15 Decolonising Caribbean Imaginaries

Conclusion

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Caribbean history encompasses the histories of colonialism, diasporic migrations, and the process of decolonisation. Included in these complex histories are the Indigenous peoples, the conquerors, the planters, and the enslaved and indentured laborers. Throughout time, each of these groups contributed to the social fabric, culture, and commerce of the islands, adapting to and altering the region in response. A constellation of socio-cultural tropes emerged across the Caribbean as a result, some of which are discussed in the chapters here. Globalisation and resiliency, historical memory and identity – these tropes provide effective frames for viewing the impact that centuries of colonialism and oppression have had on the region. The sequence of tropes introduced in this book is selective, and exemplifies a myriad tropology that has impacted the musical richness and cultural diversity of the island nations. This book aims to influence and invigorate the translation of these cultural tropes in the analysis of other musical genres in the Caribbean: for example, how does *Montamentu* relate to other Afro-syncretised religions, like Vodou in Haiti, Lucumí/Santería in Cuba and Shango in Trinidad? In what ways is the global circulation of reggae and dancehall similar – and different – to that of reggaeton and salsa, and what has been their impact on the commerciality of Caribbean music? In bringing these authors together, this book also seeks to stimulate explorations into other tropes not mentioned in the book: for example, how have the environmental legacies of the colonial period impacted music-making across the islands? What role has music played in shaping – and resisting – gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices? What does music-making in the islands reveal about the correlations between contemporary economic policies, nation-state building practices, and the shaping of social identities?

While our chapters took on specific tropes, individually discussing them in relationship to the music-making practices within specific nations or communities, this conclusion encapsulates them by pointing more specifically to what binds them and their supporting tropes. What ties them is 'the encounter', that sustained collision of 'new' and 'old' worlds, from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108379779.016 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mass movements of people (many taken into the Caribbean against their will) to imperialism's continued economic, political, and social conquests. Each of the musics and cultural productions discussed in this book resist the hegemonic concepts imposed by the colonial encounter, including race, nation, and citizenship, and, as such, pose a challenge to the foundational discourse on Caribbean music as being disconnected from the imperial agenda of the colonial encounter.

The law of diffraction in physics provides a useful analogy for understanding and discussing the richness and particularities of the Caribbean experience. It is employed to define what happens when waves bend or curve to accommodate obstacles: when a rock is thrown into a pond it creates small rippled waves; if a second rock is thrown, more rippled waves form, which, overlapping with the first, create continued patterns. Feminist theorist Donna Haraway draws on this notion of diffraction to assess encounters of difference, and writes that, while reflection is tied to 'repeating the Sacred Image of the Same', 'diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference'. As she reminds, those patterns created from the encounter, those rippled effects, '[do] not map where differences appear, but rather ma[p] where the effects of differences appear' (1997, 273).

Taking Haraway's lead, the entrance of the first Europeans into the Caribbean is that rock thrown into the pool that forever changed the cultural and social face of the region. As increasingly more Europeans arrived, each representing another rock thrown into the mix, the islands transformed further, shaped and reshaped by the expanded ripple effect of violent exploitation and oppression, the chaotic splashes of slavery and servitude forever stamping circled patterns on to the newly created island nations, the Caribbean never to be unmarked or made still again.

Music-making in the Caribbean represents an example of 'where the effects of differences appear', with each musical genre introduced in this book, while a vestige of colonialism, continuing to reflect that encounter differently. *Bachata*, *Rara*, *gwoka*, carnival – these emerged as an aftermath of colonialism; the effect and product of what comes out of a history of racialism and inequity and the commitment to resist and subvert. What the people from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Curaçao, and Haiti have derived from the encounter or encounters directly shaped the contexts of their belonging, which have given rise to new constructions of identity and have inspired the creation of new musics and musical practices. To borrow from another feminist theorist Karen Barad, Caribbean music represents the 'patterns of

difference that make a difference', each mode of resistance and new musical sound capable of expressing the complexities ignited by colonialism, while at the same time standing in resistance to those complexities (2007, 72).

The rippled impact of colonialism is often viewed as a single encounter of oppression in the Caribbean, thereby giving rise to the perception of a unified experience – and, with it, a singular view on its musics and constructions of identity. There is a tendency to view the Caribbean through a tourism lens (e.g. imagery of beaches and umbrella-topped cocktails), which further mediate and disseminate fantasised versions of the region. Also emerging is an accepted practice to collapse the island nations into one – one people, one race, one language, one culture, one music. Resolving such imagingings extends beyond geographic borders, and requires a collective investment towards finding more inclusive models for examining and speaking about the region. In this book, music is introduced as one effective vehicle by which to gain such perspective.

Music was part of the belongings that peoples carried with them into the Caribbean; the memories of home were captured in its song texts, its drum rhythms, and its melodies. As one of the few surviving links to home, music afforded the indispensable luxury to transport back through time, and to translate what was an invisible past into a tangible present. Yet, memory lacks precision: it seldom 'sees' with perfect accuracy. Instead, the tendency in remembering is to adjust and change details from the past to suit immediate or long-term personal and social needs. Music, consequently, was reshaped and revised to accommodate the new hardships and challenges due to the colonial encounter. This meant that music's role would extend beyond historical repository: music now served as a vehicle through which to make sense of and interpret those histories and, at the same time, give meaning to the present. Embedded in music are the lived and imagined experiences, as well as the struggles and the triumphs – in short, music reflects the complex realities of everyday life. And, as such, it provides us with a way to confront the Caribbean imaginary, and to displace and contest notions of a single, unified Caribbean culture or experience. With music, then, we can begin to remap the region as multiple, intersectional, and fluid. This book represents a step towards that goal.

To borrow from Kwame Anthony Appiah, the Caribbean imaginary 'must be understood, ultimately, as an outgrowth of European racialism' (1992, 62). That means, in order to remap the region, we must create a cartography that challenges European racialism, and therefore questions the essentialised characterisations of that discourse. *Parang*, Guadeloupean hip-hop, calypso, *son* – these musics are not only connected by geography,

they are also linked by their mutual positions as strategies for disrupting and decentring imperial authority, and for reordering the inequality of power initiated by the colonial encounter. This makes music a particularly powerful tool in the construction of a counter-cartography.

Unpacking the theme of identity is central to this remapping. Again, Caribbean music provides a particularly compelling site for the production and reflection of identity. Caribbean identity cannot be reduced to a uniform definition. Rather, plurality inscribes itself within the very history of 'being Caribbean', with categories of belonging inevitably differing from island to island, community to community. As Tallaj reminds in her chapter on *merengue*, the meaning of racial categories in the Caribbean inescapably reflect a wide spectrum of experiences and, as a result, are nether fixed nor necessarily collectively shared. Dominicans, under Truijillo authority, were obligated to define themselves against incredibly contentious histories and assertions of racial and national authenticity. Yet, they assumed definitions of Self that challenged singular interpretations of belonging. *Merengue* has provided a commanding vehicle through which to engage in that powerful process of redefinition, a creative – and effective – system through which to contest and confront the ever developing and regularly challenged notions of nationhood and belonging.

Questions regarding 'who we are' often are intimately connected to questions of 'where we are', a phenomenon that is especially present in a diasporised region like the Caribbean. A compelling example can be found with the large number of Chinese indentured workers who were brought to the Caribbean as sources of labour to uphold the plantation agrarian economies, which led to complex social interactions and relationships. Predictably, new positionings of Self among the Chinese developed, and, also unsurprisingly, these revised notions of belonging became closely linked with their change in physical environment. From their arrival, the Chinese held a rather uncertain place in the Caribbean's complex and unforgiving racial and social hierarchy. For example, in Cuba, where most Chinese were contracted to work, enslaved Africans and their descendants were considered of higher status to the Chinese, because they were perceived to have assimilated into Cuban society to a higher degree.

The colonial social system encouraged distancing between Chinese and African communities, a divide-and-conquer strategy that culminated with plantation proprietors commonly pitting the two communities against one another through organised battles and assaults. It created schisms that had the effect of turning the two communities against each

other, enforcing – and artificially-cultivating – differences based on a distinct process of 'dis-identification'. In other words, an 'us versus them' scenario emerged, where definitions of 'Blackness' in Cuba were formed at least partially in opposition to 'being Chinese', and 'Chineseness' in Cuba was formed in opposition to 'being African'. It was a division in identity that continues to permeate Cuba yet today, with Chinese-Cubans notoriously regarded as 'more foreign' and therefore 'less Cuban' than Afro-Cubans. The complexity of Cuba's race relations frequent contemporary music on the island, with modern bands – from NG La Banda to Klimax – continuing to stake claim to a Black Cuban identity, sometimes producing oppositional paradigms on the Black-Chinese cultural imaginary by mocking the Chinese language in their lyrics or misrepresenting Asian traditional music through sampling.

Further complicating this 'place identity' in the Caribbean was the necessary negotiation of 'living here and remembering/desiring another place' (Clifford 1997, 225). All persons relocating to the Caribbean, outside the indigenous Amerindians, found themselves part of unfamiliar and distinctly different (and constantly changing) cultural landscapes. In order to establish a sense of belonging in this 'new world', they had to re-map individual and collective relationships to and associations with 'home'. In his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford unpacks the complex co-presence of 'here' and 'there', writing that, among diasporised communities, 'linear history is broken, the present . . . constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed feature: a renewed, painful yearning' (1997, 264). A 'return to home' necessarily had to be more symbolic or psychological – and this could be nurtured and supported with music, its rhythms, choice of language, and textual references facilitating a welcome opportunity to belong to two places at once.

Most of the authors here explicitly or implicitly reference this 'in-betweenness'. A prime example comes from Chapter 10, which introduces Guadeloupean hip-hop as a voice of youth discontent. Guadeloupe is an overseas department of France, which means Guadeloupeans are French citizens, with full political and legal rights. Yet, for the Guadeloupeans living in Paris, French citizenship, like their residence in Paris, is seen with general distrust, even disdain. Many of the lyrics in Guadeloupean hip-hop capture the contradiction. The Caribbean is presented through reflective, often heart-warming imagery; a nostalgic yearning to return. France, on the other hand, is regarded as unfriendly, intimidating, and challenging; as a place of alienation, impermanence, and non-belonging. There are today a growing number of youths whose parents may have been born in

Guadeloupe, but they were born in France – they never have lived on the islands; some have never travelled there. And herein lies the paradox common to the Caribbean diaspora: these youths may not feel they fully belong either to France or their home island, yet, nonetheless, they are ascribed to both. It is this 'in-betweenness' that marks the Guadeloupean youths' song lyrics, with hip-hop serving as the powerful symbolic base upon which to stake dual claims of belonging.

Another example of this 'in-betweenness' comes from the Afro-syncretised religions (like *Montamentu*). The practice of African religions was systematically banned across the Caribbean as a measure of control. The colonialists, many Catholic themselves, began requiring the Catholic training of enslaved labourers. Most African-based religions practiced among the enslaved labourers held certain commonalities, most importantly, the belief in a single God, with African deities as the intermediaries. When priests distributed woodcuts and lithographs of the Catholic saints, the African labourers recognised striking parallels to their own traditional deities. For example, the lithograph depicting Saint Peter holding the keys to gates of heaven and standing next to a rooster, a symbol of the New Testament's account of Peter's denial of Jesus, was accepted as a counterpart to Legba,[1] the African trickster deity. Like Saint Peter, Legba was a guardian of the heavens, with one leg rooted to the ground, while the other stretched upwards to the spirit world – Legba walked in two worlds at once. With Legba's loyal companion also being a rooster, the connections between him and Saint Peter were undeniable, and these links allowed Saint Peter to be venerated while Legba was simultaneously worshipped. Each of the Catholic saints found similar counterparts within the African-based religions. Unbeknownst to the colonialists, African labourers could practice Catholicism and their African religions concurrently. What was central to uniting the living and spirit worlds, to connecting the 'new world' with the more familiar Africa? Music, specifically drumming, with its rhythms played to awaken the deities and invite them to the ritual event, each hit of the drum a metaphoric reference to an ancestral history revisited in real-time.

While some Caribbean music allowed communities to reclaim the colonial encounter in ways intrinsic to traditional cultures and needs, other musics facilitated opportunities to *diffract* from that encounter, to shed (rather than accommodate) the restrictive labels of colonialist

[1] Legba goes by a variety of names across the Caribbean, including Eshu, Ellegua, Elegbara, and Esu.

discourse. In this case, music enabled communities to forge new, forceful connections that exceeded domination. Here, music ruptured the subject/object orderings of the colonial encounter, enabling instead new networks of meaning and belonging to be created. A particularly vivid example comes from Little Roy's 1975 reggae hit 'Christopher Columbus', which delivers new truths about the colonial encounter with its claim that followers of Rastafari were in Jamaica long before Columbus' so-called 'discovery'. The song dismantles the hegemony of Western historiography, its opening proclamation that 'Christopher Columbus come steal dreadlocks' honour' clearly inserting Rastafari and Jamaica's Black community into the colonial discourse. Roy's song recalls the Rasta anthem documented decades later by writer Erna Brodber, who remembers hearing the song while growing up in Jamaica:

> Men say Christopher Columbus discover on yah,
> But I say Christopher Columbus find dreadlocks on ya.
> Im go again, im come again,
> Bring Babylon on ya.
>
> (Brodber 2000, 119)

Both Roy's rendition and Brodber's transcription offer a counter critique of the accepted beliefs that Caribbean history begins with the arrival of Columbus. Both 'force the unearthing of data towards the reconstruction of the history of these myth-makers and myth-keepers', while 'provid[ing] us with a case history of relationship between the enslaved and their master, between the plot and the plantation, between the big and the little traditions' (Brodber 2000, 119). Like many musics from across the Caribbean, these reggae examples demonstrate how music could build new truths around the colonial encounter, 'not just so that we, too, could have history', Brodber explains, but that 'this knowledge of our history would affect our minds and through our minds, our environment' (118).

Precisely because Caribbean music enabled a different representation of Self and Other, it must also be viewed as a political intervention. 'Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture', reminds Stuart Hall (1990, 226). As a result, he continues, identity must be regarded as a 'positioning', and, consequently, also as political. Being rich in symbolism and meaning for both the performer and the audience, music enables that position to be made public, and for those persons whose identity had been denied or silenced by colonialism, being able to foreground this 'new world' identity makes music-making

a political act in the Caribbean. Each of the musics from this book challenges hegemonic constructions of belonging and, as such, can be examined as acts of political defiance to being positioned as the Other.

For example, Curaçao, not unlike other New World colonies, adopted the polemically derived choice of 'Being Dutch' or 'Being African' during slavery. When twentieth-century globalisation introduced cultures fundamentally different from those of the Netherlands, Afro-Curaçaoans found themselves drawn to new and different ways of life. They began adapting these disparate cultures to their own needs, reshaping them in their own image through an interactive system whereby they could pick and choose particular cultures from which to forge new, syncretic identities. Music emerged as the primary means and mechanism by which those identities were explored, shared and maintained. 'I am Cuban!' explains one Afro-Curaçaoan, pointing to his love of traditional salsa as the deciding factor behind this cultural affiliation. 'In my heart, I know I am Colombian', says another as he claps out the Colombian cumbia rhythm across his chest. A man standing nearby quickly joins the conversation by announcing his own affiliation: 'African, Dutch, Sephardic Jew, Native American!' How can a Black community deny its African ancestry? How can descendants of enslaved Africans come to define themselves as anything but Black? Such questions are quickly silenced with this response from a young Afro-Curaçaoan pianist: 'I can be from anywhere I choose. I think my history gives me that right. And I choose Cuba. It's as simple as that' (De Jong 2003).

By revising the terms by which identity was understood and represented, Caribbean music also challenged narratives about a unitary experience, pointing instead to the cultural hybridity that occurred when the Self and Other became conjoined by the colonial encounter. The impact of unequal power relationships between coloniser/colonised did not fade when formal colonial power ended. Rather, colonial hierarchies and imperial knowledges persisted, the effects of which created a liminal space that extended beyond binary equations of Western versus non-Western. For Homi Bhabha, it is a 'third space'; it is that 'moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the "beyond"' (2012, 2). In representing 'the beyond', this 'third space' was laden with ambiguity and possibility. It allowed for the blurring of difference, which threatened the stability of the schematised reality of the coloniser (Stoler 1995).

Each music discussed in this book is in some way a testament to the transformative power of hybridity. Located at the intersection of coloniser/colonised, each music called into question the authority of colonially-determined hierarchies and assumptions of difference. As such, each challenged the imperial hegemonic core, unsettling colonial authority by stressing 'strategies of subversion that turn[ed] the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power' (Bhabha 1985, 154). This allowed for articulating difference in ways that would unite rather than separate, enhance rather than weaken. With music, the people of the Caribbean could rework categories of racial identity on their own terms and could highlight the interconnectedness of their island cultures and ethnicities from perspectives meaningful to them. In short, Caribbean music gave voice to that all-important 'third space', offering to its people 'an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment' (Bhabha 2012, 6).

From this perspective, the strength of Caribbean music was acquired not by detaching from imperial authority, but rather from engaging within it, with communities using music to reclaim their differences, and to convert them into symbolic capital (Ang 2003, 141). *Kokomakaku*, for example, achieved its potency not as a strategy of opposition as much as through the multifaceted interaction it enables with colonial discourse and strategies. Its power of resistance lies in its impenetrability, with colonial attempts to ban *kokomakaku* simply pushing it underground, where it gained momentum as it transformed into *Montamentu*, confounding Dutch colonialists further with a music and a people that they could not control. Similarly, *gwoka* was introduced through collaboration, exchange, and movement; as a genre able to accommodate musical difference. Yet, with this ability to integrate different musical styles came a wider, more strategic role: to bring forward previously hidden histories of contact and meaning.

Music education provides yet another avenue towards understanding the complexities and dynamics of difference. As argued by Laurence and De Jong in Chapter Thirteen, Western notation, when privileged over oral traditions, can marginalise or submerge other forms of music learning and music making, re-inscribing traditional practices with Western patterns of thinking. Significantly, colonialism entrenched dominant paradigms of the West throughout the Caribbean – and this has included music education, with Western notation a residual of European education standards that has often been deemed best practice. To research music education in the Caribbean, as a result, is to realise the colonial process itself, including how colonialism impacts the way 'difference' is understood and defined. Notation and orality are often perceived as a dualism that offers the choice

of one to the exclusion of the other. Yet, as argued here, the two can and do co-exist, providing yet another 'third space' for readdressing, questioning, and articulating difference in the Caribbean.

The chapters introducing musics from the diaspora – Guadeloupean hip-hop in Paris, Dominican *bachata* in New York City and the Curaçaoan *Tambú* in the Hague, Netherlands – further point to the effects of difference, to the persistence of essentialism which, when crossing island nation borders, re-establishes new notions of place, homeland, difference, and 'Otherness'. As Stuart Hall reminds us, 'the Caribbean is already the diaspora of Africa, Europe, China, Asia, India', so when that diaspora 'rediasporises itself' again in France, the United States, or the Netherlands (1996, 501) a broad, complicated network of intersecting communities emerge, where contradictory discourses around the colonial encounter easily overlap and criss-cross. Historically, communities across the Caribbean have been prey to racist representations from the United States and Europe. Relocating to these former empires demanded further negotiations of a racial Otherness that were subject to unfamiliar and always changing Western regimes of racial classification and racist inequality. These racial discourses were both flexible and volatile, their ambiguity leading to even more complex equations of race, with difference now marked also by class, colour, gender, and nationality. The music that emerged from these diasporic communities assumed particular urgency, the familiar songs of home enabling a means to remember while newly created hybrid genres allowed for the pluralistic frames of identity/difference that now defined their lived experiences.

This book brings together the region's socio-cultural tropes and the decentring of the colonial encounter through music and its interrelationships. To do so, we have had to move beyond viewing the region as insular, and beyond narratives of fragmentation and heterogeneity that still attach to Caribbean studies. Instead, we have explicated the thematic continuities of the region, with music introduced as the means by which to bridge language and cultural gaps and to allow for discussions that speak both to the individuality and collectivity of the island nations and their diasporic communities. The musics introduced in this book represent the Caribbean as a complex, multi-layered space, framed by the strategies of resistance and accommodation as inscribed in the region's colonial past as well as post-colonial present. These strategies unfold through and in unpredictable ways, thus enabling a comparative and syncretic approach to studying the Caribbean, one that acknowledges its patchwork of fragmented, dynamic, plural, and fluid differences.

The relationship between the socio-cultural tropes and the decentring of the colonial encounter can be challenging to see, especially when set against what is a hugely complex collection of islands. Yet, with music-making, we have a tool of analysis that not only allows the opportunity to reveal hidden cultural structures, it also enables us to observe how those structures impact everyday lives. We can understand with more clarity how the people of the Caribbean may have lived in the past, how they survived the traumas of slavery and indentureship, what rituals of old they have continued to maintain, why some traditions have disappeared and for what purpose have some been revised. The abuses of the colonial encounter are grieved, but not erased with Caribbean music. Ancestors are not forgotten, but instead are reclaimed through new sounds and new musical instruments. Likewise, constructions of identity are not there for colonials to define. With music the weapon of resistance, belonging was reframed around strategies that transcended the very signs and symbols colonialists had used to label and control. Colonialism may have tried to erase the histories and geographies of the islands' Indigenous peoples as well as the African and indentured labourers, but music ensured its visibility. This all makes music an absolutely incredible tool for studying the Caribbean – with it we have access to what may otherwise remain hidden from view.

Yet, in addition to helping us understand those overarching tropes, music also enables us to view and appreciate the smaller details. With music, we are invited into the privates lives of the Caribbean peoples, the lyrics of a song exposing the everyday challenges of 'living in-between' – between races, cultures, languages, and nations; the ritual dance now a public display of self-discovery, each movement a shared mark of colonial and post-colonial survival. With music we can observe even the smallest details about 'being Caribbean' and its wider implications.

To be sure, decolonising the Caribbean imaginary involves complicated tensions and conflicts, requiring us to raise problematic questions and to rethink assumptions that might otherwise go unchallenged. By confronting and subsequently dismantling longstanding legacies of colonialism, we challenge those stereotyped essentialisms that embedded imperial authority so deeply that modern colonialist agendas continue to pervade the region. To decolonise the Caribbean imaginary, we must first advocate for and engage critically with other knowledge-producing processes, specifically those developed by and shared among the people themselves – like what is allowed with music-making and the lived experience of performance.

Ethnomusicology is a discipline that attempts to answer questions about music-making and its place in the world. We seek out our answers by

looking through books and government reports, and by listening to and viewing music performances. Yet, we also reach conclusions by connecting with the people and the music itself, by hearing from musicians how music-making has impacted their lives and the lives of their ancestors, and by witnessing in the music their life stories of struggle, exile, and survival. To understand Caribbean music is to understand the multiplicity of the human experience; the complexities that accompany colonial expectations to camouflage difference. With music, that expected invisibility is challenged; that sense of alienation communicated; and the cultural roots sustained. In the end, with Caribbean music we acquire the needed context from which to begin that slow and arduous process of decolonialising the Caribbean imaginary, and remapping the region with more understanding and consideration.

How the colonial encounter gave rise to the music in a real sense defines who the Caribbean people are, and this has been the main conceptual focus of all the essays in this book. The essence of that phenomenon is eloquently summarised in the words of an elderly Curaçaoan man who explained early upon De Jong's arrival to the island some twenty years ago: 'Caribbean music is not just what we play, it *is* who we are'.

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