

Environmental Justice in Jamaica: Documentation, Dissent, and Protest¹

For ten years, I have been part of a movement to stop bauxite mining in Cockpit Country, Jamaica. As part of this effort, I have produced two documentaries, six short videos, and managed media campaigns including radio, television, print and social media.² In this plenary, I present the demands for environmental justice by communities organized against the expansion of the bauxite industry in Jamaica as examples of dissent and protest and explore the role documentation plays in the organization, participation, and dissemination of such dissent and protest.

Those with the least formal power and status suffer the most from the impacts and outcomes of environmental degradation, i.e. pollution, deforestation, dumping, water diversion, droughts, floods, disease, or population displacement. In any society, there are those who are considered less than others, and sacrifice on their part or their erasure for the 'Greater Good' is often an accepted part of national discourses of unity and progress. For example, during Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s, National Sacrifice Zones were proposed where rehabilitation would not be required: policies included the dumping of toxic waste on native lands and removing native peoples off Indian Reservations so that toxic uranium mining could take place without rehabilitating the land or compensating those affected (Ojibwa 2014). Long before the development of these National Sacrifice Zone strategies, all empires and colonial powers have used their colonies/satellites/zones of control as sites of extraction and dumping grounds for unwanted waste and unwanted people. For example, the Pacific Ocean was a Sacrifice Zone long before Japan began dumping Fukushima nuclear waste into it in 2011. In addition to decades of nuclear, ballistic, and missile testing, fourteen nations dumped nuclear waste into the

1 This paper is a reworking and updating of my original talk in the plenary "Environment and sustainability in the Caribbean" in October 2015.

2 For the video productions I refer to my youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/mediavagabond/videos>.

Pacific Ocean between 1946 and 1993 ([International Atomic Energy Agency 1999](#)).

Following the logic of Sacrifice Zones, Riverton City dump, Jamaica's largest garbage disposal facility (noxious and consistently on fire), is situated on the outskirts of Kingston in the middle of low income communities, many of whom make a living scavenging from the dump. The massive unplanned expansion of urban areas such as Kingston, which went hand in hand with a catastrophic lack of proper waste disposal, began to a large degree by the impoverishment and displacement of rural communities. Similarly, bauxite mining, beginning in Jamaica in the early 1950s, is a principle cause of rural population displacement. It caused the migration of over 300,000 people who relocated to urban areas within Jamaica. Additionally, many more increased Jamaica's massive diaspora, primarily in the United Kingdom but also in North America ([Windsor Research Centre 2014](#)).

In Jamaica's 2016 election, the People's National Party's (PNP) election slogan was "Step up the Progress," and the Jamaica Labour Party's (JLP) slogan was "From Poverty to Prosperity." The JLP won by one seat. With only 47.7% of the population voting, 2016 was the lowest voter turnout since universal adult suffrage in 1944, except for 1983, when the PNP boycotted the JLP's snap election ([The Caribbean Council 2016](#)). This low participation can be viewed not merely as apathy but rather as a form of dissent and protest, a rejection of the electoral and political system. Jamaica is an oligarchy, a society of extreme inequality with a small percentage of the population holding most of the wealth and a large percentage of the population surviving on impossibly low wages and suffering from high levels of unemployment, underemployment, self-employment, and dependency on remittances and patronage. After over 500 years of colonial rule (first Spain, then Britain) that included centuries of genocide, slavery, and other forms of unpaid labour and a political economy completely based on extraction and environmental destruction, ideals of Progress and Prosperity were fundamental to struggles for pre-independence sovereignty and continue as the focus of the post-independence national discourse. Decades of frustration over Jamaica's seeming inability to take off and achieve prosperity fuel an intense development discourse that promotes a united nation "on a mission"; in this context, the proponents of progress seek to achieve First World status by 2030 by means of Jamaica's development plan 'Vision 2030.' ([Planning Institute of Jamaica 2009](#)) Any critique of these development goals, material aspirations, and world view (or criticism of the nation state or persons and institutions representing the nation state), is labeled unpatriotic, elitist, disrespectful, out of order, heathen, backward, racist, and hostile to the interest of the Jamaican people. Therefore, even mainstream advocacy groups and NGOs that represent those reviled and/or excluded from the national discourse (such

as LGBT and feminist organizations) also embrace and quote Vision 2030 in their mission, vision, and public statements (see for example The Jamaica Forum of Lesbians, [All-Sexuals and Gays/J-FLAG](#), and [We-Change](#)).

Where is a place for democratic dissent in such a deterministic and conformist framing of citizenship? Despite such monolithic aspirations for unity, not everyone is integrated into citizenship and the nation state, not everyone has the capacity to participate, not everyone wants to perform middle class respectability, not everyone agrees with the values, presumptions, and trajectories of capitalism or modernity. Thus, these divergent parts of the population show their alienation, disassociation, and dissent in varying ways. The unlettered and functionally illiterate have little access to the formal economy; deeply rural communities continue to live “slow” lives, engaged with the rhythms of nature and farming, immersed in African cultural continuities and idiomatic Jamaican language. Religious minorities, such as Rastafarians, counter white supremacy and the equation of blackness with badness and inferiority, decry the pursuit of wealth and materialism as vanity, and reject the nation state as the core of identity or authority. And urban Jamaicans with limited economic opportunities aspire to ‘live life large,’ performing a “loud” culture that does not aspire to middle-class niceness, rejecting, in particular, the cult of respectable married womanhood and polite femininity (cf. [Cooper, 1995](#)).

1 The Case of Bauxite Mining in Cockpit Country

Since the 1950s, the government of Jamaica has granted bauxite companies prospecting and mining licenses for almost all of Cockpit Country – a large segment of the Western interior of Jamaica. Because of its karst geology and wet limestone forests, this region has high levels of endemic plants and animals. It is the source of seven major rivers (including the country’s two largest) and provides over 40% of Jamaica’s fresh water. The forests are important carbon sinks and help cool Jamaica’s temperature. Besides its ecological value, Cockpit Country is also culturally significant. It is home to the Leeward Maroons, who, along with the Windward Maroons, fought the British and achieved a sovereign status in 1740 (well over two centuries before the rest of Jamaica). It is further home to indigenous knowledges and practices of self-sufficient rural Jamaicans, whose farming is important for the country’s food security, and whose daily lives are not wedded to the prevailing economic activities of servicing tourists, hustling, scamming, and vending imported goods.

Bauxite is a combination of minerals that comprise the ore from which aluminum is made. Approximately 30% of Jamaica’s soil contains mineable levels of bauxite ([Jamaica Bauxite Institute](#)). Bauxite mining is strip mining, i.e. it

includes the removal of all ground cover and top soil. Numerous access and haul roads are built to accommodate very large digging and hauling equipment. The impacts of mining and alumina processing (Jamaica does not do aluminum smelting) include deforestation, soil degradation, noise, air and water pollution, chronic respiratory and other environmental illnesses, loss of habitat for animals, loss of lands for human cultivation, introduction of invasive species, climate change, destruction of the natural and built environments, community disruption and dislocation, and the impoverishment of communities mined or slated to be mined.

In 2006, the government of Jamaica renewed two prospecting permits in Cockpit Country. In response, a coalition called Cockpit Country Stakeholders Group (CCSG) formed to create public awareness and to stop bauxite mining in Cockpit Country. They held formal and informal meetings with communities throughout Cockpit Country, discussing the social, economic, and environmental effects of mining and listening to community concerns. So as to support these efforts, I made a film with Diana McCauley of Jamaica Environment Trust called *Cockpit Country – Voices from Jamaica's Heart* in 2007. It features a cross section of concerned citizens, including a pastor and St. Ann parish council member, displaced residents from St. Ann, small farmers, Maroon leaders, environmentalists, students, as well as a science teacher, a high school principal, and an entrepreneur from Cockpit Country. Available as a free DVD and on YouTube, *Voices* was (and still is) screened with informational materials across Cockpit Country at rum shops, schools, churches, in town squares, community centers, and homes. It was also televised on national television. Partly because of the film's reach, the public outcry against mining in Cockpit Country was so loud that the then government (as well as the opposition) promised there would be no mining, and commissioned the University of the West Indies at Mona to implement a boundary study for Cockpit Country to conduct public hearings, and report final recommendations to the government. This was accomplished in 2013 ([Webber and Noel 2013](#)), but no government of Jamaica has publicly defined the boundaries of Cockpit Country, nor whether mining will be banned from inside such boundaries.

In May of 2015, the Noranda Bauxite company (ownership: 51% Rusal, 49% Government of Jamaica) breached its mining license by expanding beyond permitted boundaries, cutting a bauxite road into privately owned land at the crossroads of the St. Ann farming communities of Madras, Caledonia, and Gibraltar. In addition, Noranda was (and though since declared bankrupt, still is) conducting prospecting activities across the eastern edge of Cockpit Country. The threatened St. Ann border communities are very aware of the degradation in neighboring districts (such as Lime Tree Garden, Caledonia, Tobolski). A number of male residents are/were long-term employees of bauxite mining



Video 1. Cockpit Country Petition Video. (© Esther Figueroa)

Online resource: <http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/id/662647>

companies, and having themselves participated in the destruction of such places, are very much aware of what would happen to their own communities if mining were to expand. Residents of Gibraltar, for example, are very proud of their recently expanded school and a very prominent historical Baptist church; having witnessed churches and schools in other communities being bulldozed or ruined, they are fearful that in addition to the loss of their farming lands, such institutions (central to community cohesion, cultural continuity, and economic opportunities) will also be damaged or destroyed.

Located in northern Cockpit Country, Windsor Research Centre (WRC), an original member of CCSG, has been the main force behind research and valuations of Cockpit Country's ecological and social systems. WRC disseminates educational materials, is involved in lobbying, comments on official development plans, and works with communities to resist bauxite mining and other forms of threats to the natural environment and their way of life. Through donor grants, WRC has given over thirty Cockpit Country communities money to assist with organizational meetings, transportation, communication, strategic planning, outreach, media, and advocacy. Upon receiving information from community members on Noranda's actions, Michael Schwartz of WRC documented Noranda's illegal expansion and then met with the affected communities, who quickly organized to oppose the incursion (Video 1).

On July 21 2015, over a hundred people held a rally at the Caledonia cross-roads. WRC paid for transportation, lunch, and refreshments, facilitating community members from across Cockpit Country to come together in solidarity. At this point an important question arises: Can there be a protest without media coverage? I had sent out press releases and informational packages to most media outlets. The protesters were expecting media coverage and had discussed strategies to get the media's attention, how best to communicate their messages, and had made placards for the occasion. Of the print media, *The Gleaner*, one of Jamaica's leading daily newspapers, published a piece about the protest ahead of the event but refused to send their leading environmental journalist to cover the rally. However, Peter Espeut, environmentalist and independent *Gleaner* columnist, attended and wrote about the protest and bauxite mining as a human rights violation in his weekly column. *The Jamaica Observer*, also a daily press, sent a crew and published a news piece the day after. AP's³ journalist stationed in Jamaica did not think the story was worth covering. Of Jamaica broadcast television, CVM sent a crew, and later in the week aired a feature on their Live @ Seven talk show. There was also a person from a local cable station recording parts of the event. Of radio, IRIE FM, the leading radio station in Jamaica, has been a partner publicizing the threats to Cockpit Country, but the journalist who was to cover the event failed to do so. Given the absence of some media outlets and tardiness of others, I became the de facto official media correspondent, because I was documenting the entire event and was familiar to many of the participants. This allowed the rally to begin without other media outlets in place, and the protesters were assured both a record of their efforts and an audience, thereby validating their actions and promoting their goals.

The rally began formally with prayers and welcomes from community leaders representing Gibraltar, Madras, and surrounding areas, who gave their reasons for being against the mining and exhorted their audience to say "No to Noranda" and "No to Mining." Then, a stream of community members from across Cockpit Country and as far as Montego Bay and Kingston spoke in solidarity about the importance of Cockpit Country and the dangers of mining. The process was very democratic and supportive, each person communicated in their own way, and participants were patient with the varying styles and lengths of storytelling that included pedagogic discourse, poetry, impromptu song, call and response, humor, religious references, and Jamaican vernacular culture and language. The speakers made frequent appeal to a power higher than politicians or multi-national corporations, referencing ancestors who had slaved, suffered, and fought for freedom so their descendants could have the

3 Associated Press (AP) is one of the largest news gathering organizations worldwide.

land; they referenced God and Jesus, who had given the land to them so they could be nourished and prosper; they referenced nature as the source of life and their duty to care for the land and pass it on to future generations. They stressed their collective rural identity and traditions through story-telling, emphasizing the richness and fertility of the land; they named, the many plants they grow and which serve as food and medicine, drew attention to the health benefits of clean air and water and their closeness as a people, all the while contrasting this, their own lifestyle with the urban blights of murder, thieving, and mistrust. As one speaker put it: “If you have a ramgoat tie pon you bedfoot when you wake up a morning you no see the ramgoat, the ramgoat gone!” This verbatim quote is an example of the contrast between rural life and the changes that come when one is no longer self-sufficient. With the destruction of their way of life by mining activities, one can expect the introduction of changes in their social environment, that is, the way people relate to each other. The emergence of stealing is shown as one consequence.

After everyone had their say there was a break for lunch. By this time, Noranda officials had called the police and several police cars were parked at the site, including a hostile officer clad as a civilian who was videotaping everyone. But the protesters were confident, relaxed, articulate, and high spirited in contrast to the presumptions of Noranda officials, their security, and the police, who were expecting burning road blocks, shouting, property damage, and mayhem. Coincidentally, there was a small bush fire nearby, and the police were ready to spring into action claiming the protesters had set it. No protesters had been near the fire and in fact several tried to put it out. I argued with the police – who were intent on breaking up the rally – that they were not to react to the fire since it had nothing to do with the protesters. Tensions increased as we moved to the second stage of the rally, a bauxite mining site in Caledonia. Noranda security had used their vehicles to block the entrance to the haul road and were standing guard. Several police vehicles were stationed and the superintendent from St. Ann was in attendance. The same ‘plain clothes’ officer was again videotaping the protesters, who stood on the side of the road with their placards when two young brothers from Madras arrived with drums. The protest turned to singing and dancing, improvising folk and revival songs. It was the most free and joyful community dissent I have ever documented in Jamaica ([Video 2](#)).

In contrast, on September 23 2015, several busloads comprising about 60 community members from across Cockpit Country (organized as Cockpit Country Communities for Conservation) came to Kingston to deliver letters petitioning various government agencies to not renew pending prospecting licenses and not allow bauxite mining in Cockpit Country. They began their tour at the National Environment Planning Agency and ended with a late after-



Video 2. Cockpit Country Rally Video. (© Esther Figueroa)

Online resource: <http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/id/662648>

noon press conference in the building of the Ministry of Mines. Their second stop on the tour was Mines and Geology; this government division is based on the 1947 Mining Act and has “general supervision” over all prospecting, mining, and quarrying in Jamaica ([Mines and Geology Division](#).) Here, the group was informed that the Commissioner of Mines was unable to meet with them and that their letters should be given to the security guard. Eventually, it was decided that two group representatives would deliver the letters. After much verbal wrangling, a director of a financial department (who had been observing the proceedings) reluctantly agreed to accept the documents in the parking lot. But when Elderslie community leader Clavie Johnson objected to being “outside in the elements,” he agreed to allow “two persons and no camera” to come to his office to deliver the letters. The rest of the group continued to wait outside, Clavie returned and reported that the position of Mines and Geology was that they did not have enough time to prepare for such a large group and felt that they could not adequately accommodate them. This, of the younger members of the group replied, was “pure stupidity.” The petitioners had been met with hostility and inhospitality and felt disrespected and disregarded by their government.

2 The Importance of Media Coverage

Documentation was crucial in both the St. Ann rally and the Cockpit Country trip to Kingston. The logic behind both activities was that media coverage would reach larger numbers of Jamaicans, who would then become aware of the threat bauxite mining poses, empathize with these communities, and thus pressure the government and support efforts to stop bauxite mining in Cockpit Country. Over the years, Cockpit Country stakeholders have achieved high levels of media engagement, so both events were successful in getting media coverage and follow up. In addition, my documenting both events as an insider and collaborator gave the participants a sense of safety, support, self-worth, and agency. Police, security personnel, and other authorities are less likely to inflict violence on the public if cameras are rolling; but if there is violence or disrespect, it is documented and participants have video footage as evidence to back up their claims. Thus, while the ‘plain clothes’ officer was videotaping the St. Ann protesters, I was videotaping him. And when at Mines and Geology the staff treated the Cockpit Country residents with disrespect, I was both questioning the offenders and filming their actions. This gave the participants a sense of their humanity, that their self-worth was still intact no matter the treatment.

The St. Ann rally was designed for media coverage, my camera therefore provided a secondary audience to the primary audience at the rally. Participants could perform in the full knowledge that there would be a larger and more durable audience than the one in attendance; the event would live on beyond the moment. In addition to the speeches they gave, they also spoke individually to my camera. One woman called me over and gleefully showed me sweet potato plants growing through the pavement of the bauxite road; it was a powerful visual metaphor, she was showing me that they as a people, their farming, and their way of life could not be defeated. At Mines and Geology, my camera was seen as a threat by government personnel and I was forbidden to enter their building. But for the participants, my camera was protection, validation, and created transparency. For the record and following this sentiment, community leader Clavie spoke directly to my camera explaining the processes the group was experiencing. For example, that they would rather present their letters to the Commissioner of Mines, but since they could not do, that they assented to present it to another member of the division. This framed his actions as personal and collective agency, and showed that they were making strategic choices on their own behalf.

Documentation (whether research based power point slide shows, informational newsletters and hand-outs, documentary films, or educational videos) has been central to the time consuming process of organizing in Cockpit Coun-

try, a place with far flung communities separated by rugged terrain and bad roads. It was my two films, *Cockpit Country – Voices from Jamaica’s Heart* and *Cockpit Country is our Home* which were shown to over 20 communities in the most recent set of meetings and organizing. Because of low literacy levels, face-to-face communication, film and other visual and oral mediums are most effective. In these films, community members see and hear people like themselves, recognize the landscapes, animals, and plants they are familiar with; this helps build trust and confidence, which then leads to participation. Since one of the goals of the movement is visibility, a dissemination of media in multiple formats and platforms and aimed at general and targeted audiences is required. Documentation also creates an archive for future actions. We have evidence of the damage, the lack of proper land rehabilitation, what officials have stated and what they have promised; but most importantly, we have proof that communities came together for a common cause, took actions for themselves, the earth, and generations to come, and that they did so with creativity, joy, hope, and commitment. Thus, we have proof of a truly inspiring and rare moment in Jamaican democracy.

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