Modern American History (2024), **7**, 301–306
doi:10.1017/mah.2024.30

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

TAKE THREE: THE BANJO

Jail the Zombie: Black Banjoists, Biopolitics, and Archives

Jake Blount

Department of Music, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA
Email: jake_blount@brown.edu

On February 12, 2024, renowned Black banjoist Rhiannon Giddens declared the onset of a "Black Banjo Renaissance." Highlighting performers and scholars who have dedicated themselves to the revitalization of Black string band music since the Black Banjo Gathering in 2005, Giddens also acknowledged the historical precariousness of the tradition and the musical elders who have kept it alive.[1] Those elders, an attentive reader may note, are relatively few in number—especially when compared to the robust oral tradition that white string band musicians enjoy. Fewer still were able to transmit their craft to other Black people during their lifetime. This scarcity of living elders and intact musical lineages, which I will explain in the coming pages, has made today's Black string band musicians (myself included) heavily reliant on twentieth-century archival sound recordings of our forebears. This relationship has engendered strong and conflicted feelings in me that are difficult to reconcile. I am intensely grateful to be able to commune with musical predecessors through the medium of the archive. My warm feelings are counterbalanced, however, by persistent concerns about the accretion and management of these recordings and the uses to which non-Black musicians and scholars have put them. It is with some trepidation that I, a banjoist and ethnomusicologist-in-training, engage these topics in a history publication. Nevertheless, I hope these reflections may prove useful and provocative to all of my colleagues who engage archives of sound.

To establish the significance of Black banjo players and the comparatively few recordings of us that exist, we must briefly examine the early history of the instrument. Descended from African spike lutes like the akonting, the banjo—with a body made of a gourd or calabash, a head made out of animal hide, and gut strings—was invented by Africans and/or African Americans enslaved on sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean.[2] Sir Hans Sloane's 1707 publication *A Voyage to the Islands* provides both the first written mention and first illustration (Figure 1) of an instrument that scholars have conclusively identified as an early banjo (Sloane calls it a "Strum Strump"; the instrument enjoyed a diverse nomenclature in its early days).[3] The book also includes a few tunes transcribed by a free African-descended

[1] Rhiannon Giddens, "Black Banjo Renaissance Post #1," *Facebook*, Feb. 12, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/RhiannonGiddensMusic/posts/pfbid02nmDzwcgWeuCEg97YsgRaehUbmfdQyBqna8TjKHkhViUfMqmjGnz4NcgzXuaRFNYTl (accessed Feb. 12, 2024).

[2] Shlomo Pestcoe and Greg C. Adams, "Banjo Roots Research: Changing Perspectives on the Banjo's African American Origins and West African Heritage" in *Banjo Roots & Branches*, ed. Robert B. Winans (Urbana, IL, 2018), 4; Kristina Gaddy, *Well of Souls: Uncovering the Banjo's Hidden History* (New York, 2022), 13–4.

[3] Gaddy, *Well of Souls*, 8–20; Pestcoe and Adams, "Banjo Roots Research"; Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica* (London, 1707), l, III; Dena J. Epstein, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," *Ethnomusicology* 19, no. 3 (1975): 14–5.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press

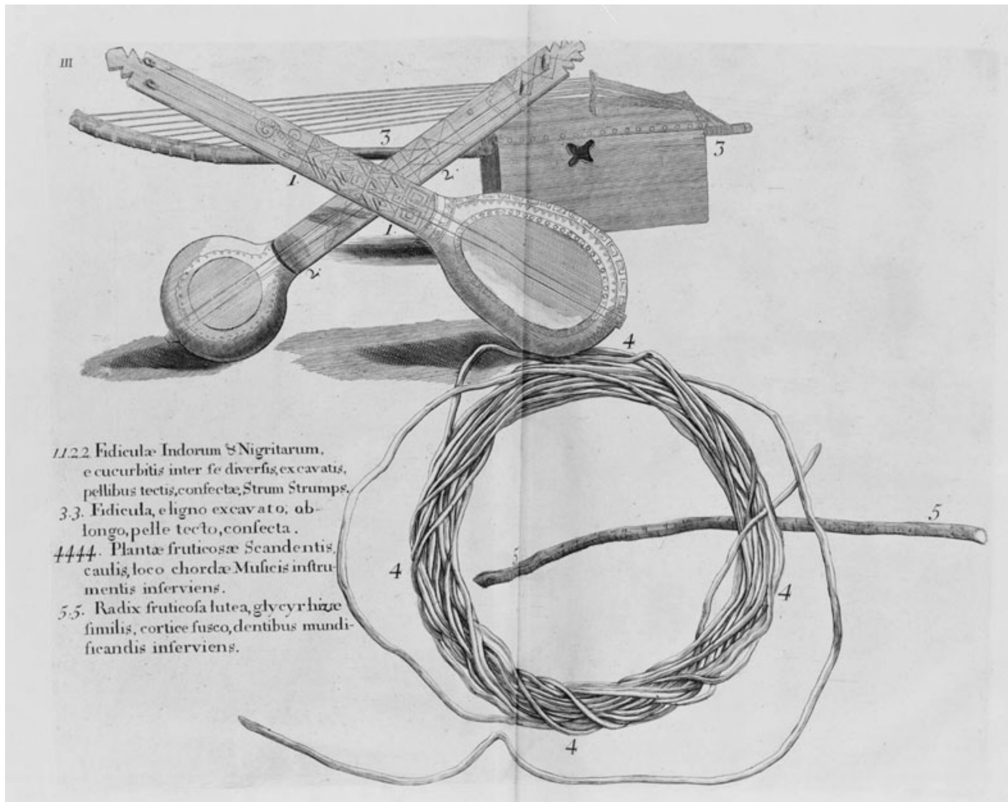

Figure 1. An engraving of two early banjos and another instrument. Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica* (London, 1707): III. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

musician named Mr. Baptiste in 1687.[4] Sloane's tale is among the earliest written accounts of music made by Africans or African-descended people in the Americas.[5]

Before I say more about the music made on plantations, it would be best to spend a brief moment reflecting on the plantations themselves. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon makes a compelling argument that plantations were a "nursery for biopolitics," the theory of power first introduced by Michel Foucault.[6] Foucault posited that modern states derive their power (at least in part) from the ability to "make live" or "let die"—to propagate certain kinds of life while designating others as disposable, or even in need of eradication.[7] Because the purpose of the plantation was to extract capital from the enslaved rather than to exterminate them outright, Dillon argues that the biopolitical plantation system worked to reduce the enslaved not to disposable "bare life," as philosopher Giorgio Agamben would have it, but to "bare labor."[8] The plantation

[4]Gaddy, *Well of Souls*, 8–20; Mary Caton Lingold, "In Search of Mr Baptiste: On Early Caribbean Music, Race, and a Colonial Composer," *Early Music* 49, no. 1 (2021): 49–66; Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands*, l–li.

[5]Mary Caton Lingold, *African Musicians in the Atlantic World: Legacies of Sound and Slavery* (Charlottesville, VA, 2023), 76.

[6]Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Zombie Biopolitics," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2019): 625–52; Michel Foucault, "17 March 1976," in *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and François Ewald (New York, 1997), 239–63.

[7]Foucault, "17 March 1976," 241.

[8]Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA, 1998), 4; Dillon, "Zombie Biopolitics," 626.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press

system pursued this end through "the technology of social death," which sought to forcibly "disentangle" the enslaved from their heritage, their history, the land, and each other.[9]

As Dillon notes, however, that disentanglement became common ground upon which the captives could build new shared cultures and identities.[10] Because the technology of social death was essentially self-defeating in this way, Dillon argues that enslaved people were able to create lifeworlds nested within the deathworlds of the plantations.[11] Jean Casimir similarly points toward a "counter-plantation system" that enabled the creation of these lifeworlds. The counter-plantation system merged the existing traditions of the enslaved with knowledge of their new surroundings. It manifested in new ways of socializing that enabled the captives to bond, exchange information, and eventually solidify a new collective identity.[12] The strategies that resulted from it are what Isiah Lavender III calls "freedom technologies": "practical knowledge that helps black people solve problems with their environment and in their society, abetting their escape from physical and psychological bondage and thereby allowing them control of their own actions."[13] The freedom technologies of the counter-plantation system led to the formation of new social lifeworlds—not in defiance of the technology of social death, but as a byproduct of its function. Dillon views the actors embedded within plantation lifeworlds as zombies: new life constituted and shaped by a prior encounter with death.[14]

The banjo was an important piece of the captives' new shared social life, developed by hybridizing pre-existing instruments and modifying them to suit the new environment.[15] We must, therefore, look upon the banjo as a product and component of the counter-plantation system; as a freedom technology; as both zombie and instrument of resurrection, gut strings taut like tendons on a gaping jaw, vibrating with the need to create more of its kind.

By 1736, the banjo had arrived in the United States.[16] It underwent significant morphological changes over the centuries that followed: the gourd or calabash resonating chamber became a wooden hoop; a fifth, low string was added; frets appeared on the neck of the instrument; the tacked-on animal skin head was replaced by a synthetic version that could be tightened or loosened with metal brackets; gut strings were traded for steel; resonators appeared on the backs of the instruments. Eventually, hybrid instruments appeared that combined the banjo with a wide array of other instruments, facilitating the formation of banjo orchestras near the turn of the twentieth century.[17]

The demographics of banjo players as a group shifted to a similar degree.[18] Once described as the "violon des Nègres"—the negro's violin—the banjo is now generally associated with rural, southern white people.[19] Scholars have proposed many possible causes for this shift: urbanization, the instrument's role in derogatory stereotypes propagated by blackface minstrel shows, and even marketing schemes by early white banjo manufacturers.[20] Black people have continued to play the banjo despite shifting public perceptions of the instrument, employing it

[9]Dillon, "Zombie Biopolitics," 635.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., 636.

[12]Jean Casimir, "On the Origins of the Counter-Plantation System," in *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Laurent Dubois et al. (Durham, NC, 2020), 61–66.

[13]Isiah Lavender III, *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement.* (Columbus, OH, 2019), 16.

[14]Dillon, "Zombie Biopolitics," 636.

[15]Gaddy, *Well of Souls*, 30–1; Lingold, *African Musicians in the Atlantic World*, 67–93.

[16]Gaddy, *Well of Souls*, 33–40; Shlomo Pestcoe and Greg C. Adams, "Zenger's 'Banger': Contextualizing the Banjo in Early New York City, 1736," in *Banjo Roots and Branches*, ed. Robert B. Winans (Urbana, IL, 2018), 153–71.

[17]Karen Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Urbana, IL, 1991).

[18]Ibid.; Gaddy, *Well of Souls*; Robert B. Winans, ed., *Banjo Roots and Branches* (Urbana, IL, 2018).

[19]Epstein, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," 360.

[20]Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press

skillfully in diverse genres that include old-time string band music, jug band music, ragtime, blues, and mento.[21]

The Black old-time banjo tradition came perilously close to extinction at the turn of the twenty-first century. It was saved, I would argue, by the timely formation of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, whose success instigated a wider resurgence of Black banjo music and scholarship: the core of the Black Banjo Renaissance.[22] Nonetheless, we face a paucity of true elders. Due to the relative discontinuity of our oral tradition, the reconstructive efforts of present-day Black banjoists must rely heavily on sound recordings from the early-to-mid twentieth century—and upon the diverse archives in which they now reside.

The most influential of these recordings (and perhaps numerical majority of them) were collected under the auspices of state-run initiatives and are housed in the archives of state-funded institutions.[23] The scholar Achille Mbembe conceives of the state archive as a site where governments entomb the "remains" of certain dead individuals—traces left behind upon their death. He argues that these remains are confined to the archive because "left to themselves, they might eventually acquire a life of their own," surging back into unbidden motion like Dillon's zombies. "Assigning them to this place," Mbembe posits, "makes it possible to establish an unquestionable authority over them and to tame the violence and cruelty of which the 'remains' are capable, especially when abandoned to their own devices."[24] Because the state deems it necessary to confine certain remains while permitting the dispersal or destruction of others, inclusion in the archive represents a kind of "status."[25] Cast in this light, the archive takes on biopolitical and carceral dimensions. Authorities decide which remains to "let die" and which to "make live" in perpetual archival confinement.[26]

It may strike nonmusical readers (and indeed some musicians) as extreme to consider sound recordings as a form of physical remains. What is human-made music but the transformation into sound of energy made available by our metabolic processes? Scholars of Black music have for decades posited an even closer relationship between the physical body and sound production in our traditions, pointing toward the prominent role that dance and physical gesture play in our performance styles.[27] Rigorous study of archival recordings concretizes the importance of the body in music-making; who can listen to Lucius Smith play "Goodbye Honey, You Call That Gone" without hearing his fingers whack rhythmically against the head of the banjo as he plays?[28] Who can take in a recording of Dink Roberts without attending to the way his fingertips deaden and thwart certain notes?[29] Who can try learning a tune from Libba Cotten without realizing she was a southpaw who played the banjo upside down?[30] These musicians' bodies are

[21]Winans, *Banjo Roots and Branches*; Cecelia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville, TN, 1995); Olive Lewin, "Mento," in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford, UK, 2001).

[22]Giddens, "Black Banjo Renaissance Post #1."

[23]Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), 133–82.

[24]Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2002), 22.

[25]Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 20.

[26]Foucault, "17 March 1976," 241.

[27]Examples include Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford, 1996); Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York, 2006); Susan McClary and Robert Walser, "Theorizing the Body in African-American Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 75–84; Paul Gilroy, "Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a 'Changing' Same," *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (1991): 111–36.

[28]Lucius Smith and Alan Lomax, "Goodbye Honey, You Call That Gone," in *I'll Meet You on That Other Shore: Alan Lomax's "Southern Journey," 1959–1960* (Portland, OR: Mississippi Records, 2010).

[29]Dink Roberts, "The Coo Coo (Coo Coo Bird)," in *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*, ed. Scott Odell and Cecelia Conway (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1998).

[30]Elizabeth Cotten, "Here Old Rattler Here / Sent for My Fiddle Sent for My Bow / George Buck," in *Folksongs and Instrumentals with Guitar* (New York: Folkways Records, 1958).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press

constitutive elements of their unique performance styles. Any recording made of their music is therefore also a remnant of their physical shape.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Black banjoists (and musicians of many stripes) were "collected" by almost exclusively white folklorists, musicians, and music enthusiasts.[31] Predominantly white institutions and white individuals brought these remains under their control and archived them.[32] They assigned call numbers, accession numbers, and metadata to the remains, that they might be better organized. They instituted handling practices to maintain the physical integrity of the remains and used technology to control and monitor the accessibility and circulation of the remains. Arriving at the archive already in pieces, the remains have been repeatedly dismembered: a two-and-a-half-minute song here, a forty-second story there. These disembodied parts have been harvested like organs or cells to generate capital—economic, cultural, and social—for non-Black academics who study them, non-Black-owned companies that publish and sell them, and non-Black performers who sample and imitate them.[33] Cut into pieces and confined in fixed media, the remains cannot access the "protean capabilities" upon which the counter-plantation system relies and are therefore cut off from it.[34] The remains are reduced to "bare labor" that re/produces identical performances for the enrichment of others at the push of a button.[35] The aims of the plantation system, which proved unachievable on the plantation itself, are realized.

These archives are what Katherine McKittrick calls "plantation futures": "[conceptualizations] of time-space that … [bring] into sharp focus the ways the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence."[36] In the state archive we see the specter of the penal farm; in the collections of organizations and individuals, the plantation and the private prison. How might we emancipate the captives of this plantation future? The question presents itself readily and demands that we examine the ethics of the uses to which these remains are put. It also demands that we seriously engage the notion of repatriation.

Lest I give the wrong impression: I do not believe that we should dissolve all archives and let their contents be lost. Today's Black artists and researchers can and do reintegrate archived remains into the counter-plantation system, reanimating the dead flesh and restoring its potential for transformation. Music learned from archives has been central to creative work, community-building, and political advocacy in the Black Banjo Renaissance, including the work of artists such as Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemons, Hubby Jenkins, Amythyst Kiah, and Jerron Paxton.[37] Foucault might have called archival and recording technologies, when

[31]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 9–46.

[32]Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 133–82.

[33]Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York, 2010); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, ed. Nicole Woolsey Biggart (Oxford, UK, 2002), 281; David Guetta, "Hey Mama," in *Listen (Deluxe)* (Atlantic, 2014); David Hesmondhalgh, "Digital Sampling and Cultural Inequality," *Social & Legal Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 53–75; Richard Osborne, "'Blackface' Minstrelsy from Melville to Moby," *The Critical Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2006): 14–25; Gin Wigmore, "Willing to Die," in *Blood To Bone* (Island Records, 2015).

[34]Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 22.

[35]Dillon, "Zombie Biopolitics," 626; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC, 2005), 1–17.

[36]Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (2013): 2.

[37]Giddens, "Black Banjo Renaissance Post #1"; Center for Cultural Vibrancy, "Sankofa, Y'all: Affrolachian On-Time Music Gathering," Culturalvibrancy.org, Sept. 15, 2022, https://culturalvibrancy.org/news/black-appalachian-music/ (accessed May 18, 2024) ; Rhiannon Giddens, "Biscuits & Banjos," Rhiannongiddens.com, https://rhiannongiddens.com/biscuitsandbanjos (accessed May 18, 2024); Hilary Saunders, "JOURNAL EXCERPT: Fort Worth Nonprofit and Festival Celebrate Community and Aim to Decolonize Roots Music," *No Depression*, Aug. 29, 2022, https://www.nodepression.com/journal-excerpt-fort-worth-nonprofit-and-festival-celebrate-community-and-aim-to-decolonize-roots-music/ (accessed May 18, 2024); Jake Blount, "Rhiannon Giddens Channels the Words of Enslaved Musicians on 'Build A House,'" *NPR Music*, June 19, 2020,

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press

used to dismember and control Black remains in the service of capital, "disciplinary technologies"; this, however, is not the only use to which the archive might be put.[38] A reverent resurrection of archived remains by Black people and in service to Black communities might render these selfsame contrivances as freedom technologies.

Jake Blount (they/he) is a PhD student in musicology and ethnomusicology at Brown University. Blount is also an award-winning performer of Black folk music, and has played at venues including Carnegie Hall, Newport Folk Festival, and NPR's Tiny Desk. Blount's Twitter handle is @forked_queer.

https://www.npr.org/sections/we-insist-a-timeline-of-protest-music-in-2020/2020/09/02/903232475/rhiannon-giddens-channels-the-words-of-enslaved-musicians-on-build-a-house (accessed June 19, 2020); Tom Casciato, "Jake Blount's New Twist on Black American Folk Music," PBS NewsHour, *PBS*, Jan. 31, 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/jake-blounts-new-twist-on-black-american-folk-music (accessed Jan. 31, 2023); Helen Gregory, "Kaia Kater: Nine Pin - Featured Review," *KLOF Magazine*, Sept. 2, 2016, https://klofmag.com/2016/09/kaia-kater-nine-pin-review/ (accessed May 18, 2024); "New Dangerfield on a Mission to Reignite the Black String Band Tradition," *Songlines*, May 14, 2024, https://www.songlines.co.uk/news/new-dangerfield-on-a-mission-to-reignite-the-black-string-band-tradition (accessed May 14, 2024).

[38]Foucault, "17 March 1976," 242.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.30 Published online by Cambridge University Press