American Creoles

Martin Munro, Celia Britton

Published by Liverpool University Press

Munro, Martin and Celia Britton.
American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72693.

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Music
The plantation societies of the Americas were set up essentially as modern, profit-driven machines that used human beings as combustible, disposable parts. Far from nurturing cohesive communities, European colonists created *anti-societies* that relied on the continuous supply and consumption of bodies uprooted and thrown out of step, out of rhythm with the places and cultures they were born into. In the colonial Caribbean, where the indigenous population was more or less wiped out by illness and warfare, the new populations comprised many disparate groups of African slaves and a number of European nationalities. Set up to be dystopian, segregated work factories, these societies lacked the basic rhythmic socialization (a common, functional understanding of time, culture and work) that has been a fundamental element in bonding communities from the beginning of human history. And yet, among the enslaved people more organic and benign rhythms persisted and helped them survive the plantation and its anti-rhythmic foundations. Crucially, however, rhythm was not the property of one group, and it became one of the most effective means of transgressing social and racial divides, and in creating the unique social order and culture of the circum-Caribbean, the expanded regional space that includes the insular Caribbean and the countries linked to it by the sea and history. This chapter considers ways in which rhythm has functioned and continues to serve as a particularly malleable and persistent social and cultural element both in the Caribbean and in the American South, two sites that are connected historically through similarities in the physical and social configuration of the plantation and the societies that have emerged from it.
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The initial focus on James Brown’s rhythmic innovations in the 1960s identifies some of the salient aspects of his rhythms, and suggests some of the ways in which Brown ushered in an era in popular music in which rhythm has arguably become the predominant formal and stylistic element. Brown’s rhythms were seized upon by Black Power militants and incorporated into a notion of black aesthetics that served a politicized idea of African-American culture as a largely homogeneous, untainted entity. At the same time, Brown himself was less inclined to consider his rhythms to be echoes of a recoverable racial past, and instead preferred to read them as pre-echoes of the future, and of sounds and ways of thinking that were yet to be realized. The chapter discusses Brown’s rhythms in relation to other instances in the Caribbean that show the importance of rhythm at moments of social and personal transformation. Rhythm, it is argued, has been a primary force in creating these creolized societies, and remains a fundamental part of the circum-Caribbean world, a zone shaped by a common, interconnected history that ‘travels with the seas’ (Glissant, 2000: 29).

The New Bag

Revolutions can start in quite innocuous ways, without anyone being aware of the future significance of a certain action, speech or innovation. When James Brown released ‘Out of Sight’ in 1964 few commentators realized the significance of the moment, or that the track was an audacious step into a new mode, the first pre-echo of the sound of the future. That future, that revolution was built on and made up of rhythm (Guralnick, 2002: 239).

As its title boldly promised, ‘Out of Sight’ propelled James Brown into a new mode, almost a new dimension of music that was far removed from that of any of his peers. While the song retained something of a basic blues structure, its staccato bass lead, sharp horns, and most of all its driving, irresistible rhythm marked a departure at once from the gospel roots of much of Brown’s previous work, and from the conventional melodic structures of Western music. This new thing was the rhythm as song, the song as rhythm. As he would write later, ‘Out of Sight’ marked a new direction for Brown’s music: ‘Everything about it was new,’ he says, ‘the rhythm, the arrangement, the lyrics, and the way the beat kept on jerking up and hitting’ (Brown, 2005: 124–25).

James Brown’s rhythm revolution stalled for a year after ‘Out of Sight’ as he worked out his business problems and finally returned to the King label. The hiatus seemed only to foment the revolution, and when he came back in July 1965 the new rhythmic sound developed in spectacular fashion with the release of ‘Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag’. Recorded in typical,
improvisatory James Brown style, in less than an hour on the way to a gig, at the post-production stage the track had its intro spliced off and its entire performance speeded up for release (White and Weinger, 1991: 27). Announcing itself with its unexpected light, early accent on an expected strong beat, the rhythm is set with a short toot from the horns, ‘a marked attack played as if it were a little early in relation to the basic pulse implied by the rest of the rhythmic fabric’ (Danielsen, 2006: 73). In James Brown’s own words, this track ‘had its own sound: the music on one-and-three, the downbeat, in anticipation’ (Brown, 1991: 3). Brown soon adopted ‘rhythm on One’ as a personal slogan, and the technique itself of playing the One on top, or, as he puts it, a downbeat in anticipation, later became central to the funk sound of the seventies.¹ He had discovered, he says, ‘the power of the percussive upbeat, using the rhythm in an untraditional way […] I didn’t need “melody” to make music. That was, to me, old-fashioned and out of step. I now realized that I could compose and sing a song that used one chord or at the most two’ (Brown, 2005: 80).

For James Brown, ‘Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag’ was a statement of black musical independence, ‘something that would give us a place in the business’. It was, moreover, a new idiom, ‘a slang that would relate to the man in the street’ (Brown, 1991: 3). Despite (or, indeed, because of) its atypical, jarringly rhythmic sound, ‘Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag’ was James Brown’s first Top 10 hit; moreover, as Dave Marsh says, it declared a ‘new order of rhythm and himself as its avatar’ (Marsh, 1989: 4). Both the success of the song and its form, its sound, took Brown by surprise: as it hit the charts he told the disc jockey Alan Leeds that ‘It’s a little beyond me right now. […] If you’re thinking, “well, maybe this guy is crazy,” take any record off your stack and put it on your box, even a James Brown record, and you won’t find one that sounds like this one. It’s a new bag, just like I sang.’ Perhaps most tellingly, Brown suggests that the new phenomenon is something almost strange to him and his time, a prophecy of music to come that had an almost unnerving effect on him: ‘It’s – it’s – it’s just out there,’ he says. ‘I’m actually fightin’ the future’ (quoted in White and Weinger, 1991: 27; emphasis in original). In the

¹ Later, to be ‘on the One’ came to mean more generally to be in rhythmic harmony. As Vincent says, ‘When George Clinton is heard chanting onstage, “On the one, everybody on the one,” he isn’t trying to get his band on the beat (they are already there), he is savoring the rhythmic lock that has brought the entire house together, as one’ (Vincent, 1996: 37). Cynthia Rose makes a similar point about funk’s rhythmic harmony when she says that it ‘is not a reconciliation of opposite rhythmic impulses, but the fusion and transcending of their essential conflict’ (Rose, 1990: 53; emphasis in original).
mid-sixties, Brown says he was not seeking to reproduce ‘some known sound’ but was ‘aimin’ for what I could hear. “James Brown Anticipation” I’d call it. You see, the thing was ahead’ (Rose, 1990: 59). ‘Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag’ retains that portentous quality, the sense of a rhythmic prophecy that is still being played out, that is still itself ‘fightin’ the future’. As Dave Marsh says, in the mid-sixties, James Brown ‘invented the rhythmic future in which we live today’ (Marsh, 1989: 5).²

James Brown’s musical innovations in the 1960s and 1970s may be the best known and most influential elements in creating the ‘rhythmic future’ in which we and our music still exist, but he is far from being the only artist from the circum-Caribbean to evoke and remould rhythm in the modern era as a harbinger of times and states of being to come. Indeed, rhythm is conspicuous at virtually every major social and cultural turning point across the circum-Caribbean, in key movements such as Negritude, the Harlem Renaissance, AfroCubanismo and Haitian indigenism. What is fascinating, too, is that while rhythm is in some ways an ancient element in human cultures, it also carries the prophetic qualities that Brown sensed; counter to a folkloric or culturally nationalist understanding of rhythm, he insists that what he was doing was ‘untraditional’, ahead of him, not yet realized in sound. Rhythm embodies at once a deep cultural and social memory and a reality that is yet to come, and is forever oriented to the future. As Brown says, to be aware of this is always to ‘fight the future’, to sense what is coming and to be directed towards that future. In his case, the rhythm revolution was part of a broader social and cultural movement that challenged racism and asserted black American culture on its own terms; the freer, less-constrained future that the rhythms portended was as much a social phenomenon as a radical change in musical style. In the remainder of this chapter I will identify and analyse other such rhythmic–musical–social moments in circum-Caribbean history and show some of the ways in which rhythm manifests itself at crucial times as a portent of the future and as a marker of a desire to live in that future. Also, I will suggest that rhythm in the region is one of the most durable and adaptable markers of creolization – broadly speaking, the cultural and social processes that result from the meeting in the Americas of disparate cultures and peoples.³

² Craig Werner similarly argues that “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” unleashed a polyrhythmic ferocity that eventually reconfigured every corner of the American soundscape’ (Werner, 2006: 138).
³ For a fuller discussion of these ideas, see Munro, 2010.
Rhythm and Haitian Indigenism

Conventionally seen as an element of popular, ‘low’ culture, rhythm has often been neglected and disowned by Caribbean elites as a sign of the putatively backward African culture of the (often darker-skinned) masses. Yet, at crucial times in national and regional history, the intellectual elites have turned to rhythm, and strategically sought to incorporate it into anti-colonial or nationalist conceptions of culture, race and society. In this sense, rhythm crosses boundaries of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures, more effectively perhaps than virtually any other cultural element. The case of Haitian indigenism exemplifies this cultural fluidity and rhythm’s strategic displacement from popular to elite culture, again as a means of envisioning a future free from the failings and prejudices of the past.

It is one of the enduring paradoxes of the first black republic in the New World that it has long neglected and repressed, or else selectively appropriated, the ‘blackest’ parts of its culture, chiefly its religion and its associated rhythmic music and dance. In postcolonial Haiti, rhythm, so long feared by the French colonists as an instigator of slave revolt, was subjected to renewed state control, as the nation struggled to reconcile its modern, Westernized idea of itself with its dynamic, non-Western, yet ever-creolizing cultural traditions. From Toussaint Louverture’s laws banning ‘Vaudoux’ dances, to the anti-superstition campaigns of the 1940s, Haitian elites, often in collaboration with the Catholic Church, have fought a determined campaign against the drumming, dance and rhythm of the masses. In doing so, the elites have effectively waged an anti-rhythm crusade that attacks the very foundations of popular culture in Haiti. For the drum and rhythm occupy a privileged place in Vodou culture. As Alfred Métraux wrote in the mid-twentieth century, the drums symbolize Vodou, and the term ‘battre tambour’ [to beat the drum] signifies in the popular language, ‘célebrer le culte des loa’ [to celebrate the cult of the lwa]. The political importance of the drum is shown throughout Haitian history, Métraux says, in the way that it has been regularly prohibited by the state in its campaigns against ‘paganism’. Even if he is not a serviteur himself, the drummer is the mainspring of every Vodou ceremony; it is his ‘science du rythme’ [science of rhythm] and vigorous beats that determine the ardour of the dancers, and the intensity of the nervous tension that allows the dancers in turn to attain the desired trance-like state (Métraux, 1958: 159). The drum in Haitian Vodou is, however, more than a mere musical instrument; it is also, as Métraux says, ‘un objet sacré et même la forme tangible d’une divinité’ [a sacred object and even the tangible form of a divinity]. Believed to contain a ‘puissance mystérieuse’ [mysterious power], the drum is the first of the sacred objects that the serviteurs salute before the
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ceremony starts, and the priests themselves, the houngan and the mambo, will in the course of the ceremony come to kiss the earth before the drums and to pour libations on them (Métraux, 1958: 163).

On the one hand, therefore, the drum and rhythm were reviled and rejected by the elite, and on the other they were the very foundations of the sophisticated cultural and metaphysical system of the masses. Among the elite, Vodou was associated with Africa, and thus with barbarism and primitivism, and for that group the only civilization worth considering in the post-independence period was that of Europe (Nicholls, 1981: 42–43).

At the same time, early Haitian intellectuals were wary of being subsumed into this broader, Western civilization. Haiti’s uniqueness was held by some to lie in its distinctly hybrid culture. In 1836, for example, the author Émile Nau wrote of how both Haiti and the United States were ‘transplanted’ nations, ‘stripped of traditions’, and of how the particular fusion of European and African cultures in Haiti made it ‘less French than the American is English’ (quoted in Dash, 1998: 46). And yet, if Nau did indeed see Haiti as the primary exemplar of the ‘heterogeneous modern American nation’ (ibid.), the post-independence history of Vodou indicates the trouble the nation had in assuming this creolized identity and culture. Haiti was a modern state in terms of its early postcolonial status and also of its hybrid racial and cultural composition. This modern status was not attained through a steady process of change, but through violent, cataclysmic change and upheaval.

In a sense, Haiti’s modernity was thrust upon it, and was hurriedly and incompletely, if also enthusiastically and willingly, assumed. This was a new relationship with and conception of modernity; an early example of the ‘lived’ modernity that Glissant associates with the Americas in general, and which was not ‘developed over extended historical space’ but was ‘abruptly imposed’ (Glissant, 1989: 148). This lived modernity in early, post-independence Haitian literature at times generates an exhilarating sense of freedom – the thrill of exploring in full and pushing to its conceptual limits the new entity that Haiti was – but also a tendency to retreat from that same freedom and to at times neglect or deny fundamental, and especially ‘African’, aspects of Haitian culture. Haiti’s early intellectuals and authors seemed to hesitate before accepting the modern, hybrid nature of their culture, its religion and associated rhythms, which is ironic as Vodou was and is surely the most conspicuous example of Haiti’s creolized

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4 As Nick Nesbitt says, ‘Two of the processes that came to distinguish the Twentieth Century were invented in Haiti: decolonization and neo-colonialism’ (Nesbitt, 2005: 6).
Rhythm and Creolization in the Circum-Caribbean

culture. Vodou is essentially a distinctly modern phenomenon, a new entity created out of the meeting of diverse Amerindian, African and European cultural and metaphysical systems. It appears in effect that Vodou, far from being embraced by Haitian intellectuals as a sign of their unique, creolized, modern and rhythmic culture, became associated with a kind of internal otherness, and a sign of the unresolved conflicts and contradictions between the nation’s urban, light-skinned elite and the black rural peasantry.

This internal cultural dualism began to be revised during the American occupation of 1915–34. Jean Price-Mars’s work profoundly influenced, indeed, revolutionized, Haitian intellectualism across every discipline; as he put it himself, his work led to a ‘révolution de l’esprit’ [spiritual revolution] (Price-Mars, 1959: 44). Artists and intellectuals from various fields – poets, novelists, historians, painters, musicians, architects, sculptors – turned towards indigenous sources, inspired by the historic or prehistoric past, while sociologists and linguists reconsidered Haitian monuments, mores and language to explain and define what was particular and unique about the Haitian way of life. Importantly, too, new research on Vodou legitimized the religion, and brought it into the intellectual sphere as never before (ibid.: 44–45). As René Depestre states, Price-Mars’s _Ainsi parla l’oncle_ was a veritable ‘déclaration d’identité’ [declaration of identity] for black Haitians, an attempt to refigure Haitian culture on its own terms, which invited occupied Haiti to ‘se rafraîchir dans le terreau fécondant de ses origines’ [refresh itself in the fertile compost of its origins] (Depestre, 1998: 33, 43). The American occupation revitalized the literature of resistance in Haiti, and the repetitive, ‘African’ rhythmicity of popular music and religion, long a neglected element of national culture, was incorporated into poetry as never before, and was instrumental in imagining a future free from the restrictions and conflicts of the past. In effect, the Creole musical culture was appropriated by elite intellectuals in an attempt to infuse their written texts with some of the rhythmic energy of popular music. Although such an act of cross-cultural and cross-generic appropriation inevitably involves translation and modification, Haitian elite authors seemed in no doubt that they could capture in written works the sounds and rhythms of the masses.

Newly reinvigorated, Haitian poetry broke free from the more fixed forms of the past, and rhythms and repetitions became integral, conspicuous aspects of the new, freer and more irregular poetics. Poems became hybrid, creolized objects as French-inspired prosody gave way to a more markedly rhythmic, ‘African’ style. Indigenist poets often drew on popular, African elements – chiefly rhythmic music, the drum and Vodou – to construct a
new, future-oriented discourse that fused race issues with a Marxist interest in class liberation. The best-known literary text of Haitian Marxist indigenism is not, however, a poem, but Jacques Roumain’s peasant novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), a work that presents the returning exile Manuel as the saviour of a divided rural community, who preaches communal action and cooperation to the fatalistic peasants. Like many indigenist intellectuals, Roumain’s interest in Africa and Haitian peasant culture (and their associated rhythms) had grown over time, and had gradually supplanted his early focus on non-racialized issues of poetics and politics. In contrast to his earlier prose fiction, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* focuses almost exclusively on rural Haiti, and on peasant culture. In this work, the hero Manuel’s life is sacrificed in order for the community to reunite and return to its previous, idyllic state of pastoral harmony, an idealized anterior world characterized by proto-communist work systems and Africanized cultural practices, of which rhythms, in work and in music, are an integral part. The organic, rhythmic connections between the people, the land, work and the drum are established early in the novel, when Manuel’s father Bienaimé recalls the days of the *coumbite*, the collective, African-derived work system, which stands in sharp contrast to the impoverished, fatalistic present. Bienaimé’s memory of the *coumbite* includes a vivid recollection of the role of the *simidor*, the drummer who beats out the rhythms to which the workers sing their work songs and raise their hoes ‘d’un seul coup’ [in one single sweep] (Roumain, 1944: 18). As Bienaimé recalls, the ‘pulsations précipitées’ [rapid pulsations] of the drum course through the workers ‘comme un sang plus ardent’ [like a more ardent blood] (ibid.). The rhythms of Roumain’s prose mimic those of the drum and the workers, who are taken over, almost possessed, by the rhythm: ‘Une circulation rythmique s’établissait entre le cœur battant du tambour et les mouvements des hommes: le rythme était comme un flux puissant qui les pénétrait jusqu’au profond de leurs artères et nourrissait leurs muscles d’une vigueur renouvelée’ [A rhythmic circulation established itself between the beating heart of the drum and the movements of the men: the rhythm was like a powerful flow that penetrated them right to the depths of their arteries and nourished their muscles with a renewed vigour] (ibid.: 19–20). Significantly, Roumain celebrates the practical, utilitarian role of rhythm in bonding workers and promoting group labour; if the workers are ‘possessed’ by rhythm it is for materially useful, tangible ends. In an important sense, too, it is the rhythmic, reciprocal sharing of work and the synchronization of efforts that create the community in the novel; to work together is effectively

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5 For examples of this new rhythmic poetry, see Munro, 2010: 64–68.
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‘épouser une pulsation collective, vibrer à l’unisson, communier en un même chant’ [to espouse a collective pulsation, to vibrate in unison, to be united in a shared chant] (Bona, 2004).

Roumain’s novel is thus sensitive to the ways in which rhythm continued to structure peasant life long after the revolution and the pressing need to use rhythm on the plantations as a means of bringing together the ethnically diverse, culturally fragmented slaves. In the post-revolution period, rhythm, in the form of work songs, drums and the repetitive movements of people and their work tools, in effect helped people get back to working the land, the site of their previous forced labour. Collective, rhythmic work came to be organized by ‘Sociétés de travail’, or work societies, the principal attribute of which were the orchestras of four or five members playing the drum or bamboo trumpets as the work was carried out. Each society was distinguished by the kind of instruments played and the drum rhythms they preferred (Métraux, 1960: 33). In this way, rhythm, work and social organization were inextricably linked in post-independence Haiti. For the new Haitian state, this rhythmic counter-structure posed a threat to the rigid social and work organization that it sought to impose in the former plantations. For Alexandre Pétion, in particular, whose plans to reinvigorate the plantation system relied on the supply of a compliant, docile workforce, the societies were particularly troubling. In effect, the conflict between the state and the autonomous working societies turned around rhythm: who was to have the power to impose the rhythm of work – the state or the workers themselves? In postcolonial Haiti, as in other places, the ‘master of rhythm’ was the master of work (Barthélemy, 2000: 165–66). Rhythm had been a supplement to slave life, and had become, as in Roumain’s novel, the motor of a model of self-sufficient labour generated by the people and which operated outside the control of the state.

While Roumain evokes and promotes the rhythm-centred work of the peasants, he is more ambivalent about rhythm’s role in Vodou possession. Manuel does participate in the ethnographically detailed Vodou ceremony that is held to celebrate his return, but this kind of rhythmic possession is ultimately dismissed as a waste of energy. Manuel says that he danced willingly at the ceremony, took his pleasure and responded to the drums ‘en tant que nègre véridique’ [as a real black man], but for him Vodou is finally ‘des bêtises’ [foolishness] and ‘inutile’ [useless] (Roumain, 1944: 6). Rhythm may be seen as an element in Roumain’s construction of an ‘organic’ community in the novel. For more on the organic nature of the community, see Britton, 2006.

6 Rhythm may be seen as an element in Roumain’s construction of an ‘organic’ community in the novel. For more on the organic nature of the community, see Britton, 2006.

7 On the relationship between work and rhythm, see Lefebvre, 1992: 100.
For Roumain, therefore, rhythm was of interest as an aspect of Haiti’s ethnographic reality, and as a means of structuring work and society. It was, moreover, as for many Haitian indigenist intellectuals, a source of memory, and a recurring, insistent counterpoint to the educated elite’s complacently adopted francophilia. Despite Roumain’s misgivings about the practical benefits of Vodou, he and indigenism in general had recognized, and to some extent co-opted, popular culture as valid, politically potent elements of Haitian culture. The drum and rhythm were perhaps the primary elements of this culture, echoes of a past that had been forgotten by the urban elite, but which had continued to evolve dynamically in harmony with the changing lives of the Haitian masses.

Roumain was, in effect, something like James Brown and many others across the circum-Caribbean, using rhythm to transcend the present and imagine a different kind of society, one that retained elements of the past, but was still in essence an unrealized reality and a time to come. Roumain was creating his own rhythm revolution in terms of literary style, too, as his compatriot Lyonel Trouillot would write much later: ‘Since Gouverneurs de la rosée (without this being an obligation, a master text, or a model, everyone being free to construct their own grammar) the phrasing of certain Haitian novelists has had hips, an almost carnal swinging quality’ (Trouillot, 2010: 182).

Rhythm, Everyday Existence and Creolization

Rhythm is therefore often evoked in Haitian culture at times of crisis, stagnation or uncertainty and as a means of imagining a future freed from the restrictions of the present. Much the same can be said of the broader Caribbean, too. The crises need not be on a societal or national level, but can be individual moments of uncertainty and anxiety. A striking example of such a rhythm-induced individual moment occurs in Joseph Zobel’s classic novel La Rue cases-nègres (1950) when the young protagonist José’s repetitive routine of school and chores is dramatically altered and enlivened by the arrival of a travelling fair. The fair seems to offer José and the community a chance to escape the harsh rhythms of the plantation they live and work on. José’s personal crisis – his poverty and the realization that he cannot have access to the rhythmic pleasures of the fair – is related to the broader historical situation and his awareness that his community’s way of life has changed little since the end of slavery. Initially dismayed by his lack of money, José is receptive, as he is throughout the novel, to the sounds of recreation, and becomes enchanted by the rhythms of the carousel. Indeed, as he says, the whole village is ‘enthralled’ by the orchestra that accompanies
the carousel. From a distance, all he can hear of the music is the beat of the tom-tom that scans the waltz to which the carousel rhythmically turns. But the beat has an entrancing effect on him and his senses – he simultaneously listens to and ‘feels’ the rhythm – and he is drawn irresistibly to its source:

c’était comme autant de coups de gong invitant à la joie, autant de coups frappés à mes entrailles, et qui, à la douleur de ma situation alarmante et quasi désespérée quand l’argent n’arrivait pas, et qui, à tout instant, comme une voix enjôleuse et une force irrésistible et perverse, nous ramenait tous sur la place du marché.8 (Zobel, 1950: 150)

In this instance, rhythm works as a palliative for José’s despair. What is interesting is that the rhythm does not work against the pain, but with and to it, almost as if it is on a common frequency that does not deny the pain but finds its beat as it were and falls into its rhythm. Similarly, too, discrete personal subjectivity in a sense collapses – the ‘we’ subsumes the ‘I’ – and the collective supersedes the individual. The carousel’s rhythmic music has, moreover, a visceral, bodily effect that only intensifies as José is drawn closer to it: ‘A mesure qu’on approchait se révélaient les baguettes rythmiques, le shasha, et, au moment même où apparaissait le toit pivotant et bordant d’oriflammes, le son de la clarinette éclatait dans ma tête, dans mon ventre, me prenait, m’attirait plus vite.’ [As we approached the rhythmic drumsticks, the shasha appeared and at the very moment the revolving, banner-trimmed roof appeared, the sound of the clarinet burst in my head, in my stomach, took me, pulled me ever more quickly] (Zobel, 1950: 150).

In this way the rhythmic sounds of the carousel are complemented and emphasized by the swirling movements of the carousel so that José, in a distinctly filmic scene, feels at once the aural and visual effects in one irresistible rhythmic ensemble. This polyrhythmic effect is narrated in prose that omits periods and gradually reduces the length of clauses to form one long, rhythmic sentence:

Alors, à voir des femmes qui, sous l’effet de la musique, marchaient en roulant des épaules et secouant des fesses, des hommes dont les reins s’imprimaient d’un roulis étrange, à voir de près tourner les chevaux de bois montés d’enfants en robes blanches et à nœuds rouges, d’enfants en costumes neufs, d’enfants à chaussures vernies, d’enfants noirs, aux

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8 ‘It was like so many beats of a gong inviting us to its joy, so many beats struck in my guts and which, to the pain of my alarming, almost desperate, penniless situation, and which at any moment, like a coaxing, seducing voice and an irresistible and perverse force, drew us all to the market square.’
rires clairs et chauds, et sentir au fond de moi la convulsion des coups de
tam-tam, forts et doux comme un sang épais, je demeurais dans une sorte
de transe d’où j’étais long à revenir.9 (Zobel, 1950: 150)

From his perspective as a spectator the carousel swirls and entrances in
colour and sound, so that the identity of the children on the horses becomes
indistinct, lost, at least for the duration of the ride. Similarly, the rhythmic
sounds and motions seem to alter the experience of time, as the children
are transported to a state of being outside, or perhaps rather, inside time
and space. The penniless José is desperate, however, to switch from spectator
to participant, to be the one with the blurred identity. As he realizes, from
the perspective of the participant on the horses, turning at great speed to
the beat of the tom-tom, it is impossible to see the spectator, while on the
outside the crowd could not ‘distinguer ceux qui tournaient’ [distinguish
those who turned] (Zobel, 1950: 151). In other words, it is only from the
seat on the horses that identity is completely, albeit momentarily, lost; or,
indeed, that it is found, released from the gaze of the community, and from
its strictures and hardships. The image of José standing on the outside in
his school uniform on the threshold of the absolute liberty and surrender of
identity that the carousel offers is a poignant one, and suggests something of
his split subjectivity and the difficulty he has and will have later in the novel
of reconciling the world of education and respectability with his instincts for
escape and rhythmic release.10 As such, the rhythms of the carousel portend
the future, though the future is not here related to a clear sense of liberation
or freedom, but to a more ambivalent time to come and a compromised,
partial liberation. It is perhaps significant that the carousel is an object of
European origin, in that its rhythms do not evoke a leap into the future, but
a circular movement, time and experience turning repetitively on an axis.
This seems appropriate more generally, for just as José’s rhythmic escape

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9 ‘Then, seeing the women who, under the effect of the music walked rolling
their shoulders and shaking their behinds, the men whose hips rolled strangely,
seeing up close the carousel horses turning with children in white dresses and
red bows, children in new suits, children in polished shoes, black children,
laughing clearly and passionately, and feeling in the very depths of me the
convulsion of the tom-tom beats, hard and soft like a thick blood, I remained in
a kind of trance that lasted for a long time.’

10 Significantly, too, it is only when his friend Jojo arrives with his 100 cent
note that José is finally able to ride the carousel and to experience the ‘griserie
libératrice de mes refoulements puérils’ [liberating intoxication from my
childhood repression] (Zobel, 1950: 153); access to money and higher social
status are tacitly confirmed as the most likely and enduring means of liberation.
is compromised, temporary and uncertain, so the future that Martinique has known since Zobel wrote his novel in 1950 has been one of continued attachment to France and often ambivalent accommodation of metropolitan culture. José’s rhythmic interactions seem to sense this future, incomplete freedom and the difficulties of attaining full liberation on both the personal and societal levels.

Nevertheless, this remarkable sequence presents a striking example of rhythm as a very real force that invites and seduces the poorest in particular into an intimate relationship with it and a different state of consciousness that offers a kind of escape and healing, however temporary. In a sense, Zobel comes close to suggesting, like Aimé Césaire (and others) did, that rhythm is an essential aspect of the black man, something innate, ‘fort [...] et doux comme un sang épais’ [strong and soft like a thick blood], as José says (ibid.: 150). And yet, however much the people are drawn irresistibly to the rhythm, in grounding the event in the everyday existence of the village, Zobel is able to avoid the questionable mysticism of Césaire’s poetry and to present the phenomenon in more ethnographic, phenomenological terms. If the people do have a visceral connection to rhythm, it is grounded in everyday existence and therefore has a function that can be to some extent explained with reference to the hardships of that existence and to the way that rhythm has historically offered escape and healing to the Martinican poor.

Zobel’s fairground rhythms are, moreover, creolized in that they mix the African tom-toms with the beats and melodies of the carousel orchestra’s European instruments, creating a hybrid musicality that reflects the broader cultural fusions that are truer legacies and reflections of Martinique’s complex history than the more monolithic drumming that is evoked in Césaire’s work, for example. This is significant, as rhythm has been one of the primary vectors of creolization in the Caribbean and the broader plantation world. It was through rhythm, dance and music that the earliest cultural encounters between Africans and Europeans were mediated in the circum-Caribbean, even in the darkest days of slavery. In Trinidad, for example, despite all the fear and suspicion that separated the various social groups, there was also, just as in colonial Saint-Domingue and other Caribbean sites, mutual fascination and often disavowed identification across race and class barriers. Role reversals and parodies – central aspects of post-Emancipation Carnival – demonstrate the complex exchange of conceptions and misconceptions of the other that in turn destabilized fixed dualistic notions of identity, which were strategically promoted by the colonial administration and its various organs, including the Church. In the pre-Emancipation period, contemporary reports speak of slaves calling at the plantation house at Christmas, receiving their seasonal ‘allowances’ and then flouring ‘each other’s black faces and
curly hair’, crying out, ‘look at he white face! And he white wig!’ (quoted in Cowley, 1996: 17). It was at these times of merriment, and of breaks in the routine of plantation work, that such mutual parodies took place. Similarly, during Carnival season in the early to mid-nineteenth century, the white (French Creole) plantocracy themselves parodied the slaves’ celebrations of Canboulay (from the French cannes brulées, or burnt canes), the feast that marked the end of one cycle of plantation work, and which became associated with Carnival celebrations in Trinidad.11 When a fire broke out on an estate, neighbouring bands of nègres jardins or field slaves were called to put the fire out, and to save what cane they could, working to the beat of their drums.12 The origins of Canboulay lay in the early part of the nineteenth century, at which time the elite of the society took an active part in all aspects of Carnival. According to contemporary accounts, the upper-class white parody of Canboulay contained all of the essential elements of the slaves’ celebration: the white women would dress up in mulâtresse style, the men in nègre jardin mode, and together they would form separate bands ‘representing the camps of different Estates, and with torches and drums to represent what did actually take place on the estates when a fire occurred in a plantation’ (quoted in Pearse, 1956: 182). The rhythmic aspects of the whites’ parody are further suggested in an observer’s recollection of this ‘take off’ of slave life, and his memory of whites dressed as ‘slaves stamping in time and singing a rude refrain, to a small negro-drum’. In addition, the white elite mimicked the slaves’ rhythmic drum dances, such as the bamboula, the belair, the calinda and the ghouba. The drum and rhythm have been constant elements in these cross-cultural exchanges. In all, these transracial parodies indicate that whereas work and social structures carefully delineated and perpetuated categories of race and class, in these crucial cultural, rhythmic exchanges these positions were far more fluid, and far less entrenched than one might have expected them to be (see Cowley, 1996: 21).13 It was rhythm that opened up the society, however imperfectly and fleetingly, and which,

11 As Cowley points out, there were direct equivalents of Canboulay in Carriacou and St Lucia, and possibly also in Martinique and Guadeloupe (Cowley, 1996: 233).
12 Jacob D. Elder argues that Canboulay can be examined in four basic ways: as a ‘Black resistance ceremony’; a ‘recreational pageantry of Africans’; an ‘anti-Catholic celebration of freedom from slavery and the origin of the present Carnival’; and as a ‘popular street theatre, exhibiting African-style dance, theatre, and music’ (Elder, 2004: 49).
13 Stephen Stuempfle also emphasizes ‘intercultural exchange’ as a salient aspect of early Trinidadian culture (Stuempfle, 1995: 14).
always turned towards the future, was the most persistent means by which
social hierarchies were destabilized, and finally overturned.

In effect, these rhythmic exchanges occurred to lesser or greater degrees
across the plantation world. In each case, these were future-oriented perfor-
mances, which staged a possible society to come, one in which were ended
or otherwise lessened the inequities and indignities of the plantation. It was
through rhythm that this future world was first imagined. But rhythm was
more than a mere means of firing the imagination; as the era of slavery ended,
and a new set of challenges presented themselves, rhythm (in songs, dance,
poetry, fiction) played a dynamic role in effecting change, in expressing
lower-class social aspirations and the desire for a world remade. Rhythm
was a force for unification; no ‘race’ either owned it or was immune to its
effects. In every American territory shaped by the processes of creolization,
rhythm has been an ever-present (if overlooked and under-theorized) element
in imagining and bringing into being the new hybrid societies that constitute
the circum-Caribbean world. And if rhythm remains a significant cultural
and social force in this region, it is because the processes of change are
ongoing, the societies are still being made, and the people are still – as James
Brown was – ‘fightin’ the future’.

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