 28. N.B. due to an apparent misprint, the price of admission for the gallery is here listed at 6s. 8d. but subsequent references confirm the price of 6s. 3d. (e.g., ibid., 37).

8 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 26.

9 Richardson Little Wright, *Revels in Jamaica, 1682–1838* (Kingston, 1986), 303–4.

10 Maria Nugent and Frank Cundall, *Lady Nugent's Journal, Jamaica One Hundred Years Ago* (London, 1907), 194.

11 Sarah Phillips Casteel and Heidi Kaufman (eds), *Caribbean Jewish Crossings: Literary History and Creative Practice* (Charlottesville, VA, 2019), 2.

12 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 80.

financial and, by extension, cultural freedoms, they nevertheless occupied an ambiguous social position. As Lois Durbin explains:

> the most salient difference in the Atlantic world was skin color or race. That Jews were perceived as white Europeans in the early modern Americas has been a crucial factor throughout their subsequent history. Jews did not represent the Other in the Americas as they often did in Christian Europe. However, even in the Americas, their persistence in maintaining religious and ethnic distinctiveness certainly influenced their standing among European settlers.[13]

In the bird's eye view of the Spanish Town Theatre auditorium that Nugent briefly affords, Jews are, notably, the only group not distinguishable by their skin colour, which, in turn, inflects the rhythmic listing of 'blacks, browns, Jews, and whites' with an even more jarring quality. As Sarah Phillips Casteel puts it, Jewishness in Jamaica quickly became 'an intermediary term, a channel through which to incorporate the European into the African or to consider the ambiguous status of those light-skinned Creole subjects who are both European and not, white and not white'.[14]

While several plays in the Jamaican theatre repertoire suggest that managers explicitly courted Jewish patrons, it was only in 1831 that the island's Jews acquired full civil rights.[15] Before that date, Jews were forbidden to vote in Jamaica or hold any public office. But if the Assembly denied Jamaica's Jewish population the right to vote in public elections, it did not, crucially, bar them from what Elaine Hadley describes, in another context, as theatregoers' entitlement to '"vote" their pleasure'.[16] In *The Cruise of the Midge* (1836) Michael Scott relates 'an amusing playhouse row' that took place during an amateur performance at the Kingston Theatre and subsequently developed into a full-blown riot that required police intervention after two men (one of whom was a Jew) took to blows over a previous altercation. In framing this anecdote, Scott, like Nugent, is keen to make a point about the complex syncretism of Jamaican society. Scott begins by detailing the protagonists' choice of seating in 'the second row of a *buccra* box, near the stage' (i.e. in the company of other well-to-do white spectators).[17] He then offers extended commentary upon the auditorium's tripartite division and the 'comic appearance the division of castes produced':

> The pit seemed to be almost exclusively filled with the children of Israel . . . ; the dress boxes contained the other white inhabitants and their families; the second tier the brown *ladies*, who seemed more intent on catching the eyes of the young buccras *below*, than attending to the civil things the males of their own shades were

13 Lois Dubin, 'Introduction: Port Jews in the Atlantic World "Jewish History"', *Jewish History*, 20 (2006), 117–27, 120.

14 Sarah Phillips Casteel, quoted in Casteel and Kaufman (eds), *Caribbean Jewish Crossings*, 7.

15 For examples of plays targeted at the Jewish community, see Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 80.

16 Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford, CA, 1995), 37.

17 The *Dictionary of Jamaican English* offers various definitions of 'backra, buckra' [also buccra], the foremost being: 1. A white man or woman (the latter also *backra lady*, *backra mistress*, etc.); also, collectively, white people', with Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) cited as an early example of this usage. F. G. Cassidy and R. B. Le Page (eds), *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, 2nd edn (Kingston, 2002).

> pouring into their ears *above*; the gallery was tenanted by Bungo himself, in all his glory of black face, blubber lips, white eyes, and ivory teeth. This black parterre being powdered here and there with a sprinkling of white sailors, like snowdrops in a bed of purple anemones; Jack being, as usual on such occasions, pretty well drunk.[18]

Scott's description of the Kingston Theatre's socially stratified audiences recalls the 'Comparison between the World and the Stage' found in Book VII, Chapter I of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). In Scott's anecdote, the audience also remains, throughout, the true spectacle, with the entertainment on stage never materializing beyond passing reference to its amateur performers. To borrow from Terry Robinson's neat characterization of the Covent Garden Theatre's Old Price rioters, the men and women whom Scott locates in the Kingston Theatre were 'not merely passive spectators of theatrical events but important players in the theatre'.[19]

Notably, Scott applies racial stereotyping to all sections of the auditorium. This includes a farcical blazon directed at the black viewers in the gallery, whom Scott reduces to the singular—but representative—'Bungo … of black face, blubber lips, white eyes, and ivory teeth'. The name Bungo was probably intended as a variation of 'Mungo', the black servant popularized by Isaac Bickerstaffe and Charles Dibdin's comic opera *The Padlock* (1768). But it may also have been a name familiar to Scott during his time in Jamaica. *The African Names Database*—which records the names of captives found on board over 2000 shipping vessels condemned for illegal slave traffic during the last 60 years of the transatlantic slave trade—contains multiple entries for Bungo (and variations of the name, ranging from Bungó to Mabungo) associated with slaves coming from the Congo.[20] What, then, can we discover about the black men and women who attended and (just as crucially) did not attend the Kingston Theatre?

Kingston provided opportunities for enslaved men and women to work and interact in ways that differed markedly from life on the plantations. While the experiences of Kingston's slaves were varied, a significant number of city slaves engaged in artisanal activities and other skilled trades, including ship carpentry and tailoring, by which they could earn some money and also break away from the anonymity experienced by the majority of field labourers.[21] 'Urban slavery', as Burnard describes it, was consequently 'more permeable and more variegated than slavery elsewhere on the island'.[22] If we are to imagine Scott's Bungo as a slave, then his social position must be understood within this context; as the member of a specific subset of Kingston's enslaved population. The majority of Jamaica's slaves, by contrast, lacked the time, money or agency to attend theatrical entertainments.

Hill discounts the 'free blacks of the working class' from attending the Kingston Theatre gallery, noting that the price of 6*s*. 3*d*. for a gallery ticket would have been

18 Michael Scott, *The Cruise of the Midge* (Paris, 1836), 385.

19 Terry F. Robinson, 'National Theatre in Transition: The London Patent Theatre Fires of 1808–1809 and the Old Price Riots', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* (pubd online 29 March 2016) <http://www.branchcollective.org>. Accessed 19 March 2021.

20 For the most comprehensive record of this name see <https://legacy.african-origins.org/african-data/>. On its origins, see <https://slavevoyages.org/resources/names-database>. Accessed 19 March 2021.

21 Trevor Burnard, 'Slaves and Slavery in Kingston, 1770–1815', *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 65 (2020), 39–65, 60.

22 Burnard, 'Slaves and Slavery in Kingston', 61.

expensive for labourers whose weekly salaries ranged from 10*s*. to 12*s*. and 15*s*. to 20*s*. (if skilled).[23] The investigation into Martin Halhead, a free black man, who was accused in April 1815 of inciting a riot at the Kingston Theatre, places him outside, rather than within, the playhouse walls.[24] Although it suggests that some free black men were active playgoers, they were not, it seems, widely represented therein.

For pragmatic as well as ideological reasons, the black soldiers in the West India Regiments (WIR) are also unlikely to have attended the island's theatres (See Fig. 1). The British government's policy, from 1795, to recruit slaves for permanent military units in the Caribbean was seen as an egregious blow to the economic and political interests of Jamaican planters who, as Roger Norman Buckley explains, not only feared the consequences of arming slaves, but were also unwilling to provide their healthy male slaves for military service and resented the metropolitan government's interference with the colonial assemblies.[25] As a result of their refusal to supply the Army with slaves for the WIR, the British government resorted to purchasing slaves directly from Africa. These soldiers' legal status was initially equivocal, and it was only through the Mutiny Act of 1807 that they were emancipated. But even then, the WIR's black soldiers, like other free blacks in Jamaica, still lacked full political and civil rights.[26]

In Jamaica, the 2d Regiment was garrisoned at Fort Augusta, far away from the island's more populous areas.[27] But this kind of measure did little to dampen the 'explosive mixture of contempt and terror' with which the WIR's black soldiers were viewed by most white islanders.[28] From the 1790s to far beyond the end of the Napoleonic Wars (when the need for black soldiers in the WIR actually increased), these free black men were embroiled in what David Lambert productively identifies as a much more expansive '"war of representation" over the figure of the African subject during the age of abolition'.[29] The conversations that took place within Jamaican theatre auditoria—including, but not exclusive to, those sparked by the choice of play on offer—almost certainly contributed to this 'war of representation'.

Sailors and soldiers of all ranks frequented the English metropolitan and provincial theatres,[30] and Scott's narrative suggests that Jamaican theatres also functioned as important ideological and recreational sites for the armed forces.[31] Yet it is

23 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 37.

24 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 36. Dillon, *New Word Drama*, 181.

25 Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: the British West India Regiments, 1795–1815* (New Haven, CT, 1979).

26 Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 78–9.

27 Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 74. On the accommodation allocated to WIR soldiers, see also Timothy James Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race: Life and Death in the West India Regiments, 1795–1874* (Cambridge, 2020), 86–91.

28 Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 68.

29 David Lambert, '[A] Mere Cloak for their Proud Contempt and Antipathy towards the African Race': Imagining Britain's West India Regiments in the Caribbean, 1795–1838', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46 (2018), 627–50, 629.

30 See Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society 1793–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95–121.

31 Sailors from the Merchant, rather than Royal, Navy may have attended the Kingston Theatre more regularly. Although sailors in the Royal Navy could acquire prize money, their basic salary was low (as well as often in arrears) and opportunities for offshore leave limited (partly because of fear of desertion). On

Fig. 1. 'A Private of the 5th West India Regiment', from *Costumes of the Army of the British Empire, according to the last regulations 1812*, engraved by J. C. Stadler, published by Colnaghi & Co. 1812–1815 (coloured aquatint), Smith, Charles Hamilton (1776–1859) (after)/ National Army Museum, London/Bridgeman Images. NAM254143.

unlikely that his description of a 'black parterre . . . powdered here and there with a sprinkling of white sailors' was intended as an acknowledgement of the racial diversity of the colony's defenders. In addition to the social stigma faced by the WIR's

how sailors spent their leisure time in British port towns, see Cindy McCreery, 'True Blue and *Black, Brown and Fair*: Prints of British Sailors and their Women during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 23 (2000), 135–52.

black soldiers, there were also economic factors that impinged upon their choice of leisure-time activities. Within the WIR, black and white soldiers were issued the same uniform, pay and allowances but their salary was only 7*s*. per week.[32] Taking on 'fatigue' work could help soldiers boost their income through additional payments which, after 1815, ranged from 10*d*. to 18*d*. per day (relative to the season).[33] But since such work was in high demand because soldiers rarely received their regular pay in full, the disposable income of the WIR soldier—whether white or black—fell considerably short of what would have been required to make playgoing a viable choice of pastime.[34]

Free blacks were distinct from the more affluent free people of colour, who were offered reduced prices of admission to the boxes at the cost of 10*s*., rather than 13*s*. 4*d*. The number of free people of colour (or mixed descent) rose sharply in early nineteenth-century Jamaica but their legal status, akin to those of Jews and free blacks, remained a subject of contention. Brooke N. Newman's illuminating account of the intersecting narratives of race and subjecthood in colonial Jamaica reveals how a belief in 'hereditary blood' was used to justify slavery and marginalize the descendants of mixed-race unions, who, as Christer Petley notes, inherited 'free or enslaved legal status from their mothers'.[35] Newman calculates that between 1795 and 1825 this group went from representing just over 33 per cent to more than 50 per cent of the island's total free population.[36] Most of Jamaica's free people of colour were confined to the lowest social classes, but the early nineteenth century saw the emergence of a prominent minority, whose wealth and education allowed them to gain increasing political influence with the Jamaican Assembly.[37] Theatre managers' ever more pronounced attempts at segregation—as captured by Scott—suggest that by the 1810s, free people of colour were attending local playhouses with greater frequency and that this unsettled some white audiences. In his *West India Customs and Manners* (rev. 1793), J. B. Moreton writes of the 'many free black men and women all over the island, some of whom have slaves and plantations'.[38] The author known as Cynric Williams also nods toward the social mobility enjoyed by the creole population in his description of an evening of dancing at the house of a 'free mulatto woman' where 'there were many free people of colour' (including 'men [who] were very well dressed, and conducted themselves with the greatest propriety').[39] But, notably, of the 'blacks, browns, Jews, and whites' observed by Nugent, only 'whites'

32 David Lambert, email to author, 26 February 2021.

33 Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 127.

34 Since various African languages and dialects were spoken among the black soldiers in the WIR, linguistic barriers should also be taken into account.

35 Christer Petley, '"Legitimacy" and Social Boundaries: Free People of Colour and the Social Order in Jamaican Slave Society', *Social History*, 30 (2005), 481–98, 484.

36 Newman, *Dark Inheritance*, 2.

37 Petley, '"Legitimacy" and Social Boundaries', 498.

38 J. B. Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners* (London, 1793), 133.

39 Cynric R. Williams, *A Tour through the Island of Jamaica: From the Western to the Eastern End in the Year 1823*, 2nd edn (London, 1827), 64.

could claim full subjecthood (with gender and class functioning as critical markers even within this group).[40]

That black theatre audiences were restricted to the section of the auditorium with poorest visibility and acoustics was a fact reaching boiling point in April 1815. This is when the riot supposedly led by Halhead occurred outside the Kingston Theatre in response to managerial plans to construct a separate entrance and staircase for the use of non-white playgoers.[41] The Kingston Theatre, which had advertised separate seating for people of colour from as early as 1802, ensured that segregation was closely enforced by its byelaws. The 1812 Ordinance clearly stated:

> 2d, That no White Person be admitted to that part of the Theatre allotted to Persons of Colour, nor shall any person of Colour be admitted to those parts of the house allotted to the Whites; and that there may be no misunderstanding on this head, the lower Boxes and the Pitt are exclusively appropriated to the White Inhabitants, and the upper Boxes and the Gallery are exclusively appropriated to persons of Colour.[42]

The perceived importance of segregation to the proper government of the Kingston Theatre is highlighted by this notice's appearance as the second item in the Ordinance and its reinforcement by the third, which stipulated a system whereby 'a Person be appointed to superintend the taking of Boxes or Seats'. The latter would guarantee that first applicants to seats be given priority, their names recorded on the Box-keeper's books, and that on the evening of representation, 'each Person be shewn to the seat taken'. By not only precluding but also explicitly prohibiting the practice of 'the keeping of seats by servants', the managerial committee compelled segregation by removing household slaves from even temporary placement within the best viewing positions afforded by the auditorium.[43]

The Ordinance's commitment to creating demarcated spaces within the auditorium ultimately suggests, however, that managerial efforts were more often ignored than heeded. Scott's 'amusing playhouse row' provides its own evidence of this by detailing how the Jewish spectator, whom he blames for starting the disturbance, had left his position in the pit to occupy a seat on the left of the protagonists' box (previously described as a '*buccra* box'). It is after this 'young stray Hebrew'—as Scott refers to the playgoer, punning, in poor taste, on the diaspora—is levelled to the floor, that a full reshuffle of the auditorium occurs: 'This was the signal for the sea of Jews in the pit to toss its billows; and, like a great cauldron, to popple and hiss, until it boiled over into the boxes, in a roaring torrent'.[44] Scott's employment of maritime imagery here anticipates the important role later played by one of the sailors from the gallery, who saves the protagonist's party from the worst of the ensuing

40 It is important to note the discrepancy between Jamaica's rich and poor whites, and to enquire into the opportunities for social ascension available in Jamaica. Moreton notes that 'the British colonies in the West Indies are over-run with the sons of peasantry, from different parts of Great-Britain and Ireland, particularly from Scotland, the latter well educated men in general'. *West India Customs and Manners*, 92.

41 Dillon, *New World Drama*, 181.

42 *Royal Gazette*, 24 October 1812, volume 34, issue 43.

43 *Royal Gazette*, 24 October 1812, volume 34, issue 43.

44 Scott, *Cruise of the Midge*, 385.

violence; while his playful supernatural evocations capture the sheer force and irrepressible energy of an auditorium, defying all the containment strategies imposed by the managers of the Kingston Theatre.

As both Hill and Dillon have persuasively argued, it is helpful to compare segregation in Jamaica's theatres to that practised in its churches.[45] Mixed race congregations were of acute concern to the plantocracy. In the island's Anglican churches, social segregation required that 'the free coloreds and blacks could sit only in the back pews or in the organ loft with the slaves'. Those who did not subscribe to this rule (for example, the Wesleyans and Black Baptists) were viewed with suspicion and faced difficult conditions for their mission work, as Mary Turner has outlined in fascinating detail.[46] It is also worth highlighting that during the eighteenth century segregation had been strictly enforced in the theatres at nearby Saint Domingue. Lauren R. Clay explains how 'free people of colour . . . were officially denied entrance to the "white" sections of the playhouse' and were required, instead, to view theatrical entertainments from areas reserved for 'people of colour'.[47] Slaves were altogether prohibited from attending as spectators, although Clay notes, interestingly, that sometimes slave owners permitted their slaves to be hired as musicians for the theatre's orchestra.[48] The widespread appreciation for slaves' musical abilities offers some grounds for this also being the case in Jamaica. Thus, when Matthew Lewis dismisses the orchestra of the Kingston Theatre as 'consisting of nothing more than a couple of fiddle players',[49] it is possible that he dismisses, also, its slave performers.

What did theatregoers watch?

The earliest surviving record of a professional theatrical production in Jamaica is dated 1733 and lists John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) as the mainpiece.[50] Frequently revived in both London and Jamaica, Gay's ballad opera was popular with local theatregoers, whose reading of newspapers, imported books and personal epistolary exchanges helped them keep abreast of the latest metropolitan fashions. As Hill states, 'formal theatre in the Caribbean came from Europe'.[51] Shakespeare's plays were often staged, with Samuel Jackson Pratt's entertainment *The Shadows of Shakespeare* being well received in 1780.[52] There was also a good market for play texts: as early as November 1779 the *Jamaica Mercury* advertised the availability of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Duenna*,[53] while lists of books for sale at Aikman's

45 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 36; Dillon, *New World Drama*, 181.

46 Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834* (Urbana, IL, 1982), 12.

47 Lauren Clay, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), 196.

48 Clay, *Stagestruck*, 196.

49 M. G. Lewis, *Journal of a West-India Proprietor: Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London, 1834), 166.

50 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 74–5.

51 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 278.

52 On *The Shadows of Shakespeare*, see Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford, 1992), 183 n. 94.

53 An acting text of this play had been created by Tate Wilkinson, manager of the Theatre Royal at York, but Sheridan himself refused to publish *The Duenna*, which was only available in pirated editions during

Stationary [*sic*] Store or through auction included set editions of dramatic texts, such as the *English Theatre* (in 12 volumes) and *Bell's British Theatre* (in 20 volumes).[54] Although Moreton complains that 'the newspapers teem with little more than that of sales, vendues [*sic*], houses and lands to be rented, runaway negroes, and strayed horses' (63), they constitute an important source for the recovery of Jamaica's early nineteenth-century theatrical culture. The *Jamaica Courant*, which began publication in 1718, was the first British West Indian newspaper, while the *Jamaica Mercury* (issued from 1780 and later known as the *Royal Gazette*) saw the partnership of the theatrical impresario David Douglass and bookseller and stationer William Aikman, 'Printers to the King's Most Excellent Majesty for Jamaica and its Dependencies'.[55] As already noted, the newspapers' global reach enabled theatregoers to remain current with the latest news, including, of course, theatrical news. The *Royal Gazette* for 9–15 July 1812 thus reported that 'Cooke the Actor is arrived in London, from his transatlantic visit, and on Friday entered into an engagement with the Manager of Covent-Garden Theatre'. The fact that advertisements for plays, slave sales and runaway notices were crammed into the same pages is also significant, notwithstanding Moreton's ready dismissal of it. Each of these items helped subsidize the newspapers, reminding us that 'performance' was never confined to playhouses alone and that the institutions of theatre and slavery shared, significantly, the same print economy.[56]

Command performances helped sustain theatre in Jamaica, as they did elsewhere. Freemasons regularly frequented the island's theatre auditoria and were influential patrons in this regard. Freemasonry in Jamaica was predominantly among affluent white settlers and included the Jewish community. The Grand Lodge of England provided a model for the wider Masonic movement and Irish lodges were among the first to be established in Jamaica, where travelling warrants were also issued in order to enable the operation of Regimental lodges. Although Freemasonry rules forbade the discussion of politics and religion within lodges, after the French Revolution, the brotherhood's secrecy made it more widely suspected of radicalism. In response, some West Indian lodges began to meet under the guise of offering lessons in Spanish and English (services comparable to those already provided by theatre professionals out of season).[57] Within the Jamaican theatres, Freemasons nevertheless exercised considerable visibility. They were often responsible for the choice of repertoire at the Kingston Theatre, as advertised, for example, by the *Royal Gazette* on 15 July 1780 (while the American Company was still in residence) and on numerous other occasions, including 23 June 1813, when [Mr] Reid's benefit night featured *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret!* and *The Padlock* 'by particular desire of the Worshipful Grand Master, Wardens and Members of the Provincial Grand Lodges of

his lifetime. See Laurie E. Maguire, *Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The 'Bad' Quartos and their Contexts* (Cambridge, 1996), 107–8.

54 *Jamaica Mercury*, 26 June–3 July 1779, volume 1, issue 9/10, and 'Auction of Books' advertised in *Royal Gazette*, 20 May 1780, volume 2, issue 56.

55 Frank Cundall, *The Press and Printers of Jamaica prior to 1820* (Worcester, 1916), 73.

56 David Waldstreicher, 'Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999), 243–72, 247.

57 See, for example, Mr Morgan's advertisement for 'Music, Fencing, & Dancing' in the *Royal Gazette*, 21 October 1780, volume 2, issue 78 (item dated 13 October 1780).

Ancient Masons'.[58] Nor was the input of the island's Freemasons limited to the Kingston Theatre: the 1816–1817 season at the Spanish Town Theatre concluded with *The Foundling of the Forest* and *The Bee-Hive*, as selected by the Royal Saint Jago Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, 'under the sanction of the Grand Master'.[59] Masonic odes and songs were also frequently heard across the island's playhouses.[60]

The Jamaican theatre repertoire was thus largely determined by what was popular in London—and modified, to some degree, to suit local appetites. But it was also dependent upon the availability of actors and the roles they laid claim to. After the American Company left Jamaica in 1785, there were some attempts at sustaining theatrical culture through the activities of amateur performers. This was followed by brief engagements, for instance, of French actors escaping from insurrection in Saint Domingue, and entertainers specializing in circus acts and spectacles, as Hill records.[61] The overlap between legitimate and illegitimate theatrical cultures provides valuable evidence of an entertainment industry that may have struggled to remain afloat but refused to give up and, by the early 1810s, was able to recover some of its previous ground. Caribbean-wide connections facilitated this. The year 1812 saw the erection of new playhouses in both Bridgetown, Barbados and Kingston, Jamaica. The theatre in Bridgetown opened its doors on 1 January 1812 and it was, significantly, the company from Barbados, under the management of Charles Manning, Jesse Read and Elizabeth Shaw, that produced plays at the Kingston Theatre when it reopened on 26 October that same year (with a bill featuring *Douglas* and *Raising the Wind*).[62] The company did well, with the impressive sum of £438 apparently secured in receipts on their first night at the Kingston Theatre (although this is a surprising, even suspicious sum, especially in the light of reports that many audience members tricked the box office by entering with fake tickets).[63] Furthermore, the demand for theatrical entertainments extended beyond Kingston. Before the end of 1812, theatrical culture had also been revived at Spanish Town, where the Long Room was renovated for use by the new company in anticipation of the Spanish Town Theatre's formal reopening on 24 July 1813.[64] In 1816 a revival of local theatre was also underway at Montego Bay.[65]

II. BEYOND THE PLAYHOUSES

Hidden histories

The availability of theatrical entertainments throughout the island and the heterogeneous audiences its playhouses attracted support Jim Davis's recommendation that we redirect the gaze from the stage to the auditorium, and concentrate on the

58 Wright, *Revels in Jamaica*, 321.
59 Wright, *Revels in Jamaica*, 327.
60 See, for example, *Royal Gazette*, 15 July 1780, volume 2, issue 64 and Postscript to the *Royal Gazette*, 5–12 July 1794.
61 Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 81.
62 Postscript to the *Royal Gazette*, 19–26 September 1812.
63 Quoted in Wright, *Revels in Jamaica*, 318.
64 Wright, *Revels in Jamaica*, 318–22.
65 Wright, *Revels in Jamaica*, 330.

different 'modes of looking' that occurred therein.[66] In the context of the surviving written accounts of colonial Jamaican culture, an interest in these alternative 'modes of looking' brings us, repeatedly and unavoidably, against the limits of perspective. In his *Brief Account of the Island of Antigua* (1789), John Luffman makes the point that 'the general idea of Europeans, that blacks only are slaves, is very erroneous, for slavery extends to every descendant of negroes (slaves) by white men, such as mulattoes, mestees and quarteroons, and the two latter mentioned, are frequently as fair as Englishmen . . . habituated to a sea-faring life, or to tropical countries'.[67] Skin colour alone was not a reliable indicator of social status but, for his part, Scott only has time to rehearse the stereotype of the black spectator in the gallery, not test it (in contrast to the treatment he affords to one of the white sailors therein who, distinguishing himself from the other drunken tars, emerges as the party's rescuer). By a similar token, while descriptions of slave funerals abound in early Jamaican histories and travel narratives, Jean D'Costa warns that 'whites seldom attended the funerary or religious rites of Africans or African-creoles, and the new class of free blacks and browns tended to reject things with such an African cast'.[68] Not only, then, do we need to interrogate the reliability of the extant archive, but to remember that in a society as highly stratified as that of early nineteenth-century Jamaica, 'whites, Africans, African-Creoles and the new class of free blacks and browns' insisted on demarcated cultural practices. Any consideration of 'black culture' in colonial Jamaica needs to be elastic enough to take into account the variegated experiences of free people of colour, free blacks, runaways and slaves (in a range of urban and plantation settings).

Like the theatre spectator, whose response is, as Davis describes, 'invariably caught between the *before* and *after*',[69] so too is the work of the cultural historian, acutely aware, when handling their source materials, that, as the Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot puts it, 'the past does not exist independently from the present': 'nothing is inherently over there or here . . . The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position'.[70] Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (1673) makes claims to truth and exactitude that the author himself frequently undercuts. Consider, for example, Ligon's abrupt conclusion to his account of how Barbados's enslaved people responded to early attempts to instil Christianity: 'And this is all I can remember concerning the Negroes, except of their games, which I could never learn, because they wanted language to teach me'.[71] The sentence resists closure, notwithstanding its stated intent, and underlines, significantly, the precarious nature of Ligon's work, constrained as it is by what its author 'can remember' and could 'never learn'. These issues reverberate across Jamaica's early nineteenth-century archive, both verbal and visual.

66 Jim Davis, 'Looking and Being Looked At: Visualizing the Nineteenth-Century Spectator', *Theatre Journal*, 69 (2017), 515–34, 518.

67 J. Luffman, *A Brief Account of the Island of Antigua* (London, 1789), 114.

68 Jean D'Costa, 'Oral Literature, Formal Literature: The Formation of Genre in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 27 (1994), 663–76, 671.

69 Davis, 'Looking and Being Looked At', 522.

70 Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA, 2015), 15.

71 Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (London, 1657), 54.

As Edward Kamau Brathwaite powerfully puts it, 'most of the history is in ruins, the archives are in ruins or are already centred in such a way that whatever you read, you're reading only part of it'.[72] Such incompletion needs to be constantly borne in mind. Methods of recording are selective, as Ligon dramatizes, and incur the risk of being misleading—whether deliberately so or not. A good example of this is provided by John E. Crowley, whose study of representations of the Caribbean sugar industry across the long eighteenth century points to 'European viewing and reading publics [that] were primarily interested in the machinery that made sugar, not the agricultural processes of enslaved labor'.[73] Landscape artists tended to exclude, distance, and/or highly aestheticize the slaves who worked the land. The engraving below (Fig. 2), of a plantation scene in early nineteenth-century Barbados, taken from John Waller's *A Voyage in the West Indies* (1820), effects various kinds of omission in its romanticized representation of slave life:

> It does not show the abject material conditions of the enslaved, the dilapidation of their housing, their tattered and worn clothing, the hunger they often suffered, the blandness (and often inadequacy) of their food rations, and the contaminated water they frequently drank; it also obscures the illness and infirmities that were widespread in plantation villages or settlements.[74]

How many accounts of Jamaican theatregoing were inflected by similarly repressive strategies? And how can we go about trying to recover the voices of the men and women in Jamaica's theatre auditoria whose subject position rendered them nothing more than often unreliably fashioned and ultimately inarticulate presences? What were their experiences?

Odai Johnson's work on genocidal memory in classical theatre offers a compelling manifesto for a process by which hidden histories might be made visible again. 'To be historically mute . . . is not the same as being absent', while 'it is what the text does not say that reveals the deepest scars', Johnson argues.[75] With this in mind, we might return to Ligon's impatience with his own sources. Like many later writers, Ligon finds fault with the slaves' linguistic skills, unable to 'learn their games' because 'they wanted language to teach me'. This 'want' might, however, reflect not only, potentially, a lack of ability to express oneself, but also a lack of desire to do so. In his *View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1823), James Stewart grudgingly concedes that 'the proverbial sayings of the negroes have often much point and meaning', although he complains of their protracted delivery. 'Beginning their speeches with a tiresome exordium, mingling with them much

72 Marcia P. A. Burrowes, 'Golokwati conversations: An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite', *World Literature Written in English*, 39 (2001), 9–26, 15.

73 John E. Crowley, 'Sugar Machines: Picturing Industrialized Slavery', *The American Historical Review*, 121 (2016), 403–36, 404.

74 Item description for 'Plantation Scene and Slave Houses, Barbados, 1807–08', *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*. <http://slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1472>. Accessed 19 March 2021.

75 Odai Johnson, 'Unspeakable Histories: Terror, Spectacle, and Genocidal Memory', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 70 (2009), 97–116, 108, 110.

Fig. 2. John A. Waller, 'Slaves in Barbadoes', *A Voyage in the West Indies* (London, 1820), plate facing p. 20. Courtesy of HathiTrust.

extraneous matter, and frequently traversing over and over the same ground, and cautioning the hearer to be attentive', Stewart deems the slaves' diversions unnecessary: 'the whole which has been said, though it may have taken up half an hour, could have been comprised in half-a-dozen words'.[76] But what he here overlooks on a question of stylistic preference is the ability of the speaker to retain the listener with what he labels such 'circumlocutory' speech. The half hour expended in delivery was a half hour away from labour. Yet, it is notable that even this example of loquaciousness among the enslaved mutes the black voice; its 'tiresome exordium' and 'extraneous matter' registered but never detailed (leaving the reader beholden to Stewart's judgements alone). As Joan Scott argues, we need to remain focused on 'the discursive nature of "experience" and on the politics of its

76 J. A. Stewart, *View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1823), 264.

construction. Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted'.[77]

The performances that took place on Jamaica's stages must be understood alongside not only what occurred within the auditorium, but also beyond it. Between periods of operation, Jamaica's theatres served various purposes: the St Jago de la Vega assemblies were frequently held at the Spanish Town Theatre;[78] while the Kingston Theatre had earlier been transformed into a barracks for the Maroons[79] and hired for subscription concerts.[80] In addition to this, the Kingston Theatre regularly provided a backdrop for the military parades that were held before it.[81] Placing Jamaica's theatres within this larger social context marks an important step toward the recovery of what Petley describes as the 'multifaceted but symbiotic relationship' that characterized the island's 'distinctive urban and rural spheres'.[82]

The plantation was at the centre of island life; a space for 'inter-cultural relations' that, as Brathwaite theorizes, 'creates a space within a space'.[83] Both its richest and poorest occupants regularly sought to evade this space, however. As frequently discussed, absenteeism was prevalent in Jamaica, with estate owners preferring to reside in Britain or the island's thriving urban centres, rather than their plantation homes. The *British Review* for March 1812 was thus able to suggest that most absentee landowners 'would turn with horror from the sight of practices which are often perpetrated by their agents on their property',[84] while the *Monthly Review* for August 1812 argued that for proper management 'the presence of a West India proprietor is a *sine quâ non*; he must not reside in England, but his eye must be over all the transactions of the estate'.[85] On the flip side of this coin, Simon Newman estimates that in pre-emancipation Jamaica, 'as many as 2 percent of the enslaved at any given point were absent as longer-term or persistent runaways'.[86] Slaves were sometimes leased for short periods to other estates, or could be given permission to travel to towns and cities in search of temporary opportunities for self-hire.[87] This record of evasion doubles as an invitation to assess what David Waldstreicher poignantly describes as the 'nature and impact of unfree mobility'.[88] This, I suggest, might be meaningfully

77 Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773–97, 797.

78 *Jamaican Daily Advertiser*, 6 March 1790, issue 57.

79 On 21 August 1779 readers of the *Jamaica Mercury* (Issue 17) learnt that 'one of the Maroons quartered at the theatre shot himself, whilst the others were on the Parade'.

80 See, for example, *Jamaican Daily Advertiser*, 9 October 1790, issue 242 and *Royal Gazette*, 31 August 1794, volume 16, issue 36.

81 *Jamaican Daily Advertiser*, 25 October 1790, issue 253.

82 Christer Petley, 'Plantations and Homes: The Material Culture of the Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaican Elite', *Slavery & Abolition*, 35 (2014), 437–57, 451.

83 Burrowes, 'Golokwati conversations', 11.

84 Anon., 'Art. III. The West Indians defended against the Accusations of their Calumniators; or, Facts versus Prejudices', *The British Review, and London Critical Journal*, 3 (March 1812), 51–78, 54.

85 Anon., 'Art. XIII. Notices respecting Jamaica in 1808, 1809, 1810', *Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal*, 68 (August 1812), 426–31, 430–31.

86 Simon Newman, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Escaped Slaves in Late Eighteenth-and Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaica', *William and Mary Quarterly*, OI Reader app (2018), 1–53, 11 <https://oieahc.wm.edu/digital-projects/oi-reader/simon-p-newman-hidden-in-plain-sight/>.

87 Waldstreicher, 'Reading the Runaways', 251.

88 Waldstreicher, 'Reading the Runaways', 245.

linked to Brathwaite's suggestion that 'at the heart of the plantation discourse was the alternative notion of maroonage—the people who left the plantation and set up and gained re-creolization'.[89] What, then, can we learn from a study of the diverse nature of the extra-theatric public performances that occurred within Jamaica's slave-based and racially stratified society? How might attempts to assert cultural forms of 'maroonage' have provided slaves with narratives of freedom in excess of those on offer at the island's hegemonically oriented plantations and playhouses? What were the tensions, contradictions and also potentialities associated with this alternative domain of performance?

Other kinds of 'play'

Slaves were given brief periods of respite at Crop Over, Easter, Christmas and New Year.[90] Beyond this, only on Sundays were slaves given limited leisure time from the gruelling pace of plantation labour. As such, many of their 'plays' (sessions of music and dance not to be confused with the productions put on at the theatres) took place on Sunday afternoons. The music on these occasions was, by all accounts, lively and innovative (supporting the possibility that some slave musicians may have been hired to play in the theatres' orchestras).

Song was an important generator of the rhythms required for plantation labour and slaves with a good singing voice tended to fetch higher prices at auction.[91] Many early commentators recognized the affective power of the slaves' singing, with Bryan Edwards, for example, noting that their tone of 'predominant melancholy . . . to a man of feeling, is sometimes very affecting'.[92] As Martin Munro argues, 'with the mass influx of largely West African slaves to the circum-Caribbean, rhythm became a marker of racial difference and cultural inferiority, on the one hand, and a sign of resistance and impenetrable black subjectivity, on the other'.[93] This 'doubleness' was frequently registered by early commentators of slave festivities. Alexander Barclay remembers Crop Over, which usually took place in August, as an occasion wherein 'all authority and all distinction of colour ceases; black and white, overseer and book-keeper, mingle together in the dance'.[94] But the fraternization that he describes is, significantly, limited to the dance alone. This is in keeping with the spectacular celebrations associated with Jonkonnu and other Christmastime slave festivities that combined music, dance, and masquerade. Scott's *Tom Cringle's Log* (1829–1833) describes how upon arriving at Kingston on the first day of the Christmas holidays, the white narrator and his party are 'crowded with blackamoors, men, women, and

89 Burrowes, 'Golokwati conversations', 22.

90 Crop Over, or 'harvest home', as Barclay also describes it, marked the end of the sugar harvest and was an occasion celebrated with music and dancing. Alexander Barclay, *A Practical View of the Present State of Slavery in the West Indies*, 2nd edn (London, 1827), 10. For a fuller discussion of Crop Over and other slave festivals in Barbados, see Marcia Burrowes, 'Losing Our Masks: Traditional Masquerade and Changing Constructs of Barbadian Identity', *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, 8 (2013), 39–50.

91 Martin Munro, *Different Drummers: Rhythm and Race in the Americas* (Berkeley, CA, 2010), 16.

92 Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 2 vols (London, 1794), 2. 87.

93 Munro, *Different Drummers*, 16.

94 Barclay, *Practical View*, 10.

children, dancing and singing and shouting and all rigged out in their best'.[95] Scott's narrator—like most other white authors of accounts involving Jonkonnu—is framed as a curious, if also uncomfortable, spectator. Captivated by the slaves' exuberant movements and costumes (which, as Kathleen Wilson summarizes, amounted to a 'bricolage of theatrical, aristocratic, and military dress'),[96] the narrator is also overwhelmed, and ultimately disgusted by the free movement of the black bodies before him. The Jonkonnu dancers are described in stark contrast to the procession of the Set Girls (a custom brought to Jamaica by French planters and their slaves fleeing from insurrection in nearby Saint Domingue).[97] Whereas the former are introduced through reference to their 'barbarous music and yelling of the different African tribes', the latter are credited for their 'mellow singing' and genteel appearance (247). It is notable that in keeping with the attempts at racial differentiation enforced by the island's theatres, the Set Girls are seen to pay rigid adherence to colour and class, 'always keeping in mind—black *woman*—brown *lady*' (252). By the early nineteenth century, Jonkonnu had absorbed what Richard D. E. Burton calls 'surface creolization' but it was still seen as irrevocably African and associated with male assertions of power, while the Set Girls were associated with creole culture and exclusively feminized displays of beauty.[98] These social tensions and hierarchies are crucial to understanding the transformative potential of the performative matrixes that existed beyond the playhouses.

In his *View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (1823), Stewart claims that on public holidays, the enslaved seemed to become 'an altered race of beings' (270); the slaves' appearance being visibly metamorphosed through their wearing of 'fine clothes and a profusion of trinkets' (271). Their deportment also changes, he notes: 'they affect a more polished behaviour and mode of speech; they address the whites with greater familiarity; they come into their masters' houses, and drink with them; the distance between them appears to be annihilated for the moment, like the familiar footing on which the Roman slaves were with their masters at the feast of Saturnalia' (271). The reference to Saturnalia and its wild indulgences accounts for the overstepping of the usual distancing between masters and slaves, who here share the same space and an unusual degree of familiarity. But, once again, all is 'for the moment': the slaves 'affect' a different mode of behaviour; the distance between masters and their slaves only 'appears to be annihilated'.

95 Michael Scott, *Tom Cringle's Log. A New Edition* (Boston, MA, 1874), 'More Scenes in Jamaica', 247.

96 Kathleen Wilson, 'The Performance of Freedom: Maroons and the Colonial Order in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica and the Atlantic Sound', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 66 (2009), 45–86, 76. The actions of Maroon captains and their men translated into what Wilson terms a 'performance of freedom' that disturbed both white and black populations in Jamaica (65). Wilson recognizes in Jonkonnu a form of critical engagement with the Maroons, evidenced, for example, by the regimentals and ruffled shirts worn by the dancers. Descriptions of these regimentals sometimes differ. Scott refers to 'an old blue artillery uniform' (*Tom Cringle's Log*, 248), while Isaac Belisario's lithograph of 'Jaw Bone; or House John-Canoe' depicts the dancer in a red jacket and striped trousers (*Sketches of Character: An Illustration of the Habits, Occupation and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica* (Kingston, 1837), Part 1). The latter opens up the possibility that the WIR's uniformed black soldiers were also the intended butt of satire.

97 Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1997), 69–70.

98 Burton, *Afro-Creole*, 66.

Stewart's detailed attention to clothing is characteristic of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century descriptions of Jamaica's enslaved. Upon arriving at Kingston, Moreton describes the 'horrid scene of poor Africans, male and female, busy at their labour with hardly rags sufficient to secret their nakedness' (16). He later takes care to explain that within the plantation economy, 'every negro cultivates a small lot of land for his own use, which they sell to purchase hats, gowns, shirts, trowsars [*sic*], daucases or shifts, trinkets and paltry baubles, to give a more sable hue to their sooty complexions' (34); and expresses acute interest in the clothing worn by Maroon leaders (135). Moreton was not alone in pursuing this subject. In her journal, Janet Schaw takes apparent delight in describing the enslaved men and women she meets on her way to market during Christmastime:

> It was one of the most beautiful sights I ever saw. They were universally clad in white Muslin;[99] the men in loose drawers and waistcoats, the women in jackets and petticoats; the men wore black caps, the women had handkerchiefs of gauze or silk, which they wore in the fashion of turbans. Both men and women carried neat white wicker baskets on their heads, which they balanced as our milk maids do their pails . . . They marched in a regular order, and gave the agreeable idea of a set of devotees going to sacrifice to the Indian Gods . . .[100]

The spectacle here is uneasily framed: the simile that compares the women's balancing of their wicker baskets to milk maids carrying their pails belongs to a pastoral register far removed from the subsequent image of slaves marching in 'a regular order', akin to 'devotees' preparing a sacrifice to the Indian Gods. Further tension is introduced as Schaw concludes the description, noting that 'it is necessary however to keep a look out during this season of unbounded freedom'. She elaborates by explaining that 'every man on the island is in arms and patrols go all round the different plantations as well as keep guard in the town. They are an excellent disciplined Militia and make a very military appearance' (109)—an explanation that immediately redirects the gaze from a focus on the well-dressed slaves to the well-ordered armed men. In recognition of a latent threat of violence that needs to be contained, Schaw's aesthetic markers oscillate, uncertain of where and how to ascribe value.

When Peter Marsden comments on the dress worn by slaves at Christmastime, he expends his energy on describing their style of dancing: 'they dance minuets with the mulattoes and other brown women, imitating the motion and steps of the English but with a degree of affectation that renders the whole truly laughable and ridiculous'.[101] In poking fun at the slaves' unembarrassed movements, Marsden nevertheless overlooks their knowing transgression of realistic imitation. He thus misses—

99 As Lewis notes, 'holiday clothes . . . both for [enslaved] men and women, were chiefly white'. *Journal of a West-India Proprietor*, 73–4.

100 Janet Schaw, Evangeline Walker Andrews and Charles McLean Andrews, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776* (New Haven, CT, 1934), 107–8.

101 Peter Marsden, *An Account of the Island of Jamaica: With Reflections on the Treatment, Occupation, and Provisions of the Slaves* (Newcastle, 1788), 33.

or refuses to accept—how, by engaging in deliberate excess, the slaves parody the 'motion and steps of the English' in order to claim ownership of what was otherwise reserved for their masters. A comparable example of mimicry is recorded by H. T. de la Beche, who shares his experience of attending a dance given by a free black man (specified as 'the head negro who attends the hospital') and the formalities this entailed. In illustration, he provides a transcription of the tickets issued for the event:

> *Vere, Hayses*, 1824
>
> WM. GOTTSHALK beg leave to inform the Ladies and Gentlemen at Dunkleys, that he intends giving a May Pole dance on the 3rd Saturday in May, wherein every attention shall be paid, and good accommodation, &c &c.
>
> TICKET – *5 Shillings Each*[102]

De la Beche highlights that the permission of the plantation's overseer was the first requirement, and that 'the ladies and gentlemen . . . are the slaves upon an estate adjoining my own' (40). The subscription to etiquette is important here, not least for the valuable evidence it affords of print circulating among the enslaved.

It is notable that the house servants owned by William Beckford included 'a grandy, who organized paying dances for the "better types of slaves"',[103] and that in his *West India Sketch Book* (1834) Trelawny Wentworth also reprints an invitation to a dance, this time directed, specifically, at '*polished* ebony damsels'.[104] In his description of the preparations for the dance, Wentworth explains that while slaves who could write were in the minority, 'there are few, if any estates, that have not coloured people who have acquired some proficiency in the art . . . and among this class it is that the etiquette of sending cards is principally observed'.[105] With runaway slaves sometimes forging papers to allow them to travel across the island under less suspicion,[106] the multiple uses to which such skills were put serve as yet another reminder that in the wider context of the master-slave relationship, 'performance'—at even this highly codified level—was never about entertainment alone.

Wider perspectives

White, as well as black, cultures were being remade in early nineteenth-century Jamaica; an island of exile not only for its population of slaves, but also for the planters, soldiers, sailors, and merchants who settled there. Brathwaite underlines that 'in order to survive, all elements in that society had to improvise; the whites had to improvise . . . the whites came here without their culture too'.[107] Jamaica's performance

102 Henry T. De La Beche, *Notes on the Present Condition of the Negroes in Jamaica* (London, 1825), 40.

103 Quoted in Charles Ford, Thomas Cummins, Rosalie Smith McCrea and Helen Weston, 'The Slave Colonies', in David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr (eds), *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volume III: From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition, Part 3: The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2011) <https://www.aaeportal.com>.

104 A commitment to social distinction is implied by the cost of admission specified in Gottshalk's ticket (5 shillings).

105 Trelawney Wentworth, *The West India Sketch Book*, 2 vols (London, 1834), 2. 228.

106 On runaways' manipulation of written documents, see Waldstreicher, 'Reading the Runaways', 263.

107 Burrowes, 'Golokwati conversations', 13.

cultures—as experienced not only within, but, just as crucially, beyond the playhouse—are critical to this recovery work. In line with Christopher L. Brown's argument that although their immediate impact may be difficult to account for, marginal texts are paramount because of their potential to reveal broader patterns of thought, affect and logic,[108] we need to consider marginal—and marginalized—performance cultures; especially those of the (free and enslaved) black men and women least personified by the extant archive.

This essay's investigation of theatregoing in Jamaica and its overlap with extra-theatrical entertainments (that extended from the stage to the auditorium and beyond the playhouse) has sought to examine how performance could, to borrow from Dillon, 'display and erase meanings simultaneously', and at what cost.[109] In so doing, I have tried to remain attuned to what Susan Bennett refers to as the 'cultural effects' that theatre produces in all aspects of its production and reception histories.[110] I have also sought to probe further than this, to show how commercial theatre in Jamaica overlapped with the performance cultures practised by the men and women whose representation in the playhouses was most precarious or who were altogether excluded from attendance (as was the case for the majority of the island's enslaved).

Slaves' 'plays' (musical gatherings) and carnivalesque festivities are important supplements to Jamaica's formal performance history—and were recognized as such by early commentators, who evince considerable fascination—if also scepticism and fear—with what such entertainments entailed. As cultural historians, we need, in turn, to exercise scepticism of our own when reading through the archive in search of this culture. In his *Transatlantic Sketches* (1833) James Edward Alexander's celebration of 'the lively music of the fiddles, and the gladsome song of the creole dancers' occurs within a distinctive, ideologically charged aside:

> Oh! how I wished that some of the kind ladies of Peckham could have contemplated for five minutes this scene of mirth! Could have beheld what they are pleased to call "the naked, starved, and oppressed negroes," well clothed, plump, and full of glee: instead of shrieks of misery, could have heard shouts of laughter: and instead of the clang of the whip, could have heard the lively music of the fiddles, and the gladsome song of the creole dancers.[111]

What here clearly emerges as a means to an anti-emancipationist end remains only below the surface of many other accounts of non-white Jamaican culture. This underlines the need to remain alert to the ways in which cultural and political practices are embedded at the points of production, reception, and, just as crucially, retrieval. Later accounts of Jonkonnu, for example, reveal interesting changes to its urban performances. Barclay notes that by 1826 the Christmastime dances, which were formerly 'universal', 'have much gone out', being replaced by church-going or religious

108 Christopher L. Brown, 'Empire without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999), 273–306, 288.

109 Dillon, *New World Drama*, 52.

110 Susan Bennett, 'Theatre Audiences, Redux', *Theatre Survey*, 47 (2006), 225–30, 225.

111 James Edward Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches, Comprising Visits to the Most Interesting Scenes in North and South America, and the West Indies*, 2 vols (London, 1833), 1. 96–7.

parties (10). The same association is made by Mrs. A. Carmichael in her *Domestic Manners and Social Conditions of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies* (1833).[112] Among these white onlookers, if not necessarily the slaves themselves, Jonkonnu seems to have taken on new meanings as a result of greater missionary influence across Jamaica. Attention to how these kinds of change may have affected extra-theatrical performance cultures provides a necessary complement to our understanding of institutionalized theatre in both pre- and post-emancipation Jamaica.

To make better sense of both these kinds of performance cultures as they existed in Jamaica, we also need to think, more broadly, of parallel developments elsewhere in the Anglophone Caribbean. John Anderson Castello, the so-called 'West Indian Roscius', who was celebrated to acclaim in Jamaica, was, in fact, born in Guyana.[113] Guyana also sponsored a bustling theatrical scene but, in comparison to Jamaica, has remained relatively overlooked by many cultural historians of the early nineteenth-century transatlantic.[114] Consider, for instance, the following advertisement for an evening of theatrical entertainments at the Georgetown Theatre Royal:

> *Theatre Royal. By Permission of His Excellency the Governor. On Tuesday Evening, January 31, 1832. Will be Performed Charles Kemble's Play of* The Point of Honour, or, A School for Soldiers. *In Act III, The Ceremony of Shooting a Deserter. To conclude with the Melo Drama of* The Wandering Boys, or The Castle of Olivai. *A New Piece called* Humphrey Clinker, *is in rehearsal—as is a New Burlesque Aquatic Drama called* Billy Taylor, the British Young Fellow, *as performed at the Royal Adelphi Theatre with unprecedented applause. Tickets to be had at the Royal Gazette Office.*[115]

The determination to stage an 'aquatic drama' is especially interesting. John Buckstone's *Billy Taylor; or the Gay Young Fellow*—an entertainment 'founded upon the celebrated naval ballad' by Richard Brinsley Sheridan—was first performed at the Adelphi Theatre on 9 November 1829.[116] Although it received a mixed reception from professional reviewers,[117] *Billy Taylor* was thereafter repeated every night until the Adelphi's Christmas closure, and revived again several times during 1830 and 1832.[118] The advertisement printed in the *Royal Gazette of British Guiana* does not

112 Mrs A. C. Carmichael, *Domestic Manners and Social conditions of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies*, 2 vols (London, 1833), 1. 293–4.

113 On Castello's career, see Hill, *Jamaican Stage*, 132–4.

114 There are, of course, notable exceptions, including Manu Samriti Chander, *Brown Romanticism: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Lewisburg, PA, 2017).

115 *Royal Gazette of British Guiana*, 28 January 1832, volume 27, no. 4002. This clipping was kindly provided by Rebecca L. Schneider, Visiting Assistant Professor of English, Fort Lewis College, Durango, CO.

116 Adelphi Theatre Playbill, 9 November 1829 <https://www.umass.edu/AdelphiTheatreCalendar>. Accessed 19 March 2021.

117 *Billy Taylor* was reviewed positively by the *Dramatic Magazine*, 12 (1829), 301–2 but less enthusiastically by the *Theatrical Examiner*, no. 1137 (15 November 1829), 724 and with open criticism by the *Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, no. 669 (14 November 1829), 749.

118 Alfred L. Nelson, Gilbert B. Cross, and Joseph Donohue, *The Adelphi Theatre Calendar: A Record of Dramatic Performances at a Leading Victorian Theatre* <https://www.umass.edu/AdelphiTheatreCalendar/hist.htm>. Accessed 19 March 2021.

reveal to what extent the managers of the Georgetown Theatre aspired to recreate the spectacle on offer at the Adelphi, which included a sailor's hornpipe (performed by John Reeve) and the representation of an attack of the enemy's fleet. But the choice of entertainment alone is indicative of a desire to impress in optics, as well as song (implying that the company was strong enough to pull off the various musical numbers essential to *Billy Taylor*'s extended run in London).

By beginning to place Jamaica's performance cultures in conversation with, for example, that on offer in Barbados, Antigua, and Guyana—as highlighted by the West Indian source materials brought to bear upon this essay—we might, finally, come closer to realizing Hortense Spiller's moving call to think beyond culture as a term that 'adhere[s] to a certain stillness and predictability on *paper*' and, instead, toward a full 'repertoire of implements, from the fantastic/imaginal to the actual/material that splinter in pluralness and considerable variation'.[119] There were numerous ways of 'acting riotously' in colonial Jamaica, and a recovery of this culture requires that we, too, apply a degree of 'riotous' energy to our scholarship.

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119 Hortense J. Spillers, 'The Idea of Black Culture', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 6 (2006), 7–28, 12.