The Creole Voices of West Indian Slave Narratives

Do you remember the days of slav’ry?
And how they beat us
And how they worked us so hard
And how they used us
Till they refuse us
Do you remember the days of slav’ry?

[...] Some of us survive,
Showing them that we are still alive
Do you remember the days of slav’ry?
History can recall, History can recall
History can recall the days of slav’ry


In his classic reggae anthem from 1981, Burning Spear uses the pronoun “us” to connect not only to the community of listeners but also as a link across history with enslaved West Indians. Thus, the voice of Burning Spear in 1981 is presented as incorporating other voices from past history. This multiplicity is enhanced by the fact that the name Burning Spear refers to both the singular musician, whose given name is Winston Rodney, and the band. The multiplicity and syncretism of the communities in the epigraph is signaled not only textually in the references to “you” and “us” but also in the rhythm and sound of the song itself—its reggae beat. This beat reflects its creole community and combines influences from various musical styles such as spirituals, West African drumming rhythms, country, bluegrass, calypso, as well as American rhythm and blues. In addition, reggae’s roots in the poor and working-class environments of newly urbanized 1950s Kingston, Jamaica, are intricately intertwined with
the social and political movements of the same era, in which labor unions across many of the former British West Indian colonies transformed themselves into political parties, each claiming to represent “I-man,” the common man. Influenced by church revival meetings, political rallies often featured testimonies from those who had benefited from the largess of the party in question. Many of these testimonies, collected in the Jamaica National Heritage Library, alongside other recordings of the life experiences of fellow individual Jamaicans, detail the crushing brutality still common to the modern sugarcane plantation, as well as the bauxite, tourism, and other industries. The workers—often the economic descendants of the former slaves—were frequently illiterate; their testimonies were memorized, and then written down by someone else or electronically recorded.

Although I’ve reprinted some of the lyrics from the Burning Spear song, “Slavery Days,” I want to draw attention to the sound of the song beyond its reggae beat. One of the most haunting things about it is that in the middle Rodney changes the refrain slightly, and where in the beginning of the song he allowed the music to fill in the space after he asked the question “Do you remember the days of slavery,” it is now followed by a deep mournful groan. The groan almost seems like a response to the question asked. As Frank Moten argues, it was sometimes only the moan—one of the sonic manifestations of voice—that could communicate the experience of horror and dislocation of the Middle Passage. Burning Spear’s song speaks not only to the importance of notions of voice in representing the history of slavery in the Caribbean but also highlights the inherent multiplicity of that voice and its sonic foundations.

This chapter will argue that although every single West Indian slave narrative discovered so far is a dictated, or otherwise explicitly mediated, text, they nonetheless are important to examine. Like the self-written narratives, the dictated texts aim to represent “real” experiences of slavery despite the absence of a single identifiable “author.” One of the benefits of Barthes’s argument about the “death of the author” is that it has opened up the possibilities of authorship, to include more nuanced and complicated articulations of the author function. Barthes’s description of texts as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (1978: 146), seems particularly appropriate to describe the West Indian slave narratives that rather than having “an author” point instead to an entanglement of often conflicting voices.

The relationship between notions of voice and textual representations of that voice are crucial to understanding the development of