Proposal

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The book

Drums Rising: Symbol and Myth in African American Culture

The assumption that “drums and horns” were used for communication in slave revolts is undone in this study by showing the functional use of the drum for celebrations, weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies and nonviolent communication. As the use of those ancient instruments recede into history with the acculturation of African Americans, surrogate instrumental practices continue. The idea that the African drum was banned in early America is challenged in this documentary presentation of over one hundred visual and textual accounts of drum performance from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. The image of the drum was effectively appropriated by Europeans and Americans who wrote about African American culture, particularly in the nineteenth century, then re-appropriated by African American poets and painters in the early twentieth century who recreated a positive nationalist view of their African past.

This project is the first scholarly attempt to give meaning to the idea that the African drum was banned in the Americas during the slave era. Most importantly, Drums Rising sets the idea of a ban universally. Throughout history cultural objects have been banned, by one group against another, that have included books, religious artefacts and ways of dress. This study unlocks a metaphor that is at the root of racial bias, that is, the idea of the primitive.
Social Communication
Time and Story
Thoughts and Things: Censors, Bans and Prohibitions
The Result
The Drum as Media: Rhythm and Meta Narratives
The Body
The Image of Sound

Introduction
A Preview
Firsts
Insights and Approaches

Chapter One
Observers of Culture
Founding Fathers and Literary Giants
Planters
Doctors
Travelers — French Monks and Slave Dealers
American Writers

Chapter Two
Performance Practices
The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century
The Nineteenth Century

Chapter Three
The Drum’s Prohibition Through Time
Drums in Revolt
Fear of Revolt
Language and Intent
A Culture in Retreat
An Opposing Paradigm
Acculturation
Context
Clandestine Activities
Communication
Background

Chapter Four
Surrogates: Juba, Shouts & Rhythm Instruments
Drumless Drummers
Juba
The Shout
Synopses of chapters

Chapter One is an assessment of those commentators, over time, who have shaped the record of the past on this subject. As the collection of accounts grew in number during my research, I was taken by the almost eccentric array of whites, American and European, women and men, who found African American culture interesting enough to write about, notate the music of, or make drawings from. I have always been fascinated by the relationship between the viewers and the viewed, particularly in the realm of cultural difference. Taking into account the lack of understanding on the part of the white observer witnessing black culture, which they often readily admitted to, I believe it is important to begin with a discussion of this group.

Chapter Two is a presentation of accounts that focus on performance practices — how African Americans sang, danced and played music that involved the drum, and on what occasions. These descriptions present African styled instruments and ways of playing and also suggest the New World influences that account for the mix of European clothing, dances and instruments that evolved alongside African ways.
Chapters Three and Four are the core of this project. Chapter Three details a chronology of accounts, beginning in the colonial era, describing the prohibition of the drum. The issues of slave revolts, communication and the phases of acculturation are considered here. Along with the observations of whites, accounts from the Slave Narrative Collection comment on the place of the drum in slave society. The Narratives show a variety of activities with which the drum is rarely associated. Chapter Four presents the concept of surrogates, what came to replace the drum where it was prohibited, and how song, dance and the performance of other musical instruments compensated for the missing drum. This chapter also considers the shout, the religious ring dance, and its connection to rhythmic practices.

Chapter Five outlines the use of the image of the drum in fictional literature over time. After having shown the African drum’s usurpation by whites as an image, this chapter narrates the renewed interest in the drum as symbol among African Americans of the Harlem Renaissance. I suggest that as Renaissance artists were to some extent just as unfamiliar with the reality of the past as their fellow white Americans, they nonetheless used the drum as a cultural symbol, this time in a positive sense.

The basis for this study has been a group of anthologies in African American history. The works of Lynne Emery, Dena Epstein, The Georgia Writers’ Project, George Rawick, Eileen Southern and John Szwe, originally published in the 1970s (except for The Georgia Writers’ Project’s 1940 piece and one of Eileen Southern’s 1990 works), served as the sources for the hundreds of citations that I have reviewed. These authors have had their own agendas of describing dance, song, the conditions of the slave and African American music. They have all mentioned the drum as a part of African American culture. None have focused solely on the drum and their studies have not considered the opinions of white observers as such. The present work represents an example of the transition in historical views from a consensus stereotype (the drum as exotica) to a revisionist definition (the drum as cultural component) to a social history model — the drum’s relation to diverse groups at varying times for specific reasons. The scope of this study includes accounts from North America, the Caribbean and Africa. This topic can only be understood within the context of the Americas as a whole.

**Firsts**

There are a number of unique insights that surface from the analysis in the following pages. In Chapter Two it becomes clear that the “sheer variety of descriptions” “suggests an inconsistency in the idea that the drum was totally banned in North America” and that “African-like practices continued.” Among the performance settings described by whites in this chapter are drumming on slave ships, at weekend celebrations, during Christmas, New Years’, and at weddings and funerals. Benjamin Latrobe witnessed a dance scene in New Orleans in the early nineteenth century at which he estimates there were 600 participants.

One historical match that I discovered while considering Latrobe’s words was that one description of women dancing strikingly resembles a famous folk art painting of a plantation scene attributed to the 1700s. In the painting as
well as the description the women hold white handkerchiefs, which has been compared to known African dance practices. The second chapter also credits the year 1580 with the earliest reference to African American drumming.

Chapter Three presents the surprising testimony of one former slave whose interview is in the Slave Narrative Collection. She describes how the names or circumstances of misbehaved young women in her southern community were “put on the banjo.” She also compares this practice to what she had heard was formerly the practice among Africans in Africa. She is describing the onomatopoeic aspects of African American instrumental performance, imitating the voice, and revealing that instruments talked to her and others from her home. Her story provides an example of a surrogate use of New World instruments for Old World purposes.

In Chapter Five a description from New York from the 1800s portrays drum playing among the black population as a normal occurrence. In an excerpt later in this chapter, from a fictional work by white writer George Washington Cable, the story of the African renegade Bras-Coupe is presented. His dance prowess and almost superhuman “saturnalian antics” make for an unreal vision of enslaved blacks. Works such as Cable’s make the white fear of all that is black larger than life. In this vein, contemporary works of criticism such as Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992) describe the use of the black image as a catalyst among some twentieth century white writers. For writers such as Ernest Hemingway, blacks and other ethnic minorities represent the “other”.

Three of the illustrations here have not been published or printed in another source, to my knowledge, since their original presentation. Plates 9, “The Juba Dance,” 20, “Wandering Minstrels on Harlem Lane,” and 21 “A Night Scene in Lynchburg, Virginia,” are all nineteenth century periodical illustrations collected from research on an earlier project that I was associated with.

**Compelling reasons for the Press to publish**

1. Relevance
   This project is the first scholarly attempt to give meaning to the idea that the African drum was banned in the Americas during the slave era. Most importantly, Drums Rising sets the idea of a ban universally. Throughout human history cultural objects have been banned, by one group against another, that include books, religious artefacts and ways of dress. This study unlocks a metaphor that is at the root of racial bias, the idea of the primitive.

2. A fresh approach
   I have promoted the construct of multiple-points-of-view for this social-historical presentation. This study, for example, seeks to consider the “social place” of the drum for both blacks and whites of the time.

3. Diverse sources
This book uses the (a) writings of Europeans and colonial era Americans, (b) the accounts of African American free persons and slaves, (c) material culture in the form of period instruments, and (d) illustrations, paintings and sculpture.

4. Controversy

It has been a generalisation that the African drum was used to send messages for war. To begin, African drums speak, they do not send code, and, like any language there is complexity to their message that has never been widely considered. I contend that there was no war drum, but, there was in fact much more than that in the form of ceremonial communications for a variety of occasions. The legal ban on the drum was never effective as surrogate practices replaced over time the actual African artefact. In The river flows on: Black resistance, culture, and identity formation in early America, Walter C. Rucker. 2006, the author presents a section on African-based “martial dance” (p. 107) and the link to the use by Africans of the European military drum during battle (p. 105). This is a relatively obscure reference to the use of the drum by Africans for war outside of the core references to slave revolts such as the 1739 Stono Rebellion in the Americas. The author’s handling of the material though does imply the primacy of violence for the drum that my work counters.

5. A comprehensive account

This book is based on the descriptions of 140 individuals and 563 records of African drum accounts in the Americas.

Markets and comparative scholarship

Drums Rising is a scholarly presentation for the college market in the fields Social History, American Studies, Travel Literature, the African Diaspora, African American Literature, African American Music and Caribbean Studies. With twenty-five illustrations, some in color, the book will also have an appeal in the fields of Art History and Material Culture.


University Press. 2003 is a title that interprets the imaging of Africans in the new world. There is a chapter by Kay Dian Kriz devoted to Sir Hans Sloane who I also mention in my study. Drums Rising is focused on one theme throughout where An economy of colour is a varied collection of contributions.

Masters of the Drum: Black Lit/oratures Across the Continuum. Robert Elliot Fox. Greenwood Press. 1995 takes up the metaphor of the drum as communicator to create an analysis of African diaspora literature that is compelling and interesting. This book is not social history and does not concern music.

Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War. Dena J. Epstein. University of Illinois Press. 2003 and The Music of Black Americans: A History. Eileen Southern. W. W. Norton & Company. 1997 are both what I have termed anthologies, that is, they are large collections, compendiums of research on African American music. My study draws from these earlier works. I personally worked with scholar Eileen Southern at Harvard University for two years. These revisionist works published originally circa the 1970s made possible the repositories of raw material for later social historical interpretation such as mine.

General manuscript information

Drums Rising is complete. I have just added a preface and an epilogue that reflect current discussions in Cultural Studies literature.

The current word count is 66,023 for the entire manuscript including notes and bibliography.

There are 32 illustrations interspersed throughout the text. They include nineteenth century drawings of African Americans that were included in books, magazines or newspaper articles. These portrayals show a popularized image of the slave and former slave, often racist, and are curiously useful today in showing the coexistence of Old World and New World customs and dress. As well, a group of photographs of African and early American instruments make clear the adaptations made in African American culture. Three works from Harlem Renaissance artists help bring the discussion of the African American past into the twentieth century and provide a new view of the symbols of that experience.

This is my first book project. I have one previous article “Surrogates: Juba and Rhythmic Practices.” in the conference proceedings FORECAAST (Forum for European Contributions to African American Studies) Volume 9. Lit Verlag, Hamburg. 2003.