

# Island Time: Speed and the Archipelago from St. Kitts and Nevis

*Jessica Swanston Baker*

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Jessica Swanston Baker's *Island Time: Speed and the Archipelago from St. Kitts and Nevis* unfurls like the lyrics of a calypso, at once intimate and expansive, conjuring a temporal landscape shaped by history, resistance, and identity. The work draws readers into an intricate narrative, weaving personal anecdotes, cultural reflections, and theoretical musings into a compelling meditation on Caribbean temporality and its global resonances. Her thematic excavation reveals not merely the pace of life but the politics and poetics of temporality as a focus of resistance, identity, and belonging.

Baker defines "Island Time" as a complex negotiation of temporal experiences shaped by colonial histories, local cultural rhythms, and global influences. More than a mere counterpoint to Western efficiency, it is a lived philosophy, one that informs daily life, music, and political consciousness in St. Kitts and Nevis. Through detailed ethnographic accounts, Baker demonstrates how islanders engage with time relationally, resisting imposed structures while adapting to contemporary economic and social shifts.

What animates Baker's narrative most vividly is her evocation of "Island Time" as more than vernacular shorthand. Her exploration transcends clichéd depictions of leisure to interrogate the interplay between temporality and geography. In framing "Island Time", Baker delves deeply into its multiplicities—a kaleidoscopic interweaving of cyclical, seasonal, and embodied rhythms. Through figures like Uncle Irving, a musician and cultural educator committed to preserving traditional

Kittitian and Nevisian music, and Byron Messia, a rising dance-soul artist whose work bridges local soundscapes with global trends, she crafts a portrait of life that highlights the mutable relationship between local identity and external colonial legacies. The narrative resonates with an archipelagic sensibility—a circular, relational temporality—that resists linear chronologies imposed by colonial modernity. The author’s meticulous attention to the evolution of musical traditions, from steelpan and calypso to soca and wylers, situates time as both a cultural archive and a vehicle of resistance.

Baker’s treatment of “speed” is particularly compelling, serving both as a literal measure and a metaphorical touchstone. She highlights how the diasporic networks across and beyond the islands choreograph a dialogue of pace, rhythm, and resistance that transcends the reductionist mappings of global capitalist logics. For example, in her discussion of Inception Fete, she details how the interplay between local and global sounds reveals a dynamic engagement with temporality, wherein acceleration and deceleration reflect deeper cultural negotiations (95). These networks—embodied in the movements of people, music, and cultural practices—form intricate patterns of temporal resistance, challenging colonial and postcolonial constructs of efficiency and progress.

Baker’s assertion that “Island Time” fundamentally disrupts Western paradigms of efficiency and progress is both provocative and ambitious. While her framing of this temporal modality as counter-hegemonic offers profound insights, it occasionally risks essentializing Caribbean temporalities. The tension between “Island Time” as a site of resistance and the lived realities of a post-colonial, tourism-dependent economy invites deeper interrogation. Yet, Baker deftly mitigates these risks by anchoring her analysis in vivid ethnographic detail, as exemplified by her portrayal of St. Kitts’ political history and evolving tourism narratives.

The text is particularly poignant in its juxtaposition of global influences and local authenticity. Byron Messia’s rise as a “Dance-Soul artist”, a mixture of Soul and Dancehall (148), underscores the ongoing negotiation of identity within Caribbean music, where the forces of globalization intermingle with deeply rooted cultural expressions. Baker traces how Messia, in interviews and performances, acknowledges both his Kittitian heritage and Jamaican musical lineage, complicating assumptions about national and regional authenticity. Similarly, her discussion of small-island contributions to soca and calypso, along with the rise of wylers and Messia’s “Dance-Soul” philosophy (149), foregrounds the complex interplay between tradition and innovation. Music emerges as a locus of identity, where rhythm and speed embody not just aesthetic choices but also socio-political commentary. While some critiques of wylers lament its perceived departure from sophistication, Baker’s analysis positions the genre as a site of cultural negotiation and resilience, offering an alternative lens through which to appreciate its rapid tempos and communal vibrancy.

Baker’s methodology is a harmonious blend of musicology, ethnography, and theoretical inquiry. Her integration of participant voices—from Uncle Irving’s reflections on fife music to Tishima Browne’s performance critiques—lends a rich intimacy to her analysis. The concept of “archipelagic listening” (121), informed by thinkers like Édouard Glissant and Tina M. Campt, emerges as a vital framework for understanding the relational dynamics of Caribbean soundscapes. By treating music

as both a historical text and a lived experience, Baker elucidates how sonic practices shape and are shaped by the temporal and spatial realities of island life.

Her discussion of “sonorous archipelagos” (144) expands the discourse on sound studies, emphasizing the interconnectedness of small islands within the broader circum-Caribbean context. The iterative nature of listening, as Baker portrays it, becomes a metaphor for cultural resilience—a practice that celebrates diversity while resisting homogenization. While her theoretical engagements are robust, a more explicit reflection on her positionality could have enriched the transparency of her interpretative lens.

Although Baker’s narrative is evocative, certain absences invite further exploration. A sustained engagement with inter-island disparities and their temporal logics would deepen the analysis of “Island Time”. For instance, an exploration of how different islands experience and negotiate time based on economic structures or colonial legacies could provide additional comparative insights. Additionally, comparative frameworks that juxtapose Caribbean temporalities with those of other postcolonial regions, such as Africa or South Asia, could amplify the text’s global significance. The evolving discourse on respectability politics, particularly its impact on Black women’s identities within the Carnival and pageant scenes, offers fertile ground for expanded inquiry.

Baker’s *Island Time: Speed and the Archipelago from St. Kitts and Nevis* carves a resonant niche within Caribbean studies, postcolonial theory, and musicology. By bridging ethnographic detail with theoretical rigor, she redefines “Island Time” as a dynamic construct that encapsulates both resistance and adaptation. Her analysis of small-island contributions to Caribbean music history challenges dominant narratives, emphasizing the significance of “sonic undercurrents” in shaping regional identity. Much like a calypsonian’s lyrics, Baker’s prose lingers with readers, compelling them to pause, reflect, and embrace a temporality that celebrates fluidity and relationality. As the archipelago’s timescapes unfold, they invite us to listen—not just to the music but to the stories, struggles, and aspirations that define Caribbean life. In doing so, *Island Time* enriches academic discourse while celebrating the enduring creativity and resilience of small-island cultures.