Peter A. Roberts, *A Response to Enslavement: Playing Their Way to Virtue*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2018. x + 382 pp. (Paper US\$40.00)

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the music, dance, and masquerades of enslaved Africans in the English/British Caribbean inspired myriad descriptions in books written by the region's planters, officials, and travelers. This literature has long been scrutinized by historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and literary scholars; see, for example, Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed, *After Africa* (1983) and Richard D.E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (1997). In his latest book, however, linguist Peter A. Roberts offers a fresh perspective on these sources through an in-depth comparative analysis that also considers selected works by French and Spanish writers. In the course of his discussion, he identifies recurring themes and rhetorical patterns, while also providing a sense of how and why Africans and their descendants engaged in various forms of recreation, ritual, and festivity.

According to European observers, the enslaved population spent a lot of time singing and dancing. While there are many reports of singing during work, it was weekend, holiday, and other special events that attracted the most attention. There are numerous accounts of dance gatherings held between Saturday night and Monday morning, often centered on individuals or couples performing within a communal ring. Christmas season festivities were also common. In Jamaica, for example, there were diverse outdoor processions that typically involved competing "parties" (groups), such as the "set girls" with their fine color-coordinated costumes, and the male John Connu masquerades, whose emphasis shifted over time from the grotesque to the elegant. Observers were particularly intrigued by funerals, which featured lively music-making, dancing, and communication with the deceased. Roberts notes that writers described such funerary activities as "play," thus drawing on one of several English dialectical meanings of the word. By the late eighteenth century, writers were suggesting that "play" was a term used by enslaved Africans for a variety of outdoor performances that involved dance and imagination.

Throughout his discussion, Roberts addresses the limitations of this body of literature: the writers' incomplete and stereotypical descriptions, their generalizations from limited observations, and their recycling of information and even verbatim passages from previous accounts. For example, reports on dancing in the Caribbean drew on European descriptions of stamping, jumping, advances/retreats, and other movements in dances in West Africa. Roberts also examines especially influential writers, such as the French priest Jean-Baptiste Labat, who employed the term "*calenda*" (probably derived from the Roman

“calends”) to refer to a dance, with lines of interacting men and women, that he observed in Martinique in the late seventeenth century. Labat’s term was frequently used by other writers for different dances, while his description helped to establish European concepts of slave dancing as essentially lascivious. In addition, Roberts notes that Captain J.E. Alexander’s 1833 report on the “Joan-Johnny” in Barbados was the first mention of a dance name that was neither derived from Labat’s calenda nor associated with a particular ethnic group (such as Edward Long’s comments on the dance of the Coromantins in Jamaica). The Joan-Johnny was a dance for couples involving displays of courtship; Charles William Day described it in 1852 as “dancing with soul in it.”

While Roberts offers a valuable compilation and critique of European source material, his larger goal is to comprehend the prevalence and significance of music, dance, and related cultural practices for the generations of enslaved Africans who lived under conditions of extreme brutality and deprivation in the plantation societies of the Caribbean. His basic argument is that play is “a force creating an enhanced alternative reality which, by facilitating the dynamic and self-revising nature of characters and institutions, improves human status and value in real life” (p. 29). With references to theorists from Plato to Oliver Sacks, he outlines the power of music and dance to generate cognitive well-being, aesthetic fulfillment, social bonding, and an experience of happiness. He concludes that most of the Caribbean’s enslaved workers calculated that a violent reaction to slavery would be suicidal and that play was a practical and virtuous alternative: “Except in the case of Haiti, the majority of the slaves in the islands chose acquiescence, they chose to live as slaves rather than die ‘honourably’” (pp. 348–49). A counter-argument to this position would be that the self-affirmation and social cohesion produced through play also facilitated various ways of challenging the plantation system, from low-key disruption to occasional major revolts across the region. This deeply researched and well-written book will surely inspire ongoing debate on the motivations and consequences of expressive performances during the long era of plantation slavery in the Caribbean.

Stephen Stuempfle

Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Indiana University
sstuempfle@indiana.edu