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Writing Sample (Dissertation Excerpt)

Bling-bling for Rastafari?

As a direct outcome of its growing sonic and visual presence hip-hop has come to define what it means to be black and “modern” within a global context and particularly in youth cultures. Because of hip-hop’s preeminence, Afro-diasporic youth populations habitually identify with or define themselves against hip-hop culture, creating identities suspended between the local and the global.

Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies*

On the one hand, they desire to participate in the world as cosmopolitans who can move with social ease across geopolitical divides, unfettered from nation or locality as a primary source of identity. On the other, they face a pressure to metaculturally mark their global participation as ethnically specific and emplaced. When the processes of imagining the global and fashioning sounds that might enable access to its stages are situated within the context of local struggles, processes of mediation and commodification become analytically inseparable from conceptions of culture and musical experience.

Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!*¹

When I asked him about the relationship between hip-hop and reggae, Wasp, a Kingston-based DJ and one of my primary collaborators, told me: “Rap, ‘pon a level now, come from reggae, seen? Dancehall now is a new ting weh come after rap, seen? So hip-hop get influence from reggae, but this what we a do now—what Dami D a do, Beenie Man a do, Bounty a do, y’know—a dancehall, and that come from rap.”² Due in part to the hip-hop retrospectives frequently aired on MTV and VH1, all of which tie hip-hop’s beginnings to Jamaican immigrant Clive Campbell’s (i.e., Kool Herc’s) parties in the mid-70s Bronx, many Jamaicans hear hip-hop as an outgrowth of reggae and, conversely, dancehall (the latest subgenre of reggae), as a direct

¹ Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 146; Louise Meintjes, *The Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 220. Here Meintjes refers to South African musicians, but I leave her use of the pronoun “they” purposely vague in order to resonate with Jamaican circumstances.

² Because I was recording music with Wasp and thus literally “collaborating” with him, as well as talking with him about music in Jamaica, and because I would like to underscore the role that he and my other primary contacts played in the making of this work, I prefer the term *collaborator* to *informant*, *consultant*, *subject*, or the like.

product of hip-hop's local influence. Even Jamaicans who seek to promote themselves as "reggae artists" are increasingly drawn to hip-hop style, often in order to play to the perceived tastes of a coveted international (i.e., US) audience. Once while producing a song with Wasp, he instructed me to place the snares squarely on beats 2 and 4 and to avoid any semblance of a 3+3+2—dancehall's distinctive rhythmic accent. He did not want a dancehall sound, he explained, he wanted an "international sound," which, stylistically, amounted to hip-hop.³ But for all of hip-hop's influence and popularity, such a full embrace of "foreign" style remains contentious in Jamaica. Most of the artists I interviewed (who were predominantly young and lower middle-class) unabashedly admitted to incorporating *some* stylistic features from hip-hop into their own style, but generally they expressed a sense that such a wholesale embrace of music "from foreign" was too culturally transgressive and not their preferred practice or strategy.

Today, dancehall's incorporation of hip-hop style most frequently takes the form of allusion (e.g., adapted choruses, interpolated rhymes, covers and parodies of pop songs using unlicensed instrumentals, etc.), as well as more subtle attempts to evoke hip-hop's timbres, textures, rhythms, and themes. This sort of interplay is consistent with decades of practice in Jamaican popular music, where the sounds of the US, especially the music of African-Americans, have long animated reggae's internationally-informed but locally-accented cultural politics, one expression of what anthropologist Deborah Thomas calls "modern blackness."⁴ With the advent of cable television and the internet, many young Jamaicans have adopted hip-hop wholesale, calling themselves MCs or rappers—as opposed to *DJs*, reggae parlance for rapping vocalists—and trading local stylistic markers for putatively foreign ones. I met a number of young

³ We might compare this "internationalist" orientation to the similarly idealized, and pragmatic, notion of "overseas" that Louise Meintjes teases out in her ethnography of South African musicians, as described in the epigraph above (see *Sound of Africa!*, "cut 6," 217-49).

⁴ Deborah Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

performers who shifted seamlessly between speaking in patois and rapping in Brooklynese, for instance, and who peppered their “yard” slang with references to “mami’s”—essentially a Nuyorican coinage—and “playa-haters.”

None of my collaborators would go so far as to say that a Jamaican who rapped was not “keeping it real,” so to speak. As another Kingston-based DJ, Raw-Raw, put it: “If someone lives in Jamaica and him wan’ rap like him born in Brooklyn, I have no comment on that beca’—whatever you feel [is valid].” In other words, Raw-Raw would not want to tell a performer what is in or out of bounds regarding their mode of expression. Yet, this stated generosity toward Jamaican performers’ embrace of styles marked as non-local is not necessarily shared by all. When I asked Raw-Raw how Jamaican audiences receive a Jamaican performer who raps in an American style, he simply noted that “they don’t like it” if someone’s style is not perceived as original. Other Kingston-based artists assented that such a stylistic strategy implies a serious trade-off but is a testament to hip-hop’s power. A singjay named Dami D equated the decision of a young Jamaican to write a rap song with “put[ting] away all pride.” At the same time, he attributed the phenomenon of Jamaican rappers to hip-hop’s ability to inspire people, or in his words: “That show, seh, that hip-hop, it dedeh for really uplift the youth dem.”

Many Kingstonians view homegrown hip-hop performers as confused about their cultural identity, making an implicit equation between musical practice and national attachment. As Wasp put it, “I just be a man weh stick to my culture, still. Our culture is like, reggae, dancehall, seen? From your yard, man, is either you have a choice between reggae and dancehall, you see me a say?” Hence part of hip-hop’s reception in Jamaica, at least in terms of who can perform in a style still strongly marked as African-/American, flows from enduring beliefs about cultural propriety and national identity, about what one can and cannot do as part of a community.

Despite the range of significations that hip-hop in Jamaica carries, it remains marked, at least in some sense, as foreign—which, given its hybrid and fairly Jamaican roots, not to mention the number of Jamaicans now living in the US, perhaps speaks as much to the tenacity of nationalist ideologies than stylistic or linguistic features. In our discussions, Wasp gave voice to the tension and incongruity around embracing something perceived to have come from the outside. Despite himself being a reggae artist of the hip-hop generation, as influenced by Tupac as he is by Beenie Man, Wasp ultimately stated, if tempered by some tortuous phrasing, that a Jamaican who decides to express himself completely through American rap style might as well move north: “If a man live a yard and him a rap is like, me feel like him fi just go seh, bomb, and just know seh, yo, him fi go live in other heights, you know?” A connection to the local thus remains paramount despite Jamaicans’ longstanding (and perhaps increasing) fluency with so-called foreign forms.

Conceptualizing Jamaicans’ embrace of hip-hop as a locally-accented *use* of America, as Deborah Thomas suggests, may help to make sense of the perplexities swirling around such appropriations. While Thomas acknowledges, for instance, that “aspects of modern blackness appear to reproduce some of the discourses regarding consumerism and individualism that are associated with neoliberal capitalism,” she reconciles the apparent contradiction of employing seemingly derivative discourses by shifting our frame of reference to more specific, local acts:

[I]f we reorient our vision of politics in a way that decenters totalizing revolutionary narratives and pays special attention to very locally grounded negotiations, incorporations, and rejections, we are able to more clearly conceptualize the ways people confront and revise both structural and ideological systems of power and domination. From this perspective, black Jamaicans *use* ‘America’ to simultaneously critique, selectively appropriate, and creatively redefine those aspects of the dominant capitalist ethos that they believe benefit themselves and their communities, both materially and psychologically.⁵

⁵ Thomas, *Modern Blackness*, 14, emphasis in original.

Indeed, if one examines hip-hop in Jamaica from the perspective Thomas provides here—a perspective grounded in her own historical and ethnographic research and resonant with mine—certain contradictions around national musical provenance, imaginary as they may be, recede in importance next to questions about the local meanings of such practices. Moreover, even seemingly irreconcilable incompatibilities, such as those between Rastafarians’ longstanding critique of materialist capitalism and hip-hop’s “bling-bling” celebration of conspicuous consumption, might be understood as expressing something other than a lack of coherence or integrity or the end of an influential era of oppositional cultural politics.⁶

In order to examine the local meanings of hip-hop’s and reggae’s longstanding and contemporary interplay—and specifically, the negotiation of musically-mediated borders between “authentic” local appropriations of African-American style and what might be perceived as a capitulation to “foreign mind” (a kind of “mental slavery,” in Rastafarian parlance)—I turn here to a specific ethnographic encounter: a recording session which I participated in with three brethren from the Twelve Tribes of Israel, whose headquarters on Hope Road stood just across the street from my place of residence while living in Kingston in early 2003. With the vignette—based on a journal entry made shortly after the recording session—and analysis that follows, I seek to illustrate the ways that certain limits on and expressions of Jamaican “uses” of America take musical form, mediate social relations, and perform various kinds of cultural work in contemporary Jamaica.⁷ In the process, I hope to reflect on some of my own assumptions about such boundaries, making sense of the encounter—and what struck me initially as contradiction—

⁶ *Bling-bling* is a quasi-onomatopoeic, metonymic term for the shine of jewelry. It was popularized in the late 90s by the New Orleans-based Cash Money Millionaires. It endures as a symbolic expression—and not just in hip-hop, but in dancehall, soca, and other popular global forms that have been influenced by the language of hip-hop.

⁷ While conducting research in Jamaica from January to June 2003, and again in the summer of 2004, I kept an online journal of my recordings, observations, and analyses as an ethnographic experiment of sorts. I am pleased to report that the endeavor has connected me to a number of crucial interlocutors, informants, and other “research assistants” over the last several years. An archive can be found at <<http://www.wayneandwax.org/blog.html>>.

through the critical and historical perspectives of contemporary ethnomusicology and Caribbean cultural studies. Ultimately, with this intentionally provocative example, I mean to explore the latent tensions and redemptive possibilities of contemporary Jamaican uses of hip-hop.

Reconciling Contradiction and Crafting Community “In di Dance”

Of the various orientations and practices Thomas associates with modern blackness—among them, urban cosmopolitanism, transnational citizenship, and conspicuous consumption—there may be no better symbol for this shift in cultural politics than the embrace of contemporary hip-hop’s bling-bling ethos by Jamaicans living in Jamaica. More specifically, few examples call attention to the perplexities and contradictions of such an embrace as the endorsement of bling-bling style by Rastafarians, who historically have articulated, on the one hand, a transnational, pan-African outlook that aligns itself with African-American and other Afrodiasporic social formations and symbols, and, on the other, an antagonism to the glamorous materialism of Babylon, or Western capitalism, the system held responsible for creating and perpetuating the state of exile and exploitation in which millions of descendants of African slaves still live. Or as singer Freddy McGregor, who nodded to his northern brethren during the 70s by wearing an Afro and bellbottoms, famously and tunefully put it, “I’m a revolutionist . . . / I-man no deal with capitalists, / I’m a Rastaman.”⁸

So you can imagine my surprise when a Rastafarian collaborator began to extol luxury vehicles over a *riddim* which I and his brethren had just worked quite carefully, and sometimes

⁸ Freddy McGregor, “I’m a Revolutionist,” *Bobby Babylon*, Studio One/Heartbeat Records, 2006 [1979]. With regard to his sartorial leanings, McGregor described himself thusly to David Katz: “I was always a youth with Afro, my bell-foot pants and my soul comb” (David Katz, *Solid Foundation: An Oral History of Reggae* [New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2003], 313).

contentiously, to ensure did not sound too American (or perhaps un-Jamaican).⁹ But I'm getting ahead of myself. Allow me to interrupt this discussion for a moment to offer a brief narrative of the event.

[*run tune!*]¹⁰

“It’s gone too hip-hop again,” said Damian, his brethren, Fiya Rhed, nodding in assent. Rashorne, a gentle guy with a raspy voice, looked on with interest but did not add his opinion, despite being the vocalist, or DJ, for whom we were building a riddim. I turned back to my computer, about to remove the stuttering, double-time hi-hat line I just added to a track that had sounded enough like dancehall reggae only moments before. Suddenly, they reconsidered: “Wait a minute,” Damian said, apparently intrigued by the mix of styles, “It can work.” For the next hour or so we continued to negotiate the sonic boundaries of hip-hop and reggae, I pulling toward hip-hop almost subconsciously, having honed my skills as a producer in the style of sample-based rap traditionalists, with Damian and Fiya Rhed pushing toward a sound more “Jamaican,” more appropriate, perhaps, for a DJ representing the Twelve Tribes of Israel, one of the largest groups on the organized side of the Rastafarian movement. Placing snare drums on beats 2 and 4 of each measure had created too duple—too American—a feel, so instead I added syncopated handclaps to evoke dancehall’s distinctive, dominant rhythmic pattern. To make the

⁹ I employ the Jamaican pronunciation, *riddim*, in order to underscore here that I am referring to more than simply rhythmic properties: similar to the term *beat* in hip-hop parlance, by *riddim*, I refer to all the elements in a musical composition aside from the vocals, i.e., the accompanimental track for a vocal recording. For more on what a *riddim* entails, see Peter Manuel and Wayne Marshall, “The Riddim Method: Aesthetics, Practice, and Ownership in Jamaican Dancehall,” *Popular Music* 25, no. 3 (2006): 447-470.

¹⁰ The following section is drawn largely from my weblog (see note #7). I have chosen to set it off as a performance/recording of sorts by employing as “bookends” the terms used in dancehall performance to call for the playing (i.e., *run tune*) and rewind (i.e., *pull up*) of a record. After the *pull up*, rather than to *wheel and come again* (i.e., to replay the selection), I will instead replay the encounter as an analytical remix.

bassline “dubbier” I added a number of quickly repeated (sixteenth) notes, including the ever important “pick-up” accent just before each beat. I combined a rimshot with the kick drum in imitation of classic reggae drumming technique, and I employed what I considered a reggae-resonant synthesizer—a little bit “chintzy,” to my ears—in order to flesh out the texture.¹¹ Each step of the way, I made adjustments according to the brethren’s reactions.

All in all, the interaction was a powerful lesson in style and sensibility, and I took note of which musical features in particular connoted Jamaican, as opposed to American, style. When we finally settled on a mix that seemed to satisfy all, Rashorne stepped up to the microphone and launched into the first of many takes of his tune, “In di Dance”:

¹¹ By “chintzy” I mean that the timbre of synthesizer seemed consistent with the predilection for 1980s-era synthesizers ushered in by the *Sleng Teng* riddim in 1985. The combination of a kick drum and rimshot I refer to here as “classic” can be heard on many a reggae recording from the 60s and 70s, especially in the “one drop” style favored by roots reggae musicians.

Now mi bankbook gettin' fatta /	Now my bankbook's getting fatter /
Girls dem gettin' hotta /	Girls are getting hotter /
Dem say, "tat fi tit, an' tit fi tatta" /	They say, "Tat for tit, and tit for tatter" /
Ova big Ras, weh di girls dem a flatta, /	To me, "Big Ras," whom the girls flatter /
Yo, Monday, we rollin' in di Esc-y-lator /	Monday, we drive the [Cadillac] Escalade-r /
Chuesday, it's di Navigator / Yo, di	Tuesday, the [Lincoln] Navigator /
Benz and Bimma dem can stay until later	The Benz and BMW can wait until later

Having wrestled for hours over the placement of kicks and snares, the rhythms of hi-hats and basslines, the timbres of samples and synthesizers—and all these sonic details suggest—I was first surprised and then tickled by the irony that Rashorne's lyrics and delivery seemed to be caught in their own struggle between hip-hop and reggae. As his affirmations of Rastafari and Jamaican dancehall culture alternated with a celebration of luxury SUVs and expensive liquor, it was clear that I was not the only one bringing hip-hop into the mix. At the end of the night, having finished an initial version of "In di Dance" (the title itself a nod to American rapper 50 Cent's "In the Club"), I reflected on what seemed to be an ethnographic microcosm of the various tensions and paradoxes swirling around hip-hop in Jamaica today.¹²

[*pull up!*]

At first glance, contemporary hip-hop's endorsement of conspicuous consumption appears to contradict rather strongly one of Rastafari's most common tenets: a rejection of the oppressive conditions, physical and psychological, of Babylon. According to Ennis Barrington Edmonds, "Globally, Babylon is that worldly state of affairs in which the struggle for power and possessions takes precedence over the cultivation of human freedom and the concern for human

¹² One can hear a finished mix of the song, as included on *Boston Jerk*, an attempt to produce a sonic version of my dissertation research, at <<http://www.wayneandwax.com/music/in-di-dance.mp3>>.

dignity.”¹³ Randal Hepner essentially equates “chanting down Babylon”—note Rashorne’s lyric in the chorus, “listen to the words weh di [which the] Rastaman *chant*”—with “signify[ing] to themselves and others their rejection of a world based on crass, materialistic values.”¹⁴ Rex Nettleford couches the stance in more specifically anti-American and class-based terms, arguing that Rastafarians emphasize self-reliance over “a North American consumption pattern” and “living within one’s means versus the wanton overconsumption of the ostentatious *nouveaux riches*.”¹⁵ If the US is frequently equated with Babylon, whose materialistic values seem so embraced and amplified by mainstream American hip-hop artists, Rashorne’s hip-hop-accented celebration of luxury goods would thus appear to contradict commonly held Rastafarian notions of the good life, or *livity*—“a code of relationships with God, nature, and society.”¹⁶

From the opening line about his expanding “bankbook” to the litany of luxury vehicles, each casually assigned a day of the week for driving (or to use Rashorne’s hip-hop-inflected term *rollin’*), the young DJ seems to embrace wholeheartedly American hip-hop’s focus on ostentatious displays of wealth. Remarkably, during our recording session, some of Rashorne’s most materialistic lyrics surfaced in moments when he appeared to forget his lines, veering off in extemporaneous “freestyle” verses that seemed to fall even more egregiously into the clichés of contemporary hip-hop.¹⁷ Two freestyle moments stand out in particular for their progression

¹³ Ennis Barrington Edmonds, “Dread ‘I’ In-a-Babylon: Ideological Resistance and Cultural Revitalization,” in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 24.

¹⁴ Randal Hepner, “Chanting Down Babylon in the Belly of the Beast: The Rastafarian Movement in the Metropolitan United States,” in *Chanting Down Babylon*, 211.

¹⁵ Rex Nettleford, “Discourse on Rastafarian Reality,” in *Chanting Down Babylon*, 316.

¹⁶ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 169.

¹⁷ Freestyle, or extemporaneous rap, offers an interesting medium for observing the relationship between composition and improvisation. In particular, by demanding spontaneous exposition, freestyle exposes the way that language—in the form of stock phrases—can determine the content and underlying philosophy of one’s lyrics. Typically, performers will return to a set of idiosyncratic tropes during a freestyle—a crutch perhaps, but also a necessary strategy in a challenging practice. Particularly striking in my experience with freestyle in Jamaica was the recurrence of certain phrases, especially when the freestyle veered into American rap-style verse. Again and again, I heard references to such tropes as “representin’,” “keepin’ it real,” and “playa-hatin’.” These phrases are strong

from Jamaican to American points of reference, complete with African-American slang and hip-hop style flow. In one instance, Rashorne's freestyle moved in non-sequitur fashion from devout Rastafarian maxims through more earthy, dancehall-grounded sentiments to an American hip-hop-accented preoccupation with money which seemed ultimately, and significantly, to trip up the performance itself: "Givin' thanks and praises to the Almighty / you on the dancefloor, moving hardcore / money fi flow, yo, you know it's all dough / it's all dough, it's on the flo' / money a flow, money a flow . . ." In another instance, Rashorne transformed the pre-composed phrase "sippin' on some roots"—an endorsement of the "natural" tonics favored by Rastafarians—into an endorsement of two of the preferred, pricey beverages of contemporary hip-hop stars: "sippin' on Hennessy mix up with Mo' [Moët Champagne]."

During such moments, I was often left wondering whether Rashorne was simply refashioning American hip-hop for his own use or falling prey to its attractive, materialistic rhetoric. Rather than some subliminal surrender to black Babylon's bling, however, Rashorne's freestyles—and, for that matter, his pre-composed lyrics—may signal a more deliberate deployment of stock phrases and patterns. We might compare Rashorne's appropriation of hip-hop to Rastafarians' adoption and revision of the Bible, about which Stuart Hall observes:

[Rastafarians] had to turn the text upside-down, to get a meaning which fit their experience . . . They learned to speak a new language. And they spoke it with a vengeance . . . They did not assume that their only cultural resources lay in the past . . . They did not go back and try to recover some absolutely pure "folk culture," untouched by history, as if that would be the only way they could learn to speak. No, they made use of modern media to broadcast their message.¹⁸

markers—if not clichés—of mid- to late-90s hip-hop (a formative period for hip-hop's influence on a generation of Jamaicans), and, although they have fallen somewhat out of vogue in the US, they frequently emerge in the freestyles and written lyrics of hip-hop-influenced Jamaican artists. It is no surprise, for instance, that "playa-haters" make repeat appearances in Rashorne's song, and in the pre-composed sections at that.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 143.

Indeed, a recent report in the *Jamaica Observer* noted that even the militantly anti-materialist Bobo camp in Nine Miles, Bull Bay, now features a small computer lab, while Rastafarian scholars consulted for the article discuss the embrace of computers, the internet, television, and even money as “vital tools,” consistent with a long (“African”) history of technological innovation, through which Rastafarians are advancing themselves, their families, their communities, and their ideas.¹⁹ Similarly, we might hear Rashorne’s song as employing a newly accented vocabulary through which he can communicate with the wider world(s) of transnational Jamaican society, the pan-African Rastafarian movement, and the overlapping global audiences—and international markets—of hip-hop and reggae, not to mention with other Kingstonians who are as enmeshed in the interplay between dancehall and hip-hop as Rashorne.

Hence, the apparent contradiction of a young Rastafarian extolling symbols of material wealth should not be too quickly seized upon as an indication of local values crumbling beneath the force of American imperial power. At the most obvious level, “In di Dance” represents, at least from Rashorne’s perspective, a fully coherent statement. Although Rashorne borrows forms, phrases, and symbols from hip-hop, he deploys them in a manner consistent with his understanding of himself as a Rastafarian and a (black) Jamaican. A close examination of Rashorne’s rhetorical strategies and their context reveals an underlying logic. For one, he places himself within an African-American and Afrodiasporic tradition—alongside performers such as Sammy Davis Jr., James Brown, and hip-hop’s Cash Money Millionaires—wherein those traditionally denied access to opportunity and prosperity, in turn, flaunt symbols of affluence to confront the status quo. Significantly, in describing such a stance as “radical consumerism,” Deborah Thomas invokes one of the very symbols—a BMW—that Rashorne names in his

¹⁹ See “Laptop Dreads”: <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/lifestyle/html/20060624T160000-0500_107643_OBS_LAPTOP_DREADS_.asp> (accessed 13 September 2006).

opening verse: “Taking ‘radical consumerism’ seriously may reveal that the lower-class black Jamaican man driving a ‘Bimma’ has more on his mind than individualist conspicuous consumption. Instead, he could be refashioning selfhood and reshaping stereotypical assumptions about racial possibilities through—rather than outside—capitalism.”²⁰ Hence, for Rashorne, hip-hop’s ostentatious display of wealth, or “bling-bling,” rather than endorsing the social order, could stand in direct opposition to Babylon—especially if we view this moment as one of the “locally grounded negotiations” that Thomas contrasts with “totalizing revolutionary narratives” in her call for interpreters of Jamaican cultural practices to re-orient their understanding of politics on the island.²¹

Rashorne’s embrace of bling-bling “infrapolitics,” if you will, is additionally locally grounded because of the way that flashy style or conspicuous consumption dovetails with dancehall’s sartorial practices more generally.²² What Kingsley Stewart calls “the pre-eminence of the external” in dancehall style represents a common strategy through which young, disenfranchised Jamaicans make themselves visible within the dancehall and project their existence to the larger world. From loud music to loud clothing to explicit lyrics—and, one might add, big cars—Stewart notes that “There is an overarching and strong drive in dancehall to make the unseen visible.”²³ Parading through Kingston’s streets in large, loud, expensive vehicles, engaging in or endorsing extravagant consumption, or simply invoking the signs and symbols of capital (from which power flows in Babylon), all represent oppositional tactics for someone like Rashorne who as a Rastafarian and a young, black Jamaican is associated with a

²⁰ Thomas, 251.

²¹ Thomas, 14.

²² I borrow the term *infrapolitics* from Robin D. G. Kelley, who employs it, following political scientist James Scott, as a means of recovering the political import of everyday oppositional practices in the Jim Crow South. See Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75-112.

²³ Kingsley Stewart, “‘So Wha, Mi Nuh Fi Live To?’: Interpreting Violence in Jamaica Through the Dancehall Culture,” *Ideaz* 1 (2002): 24.

marginal underclass—despite Rastafari’s cultural prominence and spread to the middle- and even upper-classes.

In this sense, we might compare some Jamaicans’ deployment of hip-hop style to the “homeboy cosmopolitanism” that Manthia Diawara attributes to young people of color in contemporary Greenwich Village—a cultural politics of public display, of undeniable visibility, which Diawara compares to his and his peers’ adoption of James Brown’s style during the 1960s and 70s in West Africa and to the flâneurs of Paris so admired by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. For Diawara, hip-hop’s commodification, ostentatiousness, and global reach “are an expression of poor people’s desire for the good life.”²⁴ Hip-hop’s embrace by young Jamaicans might thus be understood as consistent with a broader cultural pattern across the wider world, whereby American popular culture—disseminated both by mass media and interpersonal diasporic connections—has come to dominate the imaginations of young people yearning for the freedom and wealth so often denied them in post- and neo-colonial circumstances and so sensuously symbolized by the sounds and images of African-Americans flaunting the power to consume. In this case, what Alexander Weheliye calls “hip-hop’s preeminence,” which causes “Afro-diasporic youth populations [to] habitually identify with or define themselves against hip-hop culture,” is quite closely tied to Thomas’s “radical consumerism”—or “an insistence that consumption is a creative and potentially liberatory process and that the ability to both influence and reflect global style is, in fact, an important public power”—which hip-hop quite effectively taps into, selling the art of selling, or as Snoop Dogg has put it, *Da Game Is To Be Sold Not To Be Told*.²⁵

²⁴ Manthia Diawara, *In Search of Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 238.

²⁵ Weheliye, 146; Thomas, 250; Snoop Dogg, *No Limit Records*, 1998.

If the preoccupation with bling in contemporary dancehall (and hip-hop for that matter) is, in some sense, a matter of fashion—as well as a psychological-sartorial practice inextricable from local cultural politics—it is not insignificant that Rashorne would choose to amplify his voice by using terms with such popular resonance. Another of my collaborators, Dami D, referred to bling-bling songs—and “gun tunes” alike—as “bubblegum.” He explained that there was an undeniable demand for these familiar themes among dancehall-engaged youth, and he felt that one of the most likely ways to succeed as a recording artist was to play to these expectations. This is, of course, true of the popular music industry in a more general sense. Pop often calls for—and is perhaps inseparable from—the reproduction of fairly standardized forms, adorned with the latest stylistic markers. Although the selection and expression of particular symbols usually takes creative, savvy work, in a music market it should come as no surprise that performers tend to employ and rehearse certain clichés in order to play to the sense of what is popular or perceived as “current” (for that is where the currency flows). Given this tendency and this practice, such conventions beg interrogation when they arise. Much can be gleaned by the ways that artists play with the formulae of the day.

Looking more closely at the lyrics of “In di Dance” it is telling that Rashorne’s deployment of hip-hop’s clichés often verges on parody. Not only are his boasts almost always incredibly excessive (e.g., how many cars is that again?), he appears to display a patent lack of interest in the objects he glorifies: his corruption of “Escalade” to “Esc-y-lator,” for example, stands in stark contrast to the almost obsessive specifics of some American rappers’ descriptions of their prized possessions. All of this suggests that Rashorne self-consciously employs these symbols of power, these gestures to the wider world, in order to lead listeners to the song’s simple and fundamental point: having fun at a dance. Rashorne revels in the positive images of

his brethren and sistren enjoying themselves and looking good—“jumping” and “prancing”—and he underscores the importance of community with the first person plural subject of the chorus: “Find *we* in di dance.” The focus on the dancehall and on conspicuous consumption, moreover, draws our attention to the cultural turn in grassroots Jamaican politics. The withdrawal from state-centered politics, or “politricks” as some Rastafarians would say, and the investment of energies and resources into cultural activities—from music to crafts, education to gardening—is something that Rastafarians long ago established as foundational to their social organization(s). Despite the trappings of bling-bling boasting, Rashorne puts forward a stance that seems, from a certain angle, quite consistent with the Rastafarian notion of livity. The juxtaposition of forms and practices in “In di Dance” thus points to synthesis, coherence, and an underlying logic of identity, as much as it may suggest paradox or fracture.

Rashorne’s denial of any contradictions in his performance serves to affirm his own belief in the coherence of what he has to say. When I tried to push him on the question a few days after we made the recording, he answered me in a way that expressed a lack of concern with the tensions I had been wondering about:

W: You express a strong element of Rastafari in your music. Do you ever feel like that’s in tension with some of the major themes of hip-hop or dancehall?

R: Well . . . music is jus’ music, y’know. Seen? And whether . . . you a do Rastafari music inna a hip-hop way, or you a do it R&B, or you a do it jazz, seen? Or you a do it blues, seen? Or you a do it funky, you see-me-a-say? Or even if you do it rock ‘n’ roll, it still remain music.

W: And it doesn’t matter if it’s about sufferation or flossin’?

R: No. It no matter, a still music.

W: They come under the same umbrella?

R: Yeah. Still music. It jus’ one ting, y’know: music. A seven note, y’know.

Directing the conversation toward music's transcendent and phenomenological qualities, Rashorne indicates that, for him, there is no tension here. He draws on the language of hip-hop and reggae as one would play notes from a scale. He makes music that expresses himself and Rastafari irrespective of genre. Indeed, music's very embodiment of a Rastafarian triumvirate—word, sound, and power—would seem to speak for itself as far as Rashorne is concerned. In the chorus to a second song we worked on, he underlined the inherent (and perhaps inviolable) unity of his performance, expression, and philosophy: “Everything I do a jus’ Rastafari / Everything I say a jus’ Rastafari.”²⁶

Such a pliant and pragmatic, if rather solid, notion of Rastafarian livity leaves plenty of room for change, but change is nothing new for Rastafari—a young religious movement which has already undergone several shifts in its time. The very spread of Rastafari's symbols and ideas and language from Jamaica's poorest sectors to its middle- and upper-classes, ultimately finding devotees worldwide, offers a powerful reminder of the ways the movement has changed since its inception—not to mention how Rastafarians have embraced popular music and various technologies to facilitate the spread of their perspectives and lifeways. Over the course of the religion's short history, Rastafarians have had to accommodate themselves and their vision to a number of significant and often traumatic events: from crises in direction after the raid of Pinnacle in 1954 and Claudius Henry's highly publicized and highly disappointing attempt at repatriation (and possibly revolt) in 1959; to violent, state-sponsored repression throughout the 60s; to political appropriation in the early 70s; to the deposition, arrest, and death of Haile Selassie in the mid-70s. For many Rastafarians, such events precipitated a turn inward, where the return from exile could be accomplished in spiritual rather than literal terms. Most Rastafarians

²⁶ This track is also available online: <<http://www.wayneandwax.com/music/everyting-a-rastafari.mp3>>

have remained in Jamaica, or followed Jamaican society more widely in its movements toward various metropolitan centers.

In the context of such change and accommodation, intensified by revolutions in information and communication technologies, it makes sense that young Rastafarians today, like Jamaican youth more generally, would embrace the latest, greatest forms of black subjecthood. For dancehall participants, argues Kingsley Stewart: “The ideal self is a shifting, fluid, adaptive, malleable self.”²⁷ Such a position, according to Stewart, allows for the reconciling of seemingly conflicting sentiments, “such as deejay Sizzla invoking praises to Haile Selassie and graphically explaining the details of his alleged conquests of the female genitalia, all in the same sentence.”²⁸ Arguing that such an ontology emerges from deeper cultural mores, he goes on to place such practices in the context of Jamaica’s trying social history: “Jamaicans throughout history have a heritage and a legacy of creating multiple, dynamic selves to survive and make sense of their realities.”²⁹

Despite such an ability for adaptation, however, Rastafari, as with many religions, has its orthodoxies, and Rashorne’s expressive tactics, as much as they may challenge Babylon, may also challenge Rastafarians with a different conception of livity and of how Babylon is to be chanted down. Considering the individualist, if often communitarian, orientation of the Rastafarian movement, it is not surprising that Rashorne would fashion his own conception of Rastafari, his own consistent practices, his own synthesis of the cultural resources available to him. For many, Rastafari is a faith and a movement which, as a matter of principle, resists institutions due to their inappropriate mediation of one’s relationship to Jah. Such a built-in individualism necessarily creates a degree of heterodoxy among Rastafarians. Indeed, many are

²⁷ Stewart, 25.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Stewart, 26.

critical of such organizations as the Twelve Tribes of Israel, of which Rashorne is a member.³⁰

With the creation of formal organizations such as the Twelve Tribes, certain conventions of belief and practice prevail at the level of the group, despite what may be an overall ethos of inclusivity.³¹ For some, this leads to the incorporation of ideologies incompatible with traditional principles. For example, the Twelve Tribes, which for decades has served as “a haven for middle-class Rastas” (not to mention reggae musicians), is often characterized as espousing liberal values, such as “greater equality between the sexes” and “freedom for those who prefer not to grow the beard or wear dreadlocks.”³² Thus, Rashorne’s affiliation with this particular order of Rastafari might shed additional light on his seemingly idiosyncratic interpretation of Rastafarian tenets.³³ Espousing the value of material accumulation but without traditional middle-class temperance, as “In di Dance” does, not only seems consistent with certain bourgeois values even as it challenges them, it also stands in glaring opposition—and perhaps as an alluring temptation—to Rastafarians not interested in embracing the liberal standards associated with the Twelve Tribes. Here then is yet another way to see Rashorne’s embrace of hip-hop’s symbols not as contradictory but as coherent, contingent, “locally grounded,” and provocative.

³⁰ See, e.g., Jan van Dijk 1998.

³¹ Due to its focus on “religiosity and the cultivation of an African cultural consciousness and lifestyle,” rather than “a commitment to more political and social goals” (Edmonds, 70), some scholars categorize the Twelve Tribes of Israel as one of the “churchical,” as opposed to “statical,” Rastafarian organizations. In addition, Twelve Tribes has been one of the most popular groups internationally. It exerted a strong influence over the movement’s spread in England and claims a worldwide membership, with headquarters in Ethiopia, Ghana, New Zealand, Sweden, Canada, and, among others, several in the US, including HQs in New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. Twelve Tribes brethren from overseas, especially from the United States, are regular visitors to the Kingston HQ. Thus, as a transnational group with close ties to the US, it is reasonable to expect that the organization facilitates the kind of cultural transmission—via the movement of people, goods, and ideas—that has made hip-hop, and other North American products and perspectives, so popular in Jamaica (and reggae so popular in, say, Brooklyn).

³² Chevannes, “Rastafari and the Exorcism of the Ideology of Racism and Classism in Jamaica,” in *Chanting Down Babylon*, 66.

³³ Despite its idiosyncratic spelling, Rashorne’s name (pronounced ‘Rahsaan’) also gives some indication of his “unorthodox” background. Whereas many Rastafarians, like Jamaicans more widely, have names drawn from the Bible or from a heritage of British names, Rashorne’s name points to Black Power-era Afrocentrism, especially of the American variety.

Conclusion

As with any number of African-/American cultural forms before it, hip-hop offers a range of compelling and contradictory significations to Jamaican artists and audiences. From “modern blackness” to “foreign mind,” transnational cosmopolitanism to militant pan-Africanism, radical remixology to outright mimicry, hip-hop in Jamaica embodies the myriad ways that Jamaicans embrace, reject, and incorporate foreign yet familiar forms. Empowered by as it critiques US political, economic, and military dominance, hip-hop resonates across the Jamaican soundscape as a suggestive symbol of the contradictions facing a nation whose citizenry increasingly resides abroad, whose promise of postcolonial self-determination remains elusive, and whose internal conflicts—in particular, the persistence of vast inequalities that correlate all too well with an entrenched pigmentocracy—undermine any overarching or at least official sense of national belonging. In this sense, hip-hop provides one set of cultural practices among many through which Jamaicans—in particular, lower-class blacks—have asserted, since well before independence in 1962, a cultural politics, which Deborah Thomas calls “modern blackness,” around a racial and often transnational sense of community.

And yet, although “modern blackness” offers a compelling lens through which to view Jamaicans’ embrace of so-called foreign resources, Jamaican musicians’ own discourse about such engagements suggests that such an embrace cannot happen wholesale. As Thomas notes, Jamaicans’ appropriation of African-American practices tends to be a *selective* appropriation.³⁴ Performers most often attempt to advance a sense of Jamaicanness that maintains coherence despite and through their engagement with the foreign—however familiar, or familial, such

³⁴ Thomas, 14.

resources may be. Not every engagement with African-American music in Jamaica constitutes an unambiguous expression of Afro-Jamaican resistance, nor does every expression of transnational blackness or conspicuous consumption put forward a stance that other lower-class blacks necessarily recognize as an alternative, militant Jamaicanness. Middle- and upper-class Jamaican youths' embrace of hip-hop can just as easily be read as articulating an identification with a transnational elite, and lower-class Jamaican youths must reconcile their love of Jay-Z with deeply felt local preferences for sounds and styles identified as unambiguously "hardcore" Jamaican (despite such symbols' typically hybrid roots). Accordingly, Jamaican artists and audiences demonstrate no small ambivalence about such a complex cultural resource as hip-hop. Even among those Jamaicans who fully embrace hip-hop—who watch videos on BET and MTV, who "bus' a shot" every time a selector plays 50 Cent at a dance, and who collect and circulate CD-Rs of the latest American hits—there is a sense that one can go too far in this embrace, that one can lose oneself in the foreign and wind up deracinated, a terrible fate in such a roots-conscious place.

The longstanding and increasing interplay between dancehall and hip-hop brings such issues to the fore, as we observe how musical style—i.e., the intentional deployment of specific musical figures, forms, and timbres as cultural signifiers with particular connotations—works to draw the lines of community. The strong associations produced by certain rhythmic patterns, melodic contours, formal structures, and rhetorical figures in local contexts of performance and reception often illustrate the limits, for some, of cosmopolitan, transnational, and/or diasporic identifications. Sometimes there emerge what seem to be inherent contradictions in such appropriative gestures, as when, for instance, Rastafarianism rubs up against conspicuous consumption. By examining more closely the ways that Jamaican artists deal with such a

complex, contradictory product as hip-hop, we get a better sense of the terrain of cultural politics in Jamaica today, the degree to which young artists resist and reproduce established nationalist narratives, and the pragmatic ways that Jamaican youths negotiate their place in the world—not to mention, more generally speaking, a specific illustration of how hip-hop’s global circulation produces local meanings.

It is an oft-repeated assertion that almost as many Jamaicans now reside outside of Jamaica as on the island itself. To some extent, then, Jamaica’s ongoing formation as a nation—in both real and imagined terms—is as determined by Jamaicans living in Brooklyn, Boston, and Miami, and their musical practices and predilections, as by Jamaicans living in Kingston. “Music is central to the diasporic experience,” argues Mark Slobin, “linking homeland and here-land in an intricate network of sound.”³⁵ And indeed, for the past three decades, the transnational circulation and combination of hip-hop and reggae have given shape and form to a Jamaican nation that well exceeds its geographical boundaries. Jamaicans’ *use* of hip-hop and America, both on the island and in the diaspora, has been crucial to the fashioning of a cultural identity that makes sense of these new circumstances.

At a historical juncture when many Jamaicans have shifted their metropolitan gaze and economic aspirations to American cities as well as to the glamorous, “American” lifestyles projected by Hollywood, cable TV, and mainstream hip-hop, an initially perplexing performance such as Rashorne’s “In di Dance” illustrates in a particularly vivid manner some of the ways that hip-hop draws the lines of community in Jamaica today. The cosmopolitanism one hears in contemporary Jamaican dancehall, and in songs such as Rashorne’s, bears witness to these social and cultural changes. Ironically, Jamaicans draw on global sounds, especially those of the US, in order to affirm a rather local sense of selfhood and community. The social signifiers of such

³⁵ Mark Slobin, “Music in Diaspora: The View from Euro-America,” *Diaspora* 3, no. 3 (1994): 243.

international sounds—e.g., materialism—do not necessarily corrupt an internally coherent musical system that, for example, supports Rastafarians against Babylon or forges transnational bridges across the Afrodiaspora. Hip-hop in Jamaica thus offers a rich, if freighted, resource for creative reinvention, another powerful text to turn upside-down. With regard to Rastafarians' use of the Bible, Stuart Hall notes that “in turning the text upside-down they remade themselves.”³⁶ Taking transnational hip-hop as their text, many young Jamaicans appear eager to do the same.

³⁶ Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 143.

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