Music and the Performance of Identity on Marie-Galante, French Antilles

Reviewed by Lauren Poluha

Ron Emoff's latest book is a musical ethnography that seeks to illuminate the role of music in the production of history and identity on the small Caribbean island of Marie-Galante. The author, an associate professor of anthropology and music at the Ohio State University at Newark, conducted fieldwork on Marie-Galante during the summers of 1997 and 2002, and the ethnographic content of *Music and Performance* has been gleaned from these trips.

Music and Performance is composed of seven chapters, which organize the book into three main sections on history, theory, and musical ethnography, beginning with an introduction to the island of Marie-Galante by situating it in terms of its ongoing relationship with France and connection to colonialism. As an overseas department of France and a dependent of neighboring island Guadeloupe, Marie-Galante exists in a perpetual state of "double colonization," a condition of non-nationhood that has profound effects on the construction of group and individual histories and identities. The legacy of the French colonial period is evident on Marie-Galante, once a center of sugar production. Dozens of windmills constructed during the slave era still dot the landscape, serving as constant reminders of the historical (and continued) control that Europe holds over the island (20–22). Although it covers an area of only 158 square kilometers and is home to no more than 12,000 people, the island lacks a coherent historical narrative and a unified cultural identity, and as a result, residents do not share an island-wide sense of solidarity. Through the lens of musical traditions, *Music and Performance* attempts to outline Marie-Galante's multiple historical narratives and modes of identity construction.

Chapter two discusses the varied (and often conflicting) historical narratives of Marie-Galante where residents tend to identify with either an African or European heritage. Accordingly, there are two main musical traditions that represent these historical narratives while at the same time evoking the uniqueness of being Marie-Galantais. *Gwo ka* is a drumming tradition that calls to mind African roots and the slavery era on Marie-Galante, and mainly appeals to younger audiences. Contrastingly, traditional *kadril* ensembles generally feature accordion, frame drum, and shaker, and its sounds (and accompanying dances, which stem from European quadrilles, biguines, and waltzes,) evoke the French aspects of both past and present Marie-Galante (127–8). The identities and histories constructed through these genres have not been consistent throughout space and time, however, and Emoff's aim is to present the fluidity and interpretive potential of these musical traditions, and "to illustrate the unique ways with which Marie-Galantais musically express their sense of being in an out-of-the-way place, of global marginality yet distinction" (42). Here, Emoff introduces ethnomusicologist Veit Erlmann and anthropologist Nicholas Thomas, both of whom write about the fluid, malleable, contestable nature of reality and truth, particularly in the colonial and postcolonial experience. On Marie-Galante, one person's historical truth may directly contradict his neighbor's, yet both truths are powerful shapers of one's personal identity, view of reality, the world, and one's place in it.

The major theoretical framework of the book is introduced in chapter three, beginning with the concept of the subsurreal, "a structure of feeling that combines the really real and the really dreamt or imagined into performative being" (76). The subsurreal involves a condition of being and not-being, distance, displacement, and not-belonging. This notion of the subsurreal provides the major theoretical underpinning for Emoff's entire argument. He posits that through *gwo ka* and *kadril*, "Marie-Galantais create subsurreal performative spaces filled in with imagery of dislocation and distinction *from* the nation, yet these are spaces from which to feel, just as compellingly, *in place*" (77). Through subsurreal performance, Marie-Galantais produce identity by defining not only who they *are* (Marie-Galantais or African), but also who they *are not* (French or Guadeloupeén). Martinican author Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) is introduced at this point because his poetry communicates the desire for a coherent, unified black identity, a longing that is echoed by contemporary Marie-Galantais poet Max Rippon. Much like Césaire's work, Rippon's poetry communicates the Marie-Galantais experience of displacement, distance from an imagined homeland of Africa and/or France, and a general sense of "non-being."For many Marie-Galantais, identity is formed out of a negative space of loss, displacement, and non-belonging (80). Emoff's examination of these sentiments through poetry sheds light on the ways they are also, perhaps more implicitly, communicated through the musical traditions of Marie-Galante.

Chapters four and five discuss *gwo ka* drumming and *kadril*, respectively. Chapter four gives a detailed description of *gwo ka* drumming and provides transcriptions of the genre's seven basic rhythms, as well as *gwo ka* song lyrics and melodies. Many Marie-Galantais believe that *gwo ka* stems directly from the slavery era, that the drums and

rhythms represent a direct link between the island and the African continent. In his discussion, however, Emoff reveals that the historical accuracy of this musical legacy is highly suspect, as there are no elderly *gwo ka* players on Marie-Galante and the consensus among some older Marie-Galantais is that the tradition has not been present on the island for more than twenty years (59). Thomas's argument that truth is subjectively constructed is employed here: for Marie-Galantais, historical fact is not necessarily important, but rather, truths are culturally produced. The historical inaccuracy of *gwo ka* musicians' assertions regarding their music's ancestry becomes irrelevant—it does not break down the strength of the truth that connects people to Africa.

Emoff's chapter on *kadril* centers on the hybridity of this genre: by blending musical elements from European, African, and Amerindian traditions, it embodies the complexities of citizenship on Marie-Galantais. One kadril dancer says that "Kadril doesn't make us into French women—but one acts more like a French woman at kadril" (131). Emoff summarizes the irony of this dancer's statement when he writes, "While she already *is* French, kadril events intensify, validate, or authenticate her Frenchness, which is only conditional or partial on Marie-Galante" (131). The central instruments of *kadril* are accordions, which are all imported. While *gwo ka* drums are constructed on Marie-Galante (or Guadeloupe,) accordions are a tangible link between Marie-Galante and Europe, thus exposing the European-ness of this tradition.

The book's sixth chapter discusses two more cultural practices that evoke an African past: *mayoleur*, a stick-fighting dance that is only carried on by a few elders on the island, and the presence of Rastafarianism on the island. These traditions look to the past, while simultaneously creating split/multiple subjectivities in the present. In addition to balancing in the liminal space between past history and present reality, the construction of identity on Marie-Galante is framed by the juxtaposition of locality and globality. Although the island has no tourism industry to speak of, no international market for its music (or other products) and is quite insular in its media consumption, Marie-Galante's connections to the African continent and to France, through music, history, and sense of self, reveal its conscious identification with international culture and communities. In the final chapter, a very short conclusion, Emoff recapitulates the major themes and narratives of *Music and Performance,* which are best communicated in his own words: "All of these Marie-Galantais are imaginatively displaying their agility, as agentive actors in creative control of their own lives, in moving back and forth between and in combining signs of the global and the local, the past and the present, the foreign and the innate, thus, in constructing for themselves solid ground in the non-nation" (176).

Emoff's sources include works written by ethnomusicologists and anthropologists, drawing heavily on postcolonial literature that deals with identity throughout the African diaspora. His own fieldwork accounts for a large portion of the book's content, and his writing style contains a healthy balance between theory and ethnography. The book, which will be of interest to scholars, particularly those interested in Caribbean music and diasporic identity, may also be accessible and interesting to those not in academia. Published by Ashgate, *Music and Performance* is one volume in the SOAS Musicology Series, a collection of monographs that explores music cultures from around the world, grounded in ethnomusicological theory and research methods.

Throughout the book, the stories and experiences of individuals on Marie-Galante are used to represent the multiple strains of identity formation on the island; this approach works well, as it allows the words and beliefs of Marie-Galantais to speak for themselves. The general format of each chapter is to introduce an individual, his/her conception of Marie-Galantais identity, followed by a discussion of the particular identity or history being communicated by the given individual. In most chapters, this is effective, but there are moments where an idea is introduced and not adequately developed at that time. My main critique of this book is its formatting and layout. Unfortunately, photographs (several of which are in color) are not of the highest quality, and the formatting of their accompanying captions is not particularly appealing.

This book is valuable partly because there are relatively few musical ethnographies of smaller Caribbean islands. The small size of Marie-Galante, the fact that it is not a tourist destination and its music is not present on the international market, make this book unique. Aside from an article published by Emoff in 2008, which deals with many of the same issues as *Music and Performance*, there is virtually no other literature on the music or culture of Marie-Galante, though sometimes the island's music is lumped together with that of Guadeloupe. In his book *Representing African Music* (2003), African musicologist Kofi Agawu exhorts scholars to approach scholarship on African and diasporic music from a postcolonial perspective that gives due attention, thought, and legitimacy to communities and traditions that have previously been ignored or marginalized. Emoff answers Agawu's call by giving voice to the history, musicality, and culture of Marie-Galante. Rather than allowing Marie-Galantais culture to be absorbed into that of Guadeloupe (as is so often the case,) *Music and Performance* illuminates the legitimate space that Marie-Galantais have carved out for themselves on a small

island in the French Antilles.

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