



The Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA):

Carnival as an Act of Rebellion

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Abstract:

The Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA) "is an open-access collection of pre-twentieth-century Caribbean texts, maps, and images" that seeks to remix the archives through the use of digital tools and centralize enslaved and free African, Afro-creole, and Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean. As a research assistant for the ECDA, I cultivated a digital exhibit, a collection of primary texts that provides a new point of entry into the archives. My exhibit revolves around Caribbean Carnival—a festival of freedom performed in the face of European enslavement that has its roots in the pre-emancipation ritual of *Cannes Brulees* (sugarcane burning)—and its ties to rebellion against enslavement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through this work I explored what rebellion meant in the context of the eighteenth century and how the different components of Carnival—rituals, masking, song, and dance—are all part of Afro-Caribbean culture, a culture colonizers lacked the insider knowledge necessary to fully understand or participate in. This poster explores how by applying postcolonial and decolonial frameworks to these colonial texts, such as Mrs. Carmichael's journal, they can be used to understand this insider versus outsider perspective manifested in these celebrations, the lack of cultural literacy colonizers had towards Afro-Caribbean culture, and how rooted traces of resilience and rebellion are in maintaining one's culture. By looking at the technologies of resistance and opposition from the past, we can learn and develop them for the future, working towards understanding cultural resistance as a form of celebration, embodiment, and life.

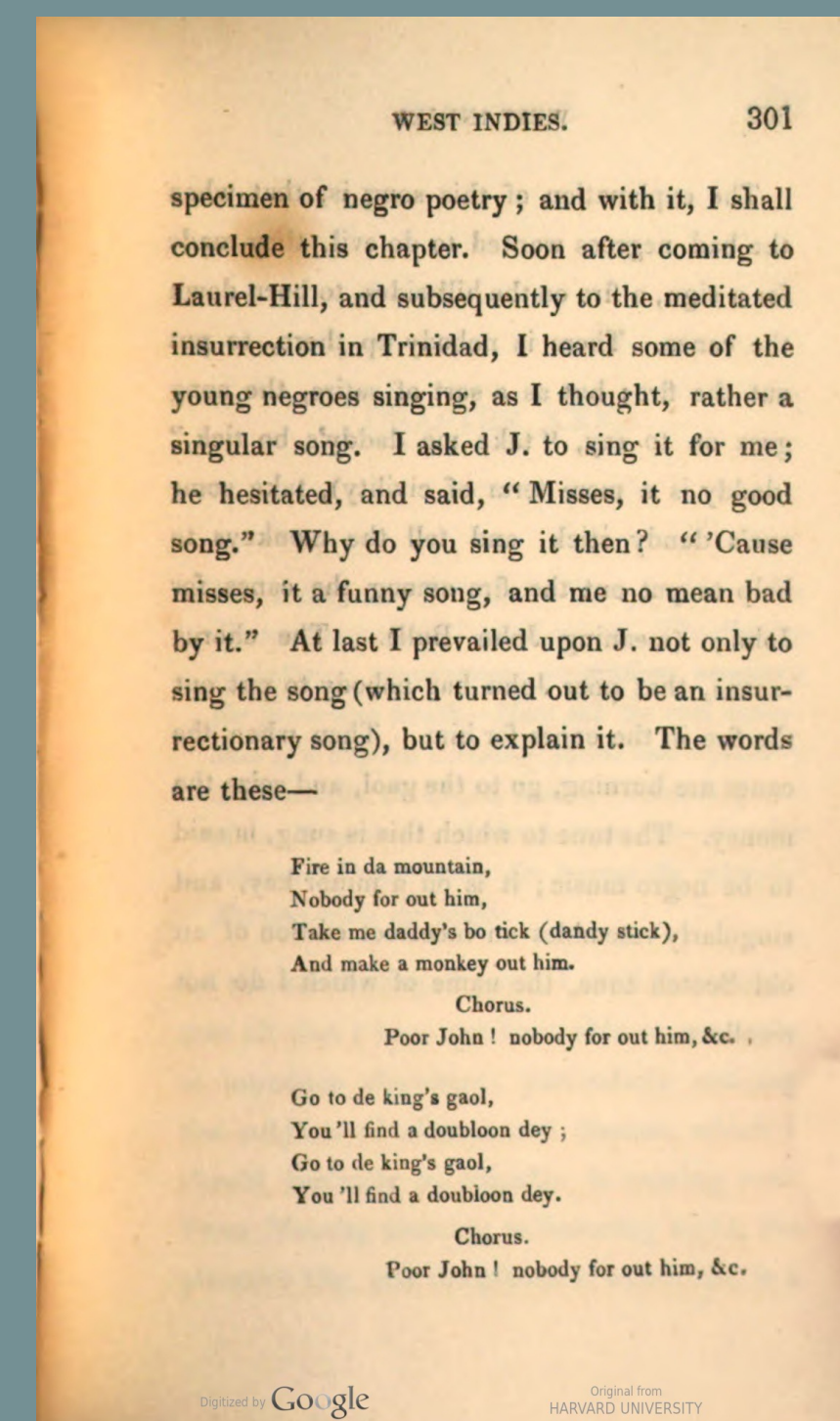
Introduction/Context:

Carnival is a celebration that marks rebellion against enslavement rooted in both African and Indigenous cultures. Some of the earliest records of carnival describe a ritual called *Cannes Brulees* (French for sugarcane burning). Enslaved Africans purposefully set fire to sugar cane illustrating resistance to compromise the trade of sugar, the very reason the enslaved were forced to work in the first place. This exhibit focuses on rebellion and power, as these acts of defiance are at the core of Carnival. Through this work, I am exploring what historical acts of resistance and rebellion look like. Unlike violent revolts and riots, Carnival is a more subtle expression of rebellion. Enslavers tried to separate and divide those they enslaved, aiming to rid them of individuality or ties to their own culture. Yet oral traditions and celebrations (like those practiced in Carnival) allowed enslaved people to resist this attempt at division by maintaining cultural ties through performance. The rituals, masking, song, and dance of Carnival are all part of Afro-Caribbean culture, a culture colonizers lacked the insider knowledge necessary to fully understand or participate in. Carnival allowed enslaved people to perform their opposition to colonial power through the extravagant, public refusal to unlearn or suppress their own culture.

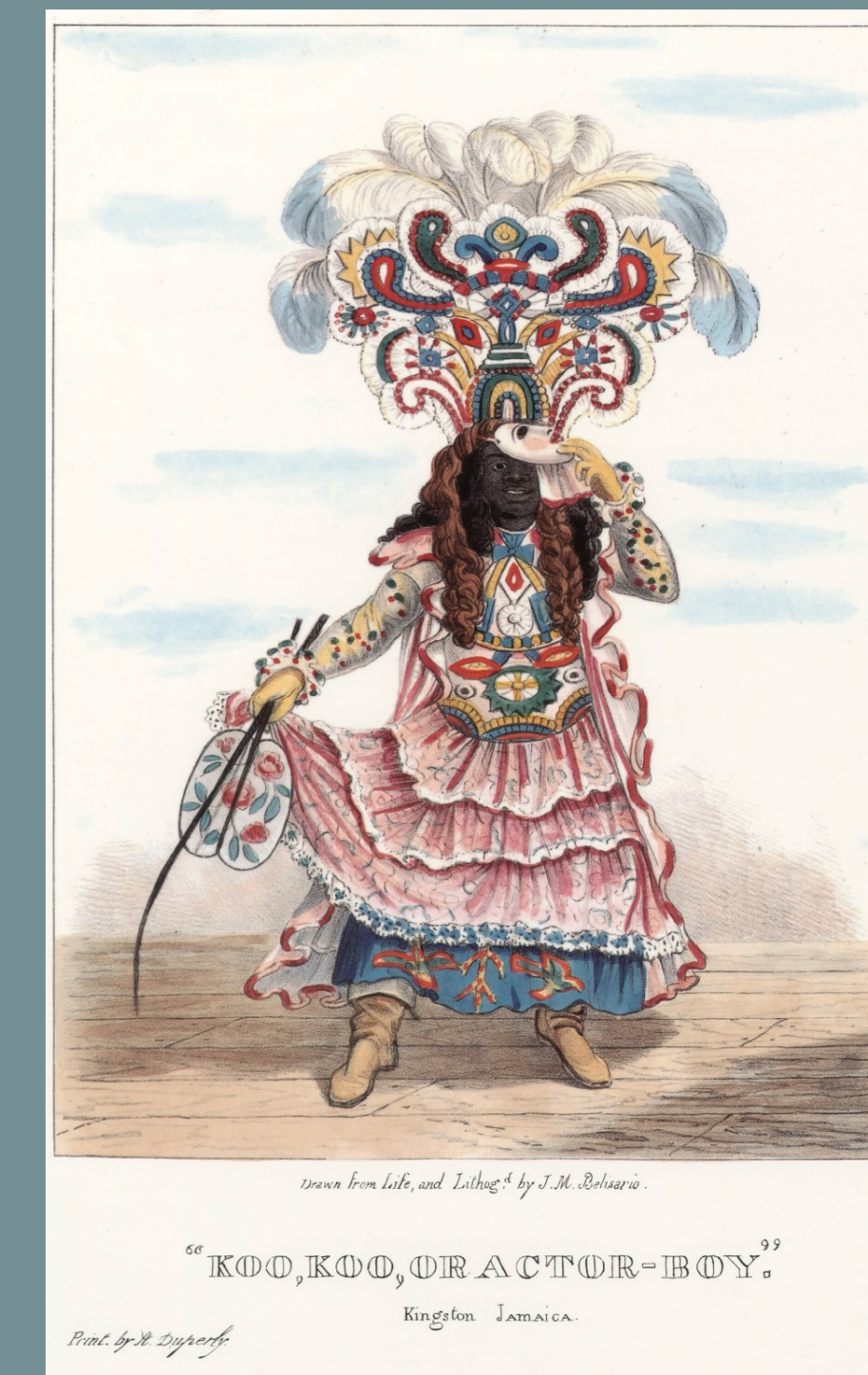
"Only the Africans are enabled to understand the 'message' because the very medium IS the message" (Elder 1998, 38).



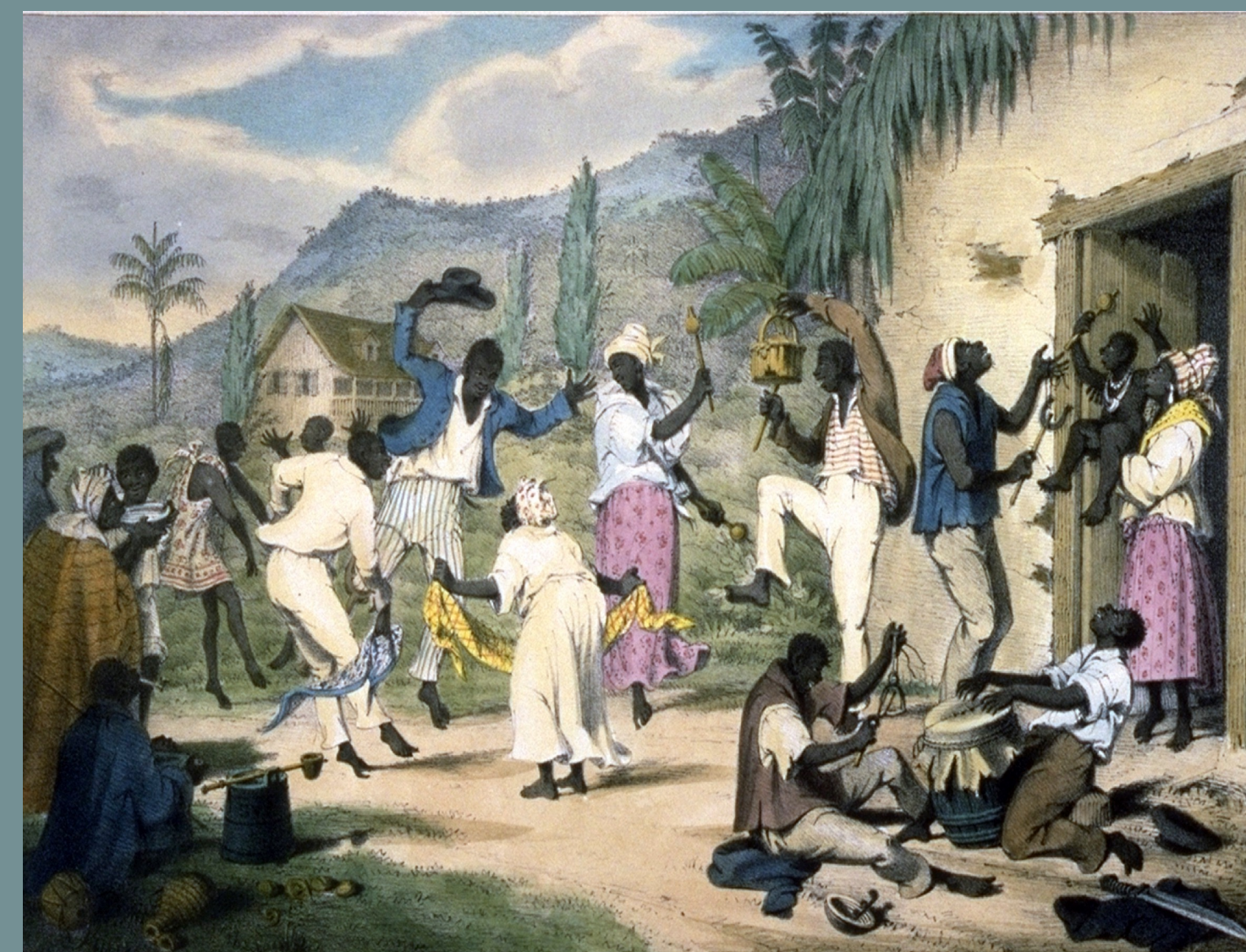
(Brunias, Agostino. "Stick Fighting, Dominica, West Indies, 1779")



(Carmichael, Mrs. (A. C.). *Domestic Manners And Social Condition of the White, Coloured, And Negro Population of the West Indies*. 2d ed. London: Whittaker, 1834)



(Belisario, Issac Mendes. "Koo Koo or Actor Boy," 1837-1838)



(Bridgens, Richard. "Dance at the Plantation, Trinidad, 1836")

These are example documents from my exhibit. Because carnival is based on oral culture, most of the documents are images that speak to visual culture. These images illustrate how the message of resistance is embedded within the acts themselves, highlighting the lack of cultural literacy colonizers had towards Afro-Caribbean culture. Additionally, I consider:

- How each source defined rebellion
- How are these documents representative of maintaining one's culture
- How each text contributes to the larger idea of Carnival

Carnival is celebrated differently on each island, and it is important to consider how all forms of Carnival are all intertwined together to really emphasize the idea of resilience.

Methodologies:

I prioritized a decolonial methodology. Because many of the primary texts used are created by colonizers visiting or living in the Caribbean for a few years, the perspective given is very limited in scope and extremely biased. In the context of my work, decolonize means to:

1. **Understand** that these texts are based upon the authors' perspective of Carnival and these perspectives are not representative of the true spirit of this celebration
2. **Observe** the language, tone, and approach taken by the author and the use of "us" versus "them" language
3. **Investigate** these sources alongside current scholarship in order to gain more background and a more encompassing view
4. **Minimize** systems of hierarchies or colonial lenses in which texts like these are often looked at and look beyond

Through literary analysis, particularly close readings, I investigated the limited perspective in the pieces and drew meaning from them outside of Western social standards of Carnival and the historical people who practiced it. This reveals a much deeper meaning than at first glance. Hence, returning agency and power to the people they are written about.

Why Digital?

This project is presented in the form of a digital exhibit because it allows us to engage with different mediums of text in much more nuanced and dynamic ways, speaking to the oral and visual nature of Carnival. These texts are lived, and the digital allows us to update and add on to these materials. Digital exhibits are also accessible to people all over the world, challenging the inaccessible nature of academia, and giving people in the Caribbean the opportunity to engage with this material on an open access platform.

Note of Appreciation

I find myself deeply indebted to the ECDA team, particularly Dr. Nicole Aljoe and Elizabeth Dillon as well as graduate students Avery Blankenship and Alanna Prince for providing me mentorship, space, and guidance to cultivate my own research projects as well as the confidence to find myself in the literature we read.