

Re/Telling History: Sistren's *Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee* as Neo/Colonial Resistance

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Sistren Theatre Collective's *Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee* was performed in Jamaica in 1985 as part of the Caribbean Popular Theatre Exchange. The play, which was staged in outdoor arenas throughout the island, intervened in contemporary political debates over the extent to which Jamaica had become a 'client state' of the United States through its compliance with the terms of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). The SAP was criticized by labour leaders and activists because of its emphasis on the repayment of Jamaica's debts to the IMF at the expense of spending on health care and education. Sistren, a theatre collective composed mainly of working-class Jamaican women, based *Ida Revolt* on the 1938 Frome estate riot, which set in motion a string of uprisings in rural and urban areas that forced the colonial authorities to pay attention to the impoverishment of the working class. Sistren chose the Frome riot as the basis for its play *Ida Revolt* to draw out the parallel between Jamaica's economic and political conditions in the 1930s and the 1980s. The collective used the African-Caribbean performance traditions of Jonkonnu and carnival to tell the story of Frome, and the play draws on the history of labour rebellion in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean (a history that is rooted in resistance to the exploitation of enslaved, indentured, and waged labourers in the global, capitalist production of sugar and other commodities) to increase its audience's awareness of the importance of defying continuing forms of economic exploitation, which in the twentieth- and twenty-first century Caribbean has included the casualization of the workforce, high levels of unemployment, widespread poverty, and low wages. Sistren re/tells history from the perspective of the workers on the Frome estate, particularly the female workers, to educate Jamaican audiences about the involvement of strong women in labour rebellions.

The Frome riot, which was one of the most significant labour revolts in Jamaican history, occurred in large part because economic conditions had not improved for Jamaica's disadvantaged majority since the emancipation of the island's enslaved population in 1834. In the wake of emancipation, the formerly enslaved merely became exploited waged labour on the plantations owned by the colonial elite (Post; Bolland, *Politics of Labour*). The Frome riot was also sparked by the exploitative industrial-relations practices of the Tate and Lyle Company, the British owners of the Frome estate, which avoided paying Frome workers their proper wages while it built its new refinery. In *Ida Revolt* Sistren compares the circumstances that led to the riot with economic conditions in 1980s Jamaica, an era in Jamaican history in which working-class people continued to be exploited at the hands of neo-colonial governments that worked in

cahoots with economic superpowers, such as the United States. As a result of the imposition of the IMF's SAP and Reagan's CBI, widespread poverty, high unemployment, exploited labour (mainly in the island's Free Trade Zone [FTZ]), and foreign economic domination continue unabated in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean, serving as hallmarks of re-colonization or neo-colonialism, disguised as 'modernization' and 'progress' in the region. The term 'neo-colonialism' is widely used to describe the continuing control of formerly colonized countries, such as Jamaica, by multinational companies, international aid donors, the local elite or comprador class, and global superpowers, such as the United States (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 162-63). Consequently, to truly understand working conditions for Jamaican women within existing capitalist modes of production, black and Third World feminist scholarship necessarily emphasizes the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which Jamaican women live, and it interrogates local hierarchies of power and their relationship to broader manifestations of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee not only protests against the onslaught of United States hegemony in the Caribbean region, it explores the role women played in the Frome uprising to contest official histories of labour rebellions in which women are figured as either supporters of their male counterparts or as compliant workers. Although Caribbean women were instrumental in planning, leading, and instigating labour rebellions, their involvement "was not even relegated to the footnotes in official narratives and in the majority of academic works on the subject" (Bolles 20) until scholars such as Lucille Mathurin Mair, Barbara Bush, Verene Shepherd, Rhoda Reddock and Mimi Sheller began to rewrite Caribbean labour history. Although there is a dearth of information on the Frome riot, *Sistren* used this uprising as a metonym for all labour rebellions in which women's participation remains invisible. The play is also a comment on conflicting representations of Jamaican women: on the one hand, Jamaican women are depicted as docile workers in official labour discourses and, on the other, as militant leaders in popular accounts of uprisings. *Ida Revolt* revolves around two competing histories of the fictional character Ida Homes's involvement in the Frome riots, which are based on written and oral versions of the 'official' and 'unofficial' histories of labour rebellions. In the official accounts, women are excluded; in the unofficial accounts, women play prominent roles. The character of Homes is based on interviews with Hilda Rioter, the woman rumoured by workers on the Frome Estate to have started the riot. In *Ida Revolt* the competition over the 'true' representation of events surrounding Frome is represented metaphorically by a stylized cricket match in which Jonkonnu and carnival troupes play against one another.

Jonkonnu is derived from the Yam, Harvest, and Recreational festivals of the Ibo, Yoruba, and Ga people and English cultural traditions such as mumming and Morris dancing. It consists of a troupe of male players who don masks and dance in the streets at Christmas time. Although

many character-types exist in Jonkonnu, there are some stock characters: Horsehead, Cowhead, Belly Woman, Pitchy Patchy, Houseboat Head, and Actor Boy. The actors do not speak during the performance, and they do not remove their masks in public; their dancing is performed to the music of fifes and drums (Banham et al. 211).[1] Jonkonnu differs from carnival in the sense that it is largely a Jamaican cultural expression and, although it utilizes public space, does not blur the theatrical contract between performers and spectators. Nigel Bolland contends that the Jonkonnu dancers, who use satire (in the form of songs and whiteface routines) to comment on the unequal social relations of slavery, “were participants in political processes of cultural resistance and self-definition” (“Creolisation and Creole Societies” 36). The political resonances of Jonkonnu, however, are more fully explored by Sylvia Wynter. She describes the performance, particularly its encoded use of West African symbolism to both threaten and entertain the plantocracy, as “cultural guerrilla resistance against the Market economy” (335). By fictionalizing the events surrounding Frome through the use of cultural forms (Jonkonnu and carnival) that invite participants to role-play, fantasize, and generally turn the world on its head, Sistren deliberately proposes an alternative history (one that constructs itself as a fabrication) to those histories already written about the riot. In the written histories women are not shown to be leaders of the uprising, although their presence among the crowd, and among those injured, is recorded. *Ida Revolt* blurs the binary oppositions of fact/fiction and literate/illiterate that have been used to “make official certain versions of history and to show others as lacking credibility” (Gilbert & Tompkins 107). In this article, I will argue that the connection between female labourers, public protest, and cultural resistance needs to be explored to appreciate the significance of Sistren’s production, particularly its use of Jonkonnu.

Sistren’s Political Context

Sistren Theatre Collective was formed by Honor Ford-Smith, a drama tutor at the Jamaica School of Drama, in 1977. Ford-Smith was employed by the Manley government to work with twelve working-class women from the Impact program (a government initiative to alleviate unemployment) on a skit for the 1977 Workers’ Week Festival.[2] The Manley government was renowned for its adoption of ‘democratic socialism’ to diminish the gap between rich and poor and to recognize the African heritage of the majority of Jamaican people. The Jamaican version of democratic socialism retained the democratically elected parliament and the two-party system, but it embraced the principles of socialism, particularly the ideology of equality for all (Payne 71). In keeping with the principles of democratic socialism, the Manley government placed much emphasis on enriching the lives of working-class Jamaicans, hence the staging of the Workers’ Week Festival. Sistren’s skit *Downpression Get a Blow* depicted women’s working conditions in a US-owned garment factory that strongly discouraged union membership and worker solidarity. Ford-Smith describes the process of devising *Downpression* as “an exchange of

experience” (“Sistren” 248). The performance did not use any written material and was based on the personal testimony of one member of the group. This method of working became the model on which Sistren’s future plays were based. Between 1977 and 1980 the twelve women attended drama classes with Ford-Smith at the Jamaica School of Drama, where they shared their personal testimonies, experimented with theatrical forms, and explored aspects of Jamaica’s oral tradition (in which Jonkonnu plays a prominent part). From the outset, the members of Sistren wanted to produce theatre that dealt with experiences of neo-colonialism in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean, particularly the way it had influenced African-Caribbean women’s lives.

When the Manley government was defeated in the 1980 election, an election that marked the end of democratic socialism in Jamaica, Sistren’s support systems were removed. In the 1980s Jamaica’s political landscape, which shifted from leftist to ultra conservative under the newly elected Jamaica Labour Party, became increasingly hostile toward Jamaican artists, cultural workers, and dissidents. Sistren found itself struggling to survive, the Jamaican women’s movement floundered,^[3] democratic socialism was dismantled, and community organizations were either dissolved or became perilously short of funding. The absence of a strong feminist voice to protest against the IMF’s economic oppression of women (and men) prompted Sistren to organize itself into a feminist theatre collective and non-government organization with funding from North American development agencies. While the women in Sistren did not openly adopt the term ‘feminist’ to describe their work, the issues addressed in their theatrical productions, the workshops they conducted in Jamaican communities, and the group’s mission statement placed importance on Jamaican women achieving equality with men in all areas of Jamaican life. Gladstone Wilson describes Sistren’s work during the 1980s as “ferverently political” (44) because the collective shifted from personal accounts of patriarchal oppression to the exploration, via theatrical productions and workshops, of the commodification of women in the capitalist modes of production and the feminization of women’s labour, particularly within the FTZs.

Sistren’s survival during the 1980s was made possible through transnational support networks, particularly within the women’s movement, which opened a space for collaborating across borders. Sistren turned to a number of development agencies, women’s organizations and theatre networks for support: Inter Pares (Canada); Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN); the United Nations World Decade for Women Conferences; Women In Development programs at the University of the West Indies and the University of Toronto (Canada); and the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance. The common reference points for these transnational networks were (and are) the connections between postcolonial governments and late global capitalism, the global exploitation of cheap labour to advance capitalist profits, the

divide between rich and poor, the impoverishment of the environment, and the disciplining of women's bodies within the neo/colonial machinery of the state (Alexander; Alexander and Mohanty; Chesters and Welsh; Mies and Shiva; Mohanty; Pettman).

Performed at the height of the Jamaica Labour Party's (JLP) second term in office, Sistren's *Ida Revolt* was devised in conjunction with popular theatre companies from other Caribbean nations to comment on the exploitation of working-class Jamaicans, and their counterparts from the wider Caribbean, in late global capitalism. Led by Edward Seaga, the JLP government was renowned for its close political relationship with the Reagan administration in the United States, a relationship which became even more congenial after Seaga embraced the tenets of Reagan's CBI.[4] Jamaica's economy had been devastated by the impact of the IMF's SAP, which had been reluctantly negotiated by Michael Manley in the 1970s and then enthusiastically renegotiated by Seaga in the 1980s.[5] Economic conditions worsened in 1985, to the point that Jamaica experienced its first general strike in the post-independence era (Payne 123). The SAP brought about a decrease in expenditure on public services, such as health care, thus burdening women with more responsibility for children and the elderly. In addition, the CBI gave rise to the establishment of FTZs, in which women barely earned enough to support themselves, let alone their dependents. The labour burden placed on the shoulders of women, in both the private and public spheres, thus changed very little from the end of slavery through the 1980s (Senior; Sistren with Ford-Smith; Ho). Hence Sistren's decision in 1985 to devise a theatrical production about a significant labour uprising in Jamaica's past, the Frome sugar estate riot, was particularly apposite.

Sparked by a delay in the payment of wages to casual workers, the Frome riot, in which four people (including two women) were killed, occurred in response to the economic conditions working-class Jamaicans endured during the 1930s. The labour uprising was a reaction to high rates of unemployment, widespread poverty, the casualization of the workforce, lack of labour reform, and continuing British control of the island (Bolland, *Politics of Labour* 299). Because it targeted foreign enterprises, local capitalism, and the colonial state, Frome marked a significant moment in Jamaican history (Post 286). In the decades after the riots, the Jamaican Trade Union movement emerged to challenge post-emancipation capitalism, the Black Power movement (particularly Garveyism) became increasingly influential,[6] and Jamaicans successfully won their fight for independence from Britain in 1962.

Researching Frome – Jamaican Women and Public Protest

To gather background information for *Ida Revolt* Honor Ford-Smith, Sistren's former artistic director, travelled to the Frome estate to interview people who had either been involved in the

Frome riot or had been present on the estate when it occurred. Ford-Smith recalls being confronted by two different versions of events, depending upon whom she interviewed. Some workers on the estate claimed that a woman nicknamed Hilda Rioter had thrown the stone that instigated the altercation, but Hilder Rioter, a domestic servant on the estate, denied having been involved in the riot. “She was, she said, a decent, hardworking domestic ‘with ambition’” (“An Experiment in Popular Theatre” 156). Mimi Sheller points out that free women often tapped into colonial discourses surrounding ‘femininity’ and used them to their own advantage; for example, some based their claims for decent working conditions on their role as mothers (para. 7). Hilda Rioter’s denial of her involvement in the riot could be read as yet another example of this kind of subversion: by appealing to her status as an ‘ideal’ domestic servant, she protected herself from the authorities and disguised her ‘warriorhood,’ which is, according to Elaine Savory’s formulation, a type of masking. Savory suggests that masking can include performing ‘whiteface,’ such as using “a mode of address which excludes white authority by appearing to pander to it” (223). In the same way, I would argue that Hilder Rioter could be putting on the mask of a docile female worker, thus using idealistic colonial constructions of Jamaican femininity to her own advantage.

The competing histories presented in *Ida Revolt* make explicit the differences between official and unofficial histories that surrounded such rebellions. In the official histories, women do not play a central role in instigating the uprisings, whereas in oral or ‘folk’ histories, which are usually submerged by the colonial authorities, there are many examples of women leading rebellions. As mentioned previously, feminist historians cite many accounts of women’s active involvement in public protest (pre- and post-emancipation) to conclude that African-Caribbean women transformed their daily activities into forms of resistance by participating in collective action where necessary (Sheller para.1). Sheller demonstrates in her research that women dominated public spaces, particularly markets, in Jamaica throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and she cites an example of women protesting the banning of Jonkonnu in 1842 by confronting the local authorities. In Ford-Smith’s background research on Frome, she also found evidence of African-Caribbean women either leading rebellions or actively participating in public protests from the beginning of slavery onwards (“An Experiment in Popular Theatre” 156-57). In contrast to Hilder Rioter, Hortense Campbell, a former sugar worker on the Frome estate, shared her personal testimony of involvement in the riot with audiences, “laying to rest the idea that women are docile and subservient and adding her words to the process of bringing out of the shadows the little known story of the activism of women in the 1930s” (Ford-Smith, “An Experiment in Popular Theatre” 152). While there may be disagreement over who instigated the Frome riot, Sheller states that Afro-Caribbean women indisputably “led efforts [...] to revive and pass down the African-rooted practices of their own communities” (para. 31), “facilitated flows of information between town and country,” and

“filled the streets and squares during popular political mobilizations or demonstrations” (para. 31).

Theatrical Intervention: Sistren’s *Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee*

Sistren’s *Ida Revolt* revolves around the two competing histories of Frome, but it is based on the life of a fictional character called Ida Homes. The histories are told by competing troupes of Jonkonnu and carnival characters, led by Madda Moon and Ole Pirate, respectively. Ole Pirate’s history presents Ida as a dutiful, Christian woman who, via promotion to domestic work, is able to achieve upward social mobility. Ole Pirate invokes Christian patriarchal discourses to make the point that a woman’s place is in the home. He does not mention the fact that many African-Caribbean women already worked, as nannies and domestics, in other people’s homes, where they became proxy mothers to the children of their employers. Madda Moon’s history, on the other hand, depicts Ida as a community leader who stood up to the plantation owner on behalf of her fellow workers. In the play, Homes starts out as a field worker on the Frome estate, but, because she is vocal about women being paid less than men for the same work, the plantation owner offers to promote her to domestic work in the Great House. He considers the fields a male domain, despite the long history of female slaves working alongside their male counterparts on New World sugar plantations. Although Ida agrees to work as a domestic helper, she uses her position to cause havoc from within the plantation owner’s house by disrupting the lavish wedding ceremony he holds for his daughter.

Sistren’s use of Jonkonnu in *Ida Revolt* reflects not only the traditional purpose of the performance form but also its modification for and incorporation into the structure of the conventional two-act play (albeit performed outdoors rather than on the traditional stage.) In this sense, *Ida Revolt* can be compared to guerrilla theatre in the United States during the mid-1960s, which was “staged in [an] environment of political conflict [...] but was allied to traditional political theatre by being mostly didactic in purpose” (Kershaw 105). Each performance began with a procession through the streets in order to draw a crowd, and, according to Ford-Smith, it “reached a wide cross-section and especially working-class people because it was a street form of entertainment” (“An Experiment in Popular Theatre” 164). The production toured rural parishes of Jamaica, ending with a performance in the parish of Westmoreland where the Frome estate riot occurred.

Further, Sistren’s melding of Jonkonnu and carnival traditions opens up what Homi Bhabha refers to as the “third space of enunciation” in which cultural difference from the colonizer can be articulated. The third space of enunciation “makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist, histories of the ‘people’” (209). In this sense, Sistren’s production reflects the

hybridity of the Caribbean in that the street performance forms incorporated into *Ida Revolt* have their basis in British and European cultural traditions, but they have come to represent, to some extent, the national cultures of the Caribbean through their fusion with African, East Indian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern cultural traditions. By articulating how the people differed from the neo-colonizers, and the differences between islands of the Caribbean, Sistren privileges popular cultures that have been, and continue to be, denigrated and/or appropriated by the local elite and its neo-colonial counterparts abroad.

The performance of *Ida Revolt* in the heartland of the capitalist production of sugar, re-imagines freedom from slavery and, through its retelling of the history of labour rebellion, positions workers as the creators of their own histories. Moreover, in this work, female workers are positioned as the makers of history. For example, Ida Homes and Madda Moon, the lead female characters in *Ida Revolt*, change the course of labour history by challenging the inequities of the plantation system. Madda Moon, addressing a group of protesters, creates a space at the beginning of the play for Ida's story to be told:

Mada [*sic*] Moon:

Crack

Ida mek history as a hero

Bout some fifty years ago

Crick

Actor Boy:

Crack

Catching hell

No water, no food, no work, no house, no money

And the prices so high

You could only watch dem fly

Crick...

St Lucian:

Crack

Ida mek a crick crack in de wall of oppression

Ida act fi change we situation

Her story is no mystery

Is my story and your story

(Sistren Theatre Collective 3)

Upon hearing Madda Moon and her troupe telling Ida's story, Ole Pirate and his troupe

charge onto the scene and use ‘aggressive dancing’ to distract the Jonkonnu characters from telling the ‘truth,’ thus literally and figuratively dominating and invading the space Madder Moon has created. From the outset, the play revolves around women leading public protest in the face of aggression from those in positions of power.

The re-enactment of the Frome riot, in which the actors transform from Jonkonnu and carnival characters to a group of protestors waving placards demanding “more water, work, no more layoffs” (Sistren Theatre Collective 3), invokes the spirit of previous rebellions and of those to come by tapping into the way that carnival “embodied an ongoing struggle against inequity and oppression” (Gilbert & Tompkins 79) and often ended in violent confrontation with the authorities. *Ida Revolt* interweaves the related purposes of carnival/Jonkonnu and public protest; it uses public space to bring cultural and political issues to the fore. Carnival, which emerged from cultural activities on market days and holidays in medieval Europe, is a performance form in which excessive consumption and disorder is permitted and/or tolerated by the authorities. In *Rabelais and His World* Mikhail Bakhtin stresses the revolutionary nature of carnival, which uses parody, spectacle, and the notion of ‘second life’ to reverse, albeit temporarily, the real-life situation of the participants. Therefore, the carnival tradition was already inherently political before it reached the Caribbean. However, Caribbean carnival, unlike its medieval predecessor, “had a ritualistic significance rooted in the experience of slavery and in celebration of freedom from slavery” (Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival* 21). Not surprisingly, the colonial authorities were alert to the possibility of rebellion during the Jonkonnu and carnival celebrations, particularly during periods of slave insurrection. Recently deployed in the anti-globalization Carnival against Capitalism protests in Genoa, Seattle, and Melbourne, street theatre such as *Ida Revolt*, which “parodies, caricatures and lampoons ‘the system’” (Chesters & Welsh 33), has a long history in the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe.

While *Ida Revolt* places women at the centre of the Frome riot, it also reclaims Jonkonnu and carnival, which are traditionally male-dominated masquerades,^[7] for female performers, who disguise themselves as central characters such as Horsehead (in Jonkonnu) and Bishop (in carnival). One can also see the ways in which *Ida Revolt* reverses the traditional gendered order of Jonkonnu through its use of the Queen of the Set Girls, Queen Luna. The Actor Boys and Set Girls began to appear in Jonkonnu troupes during the nineteenth century: the Actor Boys performed excerpts from theatrical productions, such as Shakespearean plays, but revised them to mock rather than revere the ‘great tradition’ of English theatricals, while the Set Girls were groups of women dressed in military colours who followed the Jonkonnu troupes through the streets (Hill, *Jamaican Stage* 239).^[8] In the 1830s the Set Girls emulated West African royal entourages, incorporating the character of Queen Luna into the masquerade (Hill, *Jamaican Stage* 241). Following emancipation in 1832, the Jonkonnu troupes, Actor Boys, and Set Girls were

seen more as a nuisance than as an entertainment by the colonial authorities; as a result, their performances were marginalized (Hill, *Jamaican Stage* 247). When Jonkonnu was performed, it once again became the exclusive domain of male performers; however, by reinstalling the character of Luna (referred to by Ford-Smith as “Mother Moon – the fertility effigy” [“An Experiment” 153]) to tell the story of the Frome estate riot, Sistren deliberately feminized Jonkonnu.

Ida Revolt begins with the image of a boat (created by the bodies of the performers who use sticks to demarcate its shape) containing Jonkonnu characters – such as Warrick, Belly Woman, Set Girls, Wild Indian, Queen, and Madda Moon – who carry banners that signify the Caribbean islands they represent. The Jonkonnu characters that make up Madda Moon’s troupe reflect the racial and cultural diversity within the Jonkonnu tradition and Jamaican society as a whole: Belly Woman and Madda Moon signify fertility, Warrick is a Warrior (responsible for rescuing the Queen of the Jonkonnu), and Wild Indian represents the presence of the East Indian community in Jamaica (Ford-Smith, “An Experiment in Popular Theatre”; Hill, *The Jamaican Stage*; Wynter). While the nautical path of the boat is not made explicit, it can be read as representative of more than the transportation of human cargo from Africa to the New World plantations via the Middle Passage. The masked characters also signify the transplantation and dissemination of African cultural traditions, and their creolized permutations throughout the Caribbean,^[9] and the collective memory of those enslaved, which constituted the means by which distinct ‘indigenized’ Caribbean identities were forged. In performances of *Ida Revolt* each island is defined by a dance and a rhythm to illustrate the similarities and differences between these creolized cultural forms. Actor Boy, who opens the play with a song, further explicates the blending of European, African, and Caribbean identities in Jamaica by referencing his incarnations as Pierrot Grenade in the carnival tradition and Anancy in Caribbean folktales.^[10] Although there are differences between Caribbean islands, Actor Boy points to the significance of the drum as a common form of communication between enslaved people:

Long time I hear this drum
An it beating out one different riddim
It tell me come so I go
Trying to know where I’m from
But Businessman ruling
Preacherman fooling
Police and Soldier pursing me
In de Caribbean sea
I hear a mystery
It say we come from different places

One history is written in our faces. (Sistren Theatre Collective 1)

While the Actor Boy's mask is both sacred and profane, his inability to interpret the drum's message points to the secularization of the mask due to geographical, cultural, and spiritual disconnection from Africa. Actor Boy's confusion reinforces Sylvia Wynter's point that the high tradition of African religion "carried on by priests in Africa who had to undergo years of initiation and reflection, could not survive under conditions of disruption and forced labour" (45). Actor Boy's speech, when placed in the context of *Ida Revolt*, a play in which different versions of events 'battle' each other for legitimacy, makes clear the way in which competing religious, economic, and legal discourses muddle notions of identity and connections to place within Jamaican society and the wider Caribbean. Further, it points to the commercialization of the masquerades, which, due to the seduction of the tourist dollar, no longer carry the political resonances they once did.

The existence of competing discourses around the Frome riot is theatricalized through the staging of a mock battle: Within the context of a stylized cricket game, competing Jonkonnu and carnival troupes fight over the 'correct' representation of events. One of the troupes/teams, led by Madda Moon, includes the Jonkonnu characters mentioned above; the other team, led by Ole Pirate, includes traditional carnival characters such as the Devil, the Policeman, the Bishop, and Dame Lorraine,^[11] which are all caricatures of the planter class and its cultural values. One troupe challenges the other with aggressive dancing and the singing of Revival songs, religious songs from the syncretic religion Revivalism, which is based on African spirituality and Christianity. Madda Moon's troupe contends that Ida started the Frome riot by throwing a stone at the authorities; Ole Pirate's troupe paints a picture of the 'virtuous' Jamaican woman whose reputation has been smeared by rumours of her involvement in the altercation. Used as a form of non-violent resistance to the imposition of colonial values, cricket (in its creolized form) has been central to the anti-colonial movement and, by extension, constructions of Caribbean nationalism (albeit nationalism based on masculinist black nationalist ideologies). In Jamaica, black nationalist ideologies were underpinned by the teaching of activists such as Marcus Garvey who advocated black pride and reconnection with Africa, albeit without mentioning the double jeopardy of race and gender oppression. Garvey's teachings, which interrupted colonial discourses that denigrated the African cultural heritage of the majority of Jamaicans, changed Jamaican political consciousness in the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, the push for more African-Caribbean players on the West Indies cricket team reached its zenith during the 1930s, and, as Hilary Beckles points out, there was a clear relationship between the workers' rebellion of 1938 and the fight to 'Africanize' West Indies cricket (74).

In *Ida Revolt* the cricket game's status as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle against neo-

colonial powers is reflected in the names of the competing teams: “International Pirates against the all Caribbean side” (6). Actor Boy, doubling as a cricket commentator, calls the game while the other actors mime the action. From the outset, Ole Pirate’s team takes control of the game. The policeman, appointed as the Umpire (much to Madda Moon’s dismay), rigs the toss of the coin in Ole Pirate’s favour. The International Pirates cheat as often as possible: Devil refuses to leave the wicket after a call of Leg Before Wicket (LBW), bribes are offered, the wickets are shifted, and Ole Pirate’s team refuses to acknowledge defeat after being bowled out for a six by Madda Moon. Bad Bwoy argues for a new rule to be introduced that reduces the number of balls bowled to one per over. Although the aim of the play is to comment on the way in which rules, laws, and histories are re/written to suit economic superpowers, the demonstrated skill of the All Caribbean Side can be read intertextually as a reference to the international dominance of the West Indies team in the 1980s under Pan-Africanist Viv Richards’s leadership. Richards is renowned for publicly protesting against apartheid in South Africa and, by extension, instilling pride in the African heritage of the West Indies team.

Instead of merely incorporating elements from existing Jonkonnu and carnival traditions into the performance, Sistren deliberately skewed them by incorporating strong female characters like Madda Moon in the performance to represent Jamaican working-class women’s culture. It is for this reason that Sistren’s use of carnival forms for “feminist purposes [...] represents something of an incursion into a style of performance that is often the terrain of male-oriented theatre” (Gilbert & Tompkins 89). Equally, the group’s feminization of cricket represents an incursion into a sport that has historically been an exclusively male domain. That there are intersections between carnival and cricket is not surprising: both are, after all, characterized by similar cultures of male competitiveness and camaraderie. By staging a cricket game played by Jonkonnu and carnival characters, Sistren claims both spaces for female players/performers and, in so doing, foregrounds the skills of female cricketers and the subversiveness of women’s participation in the masquerades:

The opening bowler is a Champion fast bowler and the opening batsman [*sic*], Bishop takes his place at the wicket and champion runs in to bowl from the boundary and he bowls and Bishop cuts it and ... he out. Caught at backward square by Warrick of Barbados in a spectacular forward movement [...] It’s the end of an over ladies and gentlemen and Madda Moon takes the ball to bowl this over and she runs up. It’s a short ball. The batsman goes forward to meet it. It goes through the Wicketkeeper. The batsman scampers back to the crease. Will he get there and he doesn’t. The Captain of the Pirates appears to have been stumped by Trinidad. (Sistren Theatre Collective 8)

Madda Moon’s participation in the battle/match as both a female Jonkonnu character and as

a team captain and champion fast bowler, then, contests the foundation on which Caribbean male identity has been built: fighting and sporting prowess. Madda Moon is as aggressive as her male counterparts, fighting for justice on this allegorized cricket pitch, beating the masculine neo-colonizers at their own game, and thus writing herself into the theatre of history as a significant player in the anti(neo)colonial struggle.

The original purpose of Jonkonnu and carnival is reinvigorated in *Ida* through the play's subversive use of satire. Ole Pirate's version of Ida Homes's story, one of the two competing histories of the Frome riot, is framed as a government-organized awards ceremony to unveil a statue commemorating Ida's life. In this section of the play, clear parallels are drawn between Ole Pirate and his troupe and Edward Seaga and the Jamaica Labour Party. At the sound of a fanfare, a procession of dignitaries files on to the stage and is introduced by Actor Boy, who has assumed the role of Master of Ceremonies. In his speech, Ole Pirate describes Ida Homes in the following way:

Brothers and Sisters. Today we are gathered here to unveil a statue commemorating the life of a great woman! A great Caribbean woman. Miss Ida Homes [...] Miss Homes was a citizen who sacrificed herself tirelessly for her home and her country. She was an ordinary hardworking woman who helped the women of this country to raise themselves up out of the cane field to demand to be treated as ladies. (Sistren Theatre Collective 10)

Ole Pirate's representation of Ida's life meets the needs of the nationalist agenda that, as Jacqui Alexander suggests, is premised on a model of citizenship that sexualizes and ranks women "into a class of good, loyal, reproducing, heterosexual citizens" (46). Parodying the Jamaican government's close political relationship with the United States and, by extension, US cultural imperialism in the region, the play switches from Ole Pirate's speech to a "televised tribute" to Ida Homes, "direct by satellite from Los Angeles" (Sistren Theatre Collective 10). Sistren's scathing attack on the CBI and Seaga's role in its negotiation reinforces the perspective of scholars such as Clive Thomas that the US agenda for the CBI was ideological control of the Caribbean region, via, amongst other means, media saturation. Audience members – who are transformed into television viewers by dint of facing a giant television screen erected using sticks – are confronted with a neo-colonial stereotype of Caribbean people working on a "Hollywood style sugar estate," reminiscent of *Gone With the Wind*, while singing the well-known tune "This is my island in the sun." The work scene collapses into a church scene depicting the 'docile' workforce, including Ida, being brainwashed by a televangelist named Brother Spirry Swagger (a name that bears a remarkable similarity to that of the infamous US televangelist Jimmy Swaggart) who reinforces the patriarchal ideology that "woman was made to be man's

help-mate” (Sistren Theatre Collective 11).

Following the initial church scene, the work scene is repeated with women working alongside their male counterparts on the plantation. Ole Pirate assumes the role of overseer, distributing wages to the male workers who then pay the women. Ida is the first woman to protest against the system when she throws down her pay, inspiring both male and female labourers to chant “We demand more pay / at least a dollar a day” (Sistren Theatre Collective 12). However, religious teaching, which is represented in the play by a singing “shepherd and his folk” who literally surround the demonstrators, is used to stifle the dispute through its emphasis on the benefits of “persecution” for those eventually seeking “a sweeter victory” (Sistren Theatre Collective 12). Despite her ability to perform the same ‘backbreaking’ work as men, the church advises Ida to either marry or work in the Great House as a domestic servant because the fields are no place for a woman. In her introduction to *Women and Change in the Caribbean*, Janet Momsen points out that in the post-emancipation era the Church and the education system tried to abolish any social and economic independence Caribbean women possessed by socializing them into stereotypical gender roles. Brother Swagger, returning to the screen, encourages the audience to “stretch out your hands toward the television screen” while he prays for Jamaicans to be “meek and mild” to bring an end to women’s liberation and to better obey Ole Pirate’s leadership, “For we know he is the chosen one to carryout the plan” (Sistren Theatre Collective 15). While *Ida Revolt* shows very clearly that the Caribbean is dominated by North American cultural production, the fact that Sistren uses traditional Caribbean forms of cultural resistance such as Jonkonnu and carnival to make this point illustrates the refusal of many Jamaican people to be dominated by outside forces.

Contesting the official history that Ida’s statue represents, Sistren deploys the character of Horsehead to disrupt the unveiling ceremony. Hidden under the sheet covering the statue, Horsehead jumps out when the shroud is removed and frightens all those on the platform. Members of Madda Moon’s troupe steal the statue and run through the audience, leaving Belly Woman to repel the authorities with her belly (Sistren 15). The Jonkonnu characters turn the world ‘upside down’ so that the other version of events can be told, and they insist that the audience – the people – defend the statue of Ida. It is appropriate that the Jonkonnu characters are given the responsibility of recuperating Ida’s story, for they represent not only African-Jamaican folk culture but also the communities from which such female leaders emerged. While the play includes Hortense Campbell’s real-life testimony, Sistren deliberately makes Ida’s role in the Frome worker uprising farcical, presumably to “destabilise the epistemological category of history itself by suggesting that exaggeration and fabrication are inevitably functions of historicity” (Gilbert & Tompkins 123).

The inequalities suffered by workers on the Frome estate and, by extension, Jamaicans in the 1980s are thrown into high relief through Sistren's metaphorical use of a wedding ceremony. Busha, the plantation owner, appears – clinging desperately to the top of a precariously positioned ladder, which represents Jamaica's stratified colour/class hierarchy – to announce his daughter's impending marriage. He controls the plantation's water pump with a string (the one by which he is metaphorically clinging to his position); those workers that help with the wedding preparations are given water, those that refuse are denied it. By gently shaking the ladder to ask for some water, Ida threatens to knock Busha off his perch and thus demolish the entire plantation system, an action that points to the significance of the Frome riot to labour reform in Jamaica. In what can be read as a paternalistic gesture, Busha, who hopes to silence Ida's protests with promises of upward social mobility, offers to employ Ida in the Great House. The lavish wedding feast operates as a metaphor for the disparity between rich and poor, the mismanagement of the economy by those in the upper echelons, the state's dependency on the tourist dollar, and the entrenchment of Eurocentric patriarchal ideologies in Jamaican society. Upset that the wages of plantation workers have been spent on Busha's international guests, Ida waits until the parson asks if anyone objects to the wedding to disrupt the ceremony. When her demands are not met, Ida steals the wedding cake to feed the starving workers, who are inadvertently played by the audience. By throwing stones at the authorities, Ida, with the help of Madda Moon's Jonkonnu troupe, leads the uprising against Busha and his supporters.

Sistren's critique of re/colonization in 1980s Jamaica can be read as an important precursor to the recent movement against late global capitalism, albeit one that contains a strong feminist understanding of the way in which "capitalism utilizes the raced and sexed bodies of women in its search for profit globally" (Mohanty 383). In the Caribbean, late global capitalism manifests itself in the exploitation of workers in the manufacturing industry, the region's dependency on the tourist dollar, the feminization of poverty, the payment of starvation wages, and the incursion of massive debt (on the national level). *Ida Revolt* tapped into the Jamaican public's feelings of anger and disillusionment under the Seaga regime and contributed to the popular protests that had been occurring since January 1985. While measuring the impact that *Ida Revolt* had on theatre audiences is quite difficult,^[12] Ford-Smith suggests that the production enjoyed popular appeal on its tour of Jamaica, attracting 2,500 people who would not ordinarily attend theatrical productions ("An Experiment" 161). By invoking the political underpinnings of Jonkonnu and carnival to re/tell the history of the Frome estate riot, particularly the role women played in instigating the protest, Sistren draws on traditional, creative Caribbean expressions of resistance and re-deploys them against forms of exploitation that continue in the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ The African and English influences on Jonkonnu vary from parish to parish and are noticeable in the types of characters portrayed. Judith Bettelheim claims that the strongest English influence can be detected in Jonkonnu troupes from the western parishes of St. Elizabeth, Westmoreland, and Hanover, which usually have a king, a queen, courtiers, a sweeper, a jockey, and a sailor. The most distinctive African influences can be found in the Jonkonnu troupes from the ‘free’ mountain communities of the St. Ann’s Bay area. They have masks that are based on animal characters, such as Horsehead and Cowhead. The character of Pitchy Patchy, whose costume consists of layers of green cloth or strips of coconut leaves, epitomizes the fusion of African and English performance traditions in Jonkonnu. While some claim that Pitchy Patchy’s costume is based on a traditional African model, Bettelheim argues that his costume is very similar to the Jack-in-the-Green, a character in the English mumming tradition who appears in the Jonkonnu depending upon the troupe’s parish of origin. [back](#)

² For more information about Sistren’s formation, see Honor Ford-Smith, “Sistren: Exploring Women’s Problems through Drama,” *Jamaica Journal* 19/1(1986): 2-12; Akua Rugg, “Sistren is Something Else,” *The Race Today Review* (1984): 30-31, 33. [back](#)

³ The Jamaican women’s movement had its beginnings in the black consciousness movement of the early twentieth century. The work of early Jamaican feminists Amy Ashwood Garvey and Una Marson (who were both members of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA]), the Women’s Liberation Society, and, much later, the People’s National Party Women’s Movement [PNPWM]) provided the models for Sistren’s feminist activism. [back](#)

⁴ Legislated by the US government in July 1983, the CBI was designed to benefit the United States in terms of trade, aid, and investment. Caribbean-made products, with the exception of clothes, textiles, canned goods, shoes, leather products, and petroleum, are duty free as they enter the United States, and private investors in the island’s economy were entitled to tax credits (Thomas 335). [back](#)

⁵ By 1982, Jamaica’s trade deficit had tripled. The IMF responded by devaluing the Jamaican dollar by 43 percent, which in turn caused unemployment to rise by 30 percent and government spending on health to fall by 33 percent. In the same period the Reagan administration spent millions on providing military aid to Jamaica: spending rose from “practically nothing in 1980 to US \$4.2m in 1984 and US \$10m in 1985” (French 2). The invasion of Grenada strengthened Jamaica-US relations to the point where the US viewed Jamaica as an important ally and military base in the Caribbean (Thomas 337). Ironically, the Jamaican military was used more to control rioting over the effects of IMF austerity measures than it was used in combat against ‘communist’ enemies (French 3). [back](#)

⁶ Marcus Garvey was a leader of the black consciousness movement in the early part of the twentieth century. Beginning his campaign in New York, Garvey returned to his Jamaican homeland, where he continued to preach about black pride. Later in life, he emigrated to England. [back](#)

⁷ Errol Hill, tracing the emergence of Jonkonnu in *The Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900*, suggests that the

masquerade initially included animal characters from the Egungun religious tradition, such as Cowhead and Horsehead, but changed through the process of creolization to reflect the events and cultural practices of the New World, rather than the old. Hill cites as an example the inclusion of military symbolism, in the form of costumes and character-types, which he claims mirrored and satirized the British colonizer's response to Maroon and slave rebellions during the nineteenth century. "The new appurtenances were all symbols of power [...] Perhaps by investing themselves with these costumes and properties the slaves hoped to transfer some of that power to themselves" (236). [back](#)

⁸ Although there are no official records of the Set Girls prior to the nineteenth century, Sylvia Wynter suggests that they had an equivalent in the drunken women who escorted the chief of the Egungun masquerade, Egungun-Oya (38). Monk Lewis observes that the Jonkonnu characters were 'subsidiary' to the Set Girls in the Christmas revels of 1818 and 1826 (qtd. in Wynter 42). [back](#)

⁹ Errol Hill notes that the Jonkonnu masquerade was "observed in other Caribbean lands such as the Bahamas, Saint Kitts, Nevis, and British Honduras. A 'John Kuner' masquerade was also reported along the eastern seaboard of North Carolina and suggests a strong African tradition that was carried by slaves to the territories where they were finally deposited" (230). [back](#)

¹⁰ Pierrot Grenade is one of the carnival characters noted for his linguistic skills. He is "a 'low-born' character, a jester who spoke the Patois of the underprivileged and depended solely on his wits to survive" (Gilbert & Tompkins 81) Spider Anancy, the trickster folk hero from the African oral tradition, causes good and bad events to occur. Anancy's cunning is often regarded as an important form of resistance to oppression, particularly during slavery. [back](#)

¹¹ The devil, the bishop, and the transvestite are among the oldest characters in the carnival tradition, reflecting its religious roots. Dame Lorraine is a particularly good example of the way carnival was used to mock the planter class – she is a parody of the 'fashionable lady' (Hill, *Trinidad Carnival* 21). [back](#)

¹² There are only two published essays on *Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee*, both written by Honor Ford-Smith. The script, like almost all of Sistren's plays, remains unpublished. [back](#)

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