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William 'Lez' Henry · Matthew Worley

Narratives from Beyond the UK Reggae Bassline

The System is Sound

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Editors
William 'Lez' Henry
School of Human and Social Sciences
University of West London
London, UK

Matthew Worley
University of Reading
Reading, UK

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—William 'Lez' Henry

Thanks to all the contributors and all at Palgrave for their efforts and support. On a personal level, this book evoked memories of my grandma, Adelaide Worley, from whose two-up two-down house I used to listen to dub basslines wafting up the road in Forest Fields, Nottingham. It was a strange introduction to reggae, but the sounds remain with me and conjure the love she gave. She was the peppermint queen.

—Matthew Worley

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Notes on Contributors

Les Back is Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is the author of numerous books including *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives* (UCL Press, 1997), *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics, Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2002) and *The Art of Listening* (2007) and *Academic Diary: Why Higher Education Still Matters* (The Goldsmiths Press, 2017). He is also a music journalist and maker of documentary films.

Robert Beckford is Professor of Theology at the Queen's Ecumenical Foundation. He is the author of several books exploring the interface of religion and black culture in Britain. He is a scholar-activist researching the intersections of faith and racial justice in and through diverse media texts. He has written a dozen books in the field of theology and black popular culture and theology. Beckford is also a BAFTA award winning documentary filmmaker. He has written and presented over twenty films for the BBC, Channel 4 and Discovery USA. His films explore a range of themes including political critiques of the British Empire, biblical history and North Atlantic popular cultures.

Melissa Chemam is an author, journalist, traveller and writer. From 2015, she spent three years writing her first non-fiction book about Bristol's music and art scene, centred on the band Massive Attack and their mainstay, artist and musician Robert Del Naja. Her book, *Massive Attack: Out of the Comfort Zone*, was published in 2019.

Paul Gilroy is a British historian, writer and academic, who is the founding Director of the Centre for the Study of Race and Racism at University College London. Professor Gilroy is the 2019 winner of the Holberg Prize, for '"his outstanding contributions to a number of academic fields, including cultural studies, critical race studies, sociology, history, anthropology and African-American studies'. He is a pioneer of cultural studies and author of such seminal works as *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (2010).

Martin Glynn is an internationally renowned criminologist, educator, theatre director and dramatist with over 35 years' experience of working in criminal justice, public health and educational settings and is currently a lecturer in criminology and black studies at Birmingham City University. Glynn has been appointed a visiting research fellow at SALISES (the University of the West Indies), alongside undertaking a research residency at National Justice Museum in Nottingham.

Peter Hughes Jachimiak conducted research which involves wide-ranging analyses of both the experiencing and remembering of post-war British popular culture. As such, Jachimiak is both a regular contributor to both *All Mod Icon* (the 'Paul Weller magazine') and *Subbaculture* (a fanzine that is 'a celebration of subcultural fashions, styles, and sounds'), and a reviewer for the music monthly, *Vive Le Rock!* Furthermore, Jachimiak's *Remembering the Cultural Geographies of Home* (Ashgate, 2014) is concerned with not only the spaces, places and media forms that make up the childhood family home and its immediate surroundings (such as the house, garden, streets, suburbia, TV, radio, etc.), but the interlinked nature of the cultural texts that reverberate within our memories of those spaces, places, and media forms (toys, comics, novels, TV programmes, films, music and so on).

William 'Lez' Henry is an activist, poet, writer and public speaker who is of Jamaican parentage and was born in Lewisham, Southeast London. AKA Lezlee Lyrix, he is one of the pioneering British Reggae Dancehall Deejays and has performed both nationally and internationally. He is Professor of Criminology and Sociology, University of West London and has written and spoken nationally and internationally on many of the concerns faced by people of African Ancestry. Further, his work is both

pragmatic and useful and seeks to address the wider issues around discriminatory practices in the pursuit of social justice. He is a Hung Kuen, 5 Animals Shaolin Kung Fu, 2nd Degree Black Belt Instructor and is a 1st Dan in Kyokushinkai, Full Contact, Karate.

Tom Kew is an academic researcher and music industry professional based in Nottingham, UK. He gained his Ph.D. from the University of Leicester, specialising in postcolonial literature with a distinctly regional, Midlands focus. His work involves promoting reggae music to diverse audiences, whether as Head of Marketing for Nottingham Caribbean Carnival, or as Director of the nationwide promotions company, Reggae Take Over Ltd.

Kenny Monrose holds a Ph.D. in Sociology with specialisation in Criminology and his other areas of expertise surround identities, race, gender, popular culture and criminal justice. He is a researcher and urban ethnographer within the Department of Sociology at the University of Cambridge, and a research associate at Wolfson College Cambridge. Monrose is a lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice, and the author of *Black Men in Britain: A portrait of the Post Windrush Generation*, published by Routledge in 2019.

Lisa Amanda Palmer is the Deputy Director of the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre at De Montfort University, Leicester. She was the former Course Director for the Black Studies undergraduate programme and Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Birmingham City University.

Lisa is a qualified librarian and previously worked for Birmingham Libraries and Archive Services for many years. She has a keen interest in working with local archive collections, specifically, the Vanley Burke Archive held at the Library of Birmingham. Her research focuses on Black feminism, Black cultural politics and the intersection of race, racism, gender and sexuality. Her writing covers a broad spectrum of fields including the gendered politics of lovers' rock music, the production of local community archives and the misogynoir faced by Black women in British public life. She is the co-author of the book *Blackness in Britain* (2016) and is currently writing her book on Black women in the UK's lover's rock reggae scene.

June Reid has been active in the Black arts and cultural sectors for nearly 40 years. She has also worked in Local Government in the areas of regeneration and the arts for over 20 years. She is currently a Cultural

Studies Master's student at Goldsmiths, London University and will be researching UK based African Caribbean female Sound Systems. June is a member of Sound System Outernational which is an 'ongoing initiative of practitioners and researchers, in association with Goldsmiths, University of London, dedicated to recognising, stimulating and supporting sound system culture worldwide'.

Lucy Robinson is professor of collaborative history at the University of Sussex. She writes on popular music, politics and identity, feminism and punk pedagogy. As well as co-ordinating the Subcultures Network, and the open access digital project 'Observing the 80s', she has recently advised on an exhibition on Jersey in the 1980s and on a new documentary project funded by the BFI, *Queerama*.

Lynda Rosenior-Patten has worked in the Creative and Development sectors for over 35 years and in senior management roles for 20 years. She holds a master's degree in Voluntary Administration (MVA) and a B.A. (Hons) degree in Law, Psychology and French Language, as well as various professional qualifications. Lynda is passionate about developing the professionalism of the Creative Sector, using arts and culture as drivers for economic and social development. She founded 'Maestro7' a creative management consultancy in 2016 to pursue a desire to work independently. She specialises in Leadership Development, Strategic Management, Enterprise and Employability Training, Programme Development and Audience Engagement. Projects she has been responsible for include: 'Destination Salone' a Creative Enterprise Hub project in Freetown Sierra Leone and the 'Notting Hill Carnival Pioneers Festival'.

Carl Tracey is an independent researcher and practitioner specialising in gospel music. He is a musician, radio presenter, audio documentary producer and DJ/selector of a gospel sound system called 'Radical Family' based in the UK. He has completed a degree in Commercial Music at the University of Westminster and a Masters in Theology and Religious Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Tim Wells is a poet and a writer who still buys discomixes. He is the editor of the poetry magazine *Rising* and the author of such books as *Moonstomp* (2019) and *No Weakeners* (2020). He runs the blog *Stand Up and Spit*: https://standupandspit.wordpress.com/.

Joy White is a Lecturer in Applied Social Studies at the University of Bedfordshire. In 2015/2016, she held the Independent Scholar Fellow award from the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF). She is the author of *Urban Music and Entrepreneurship: Beats, Rhymes and Young People's Enterprise* (2017). It is one of the first books to foreground the socio-economic significance of the UK urban music economy, with particular reference to Grime music. Her latest book *Terraformed: Young Black Lives in the Inner City* (2020) is published by Repeater Books.

Matthew Worley is Professor of Modern History at the University of Reading and a co-founder of the Subcultures Network. He has written widely on British politics and culture, focusing initially on the interwar period and more recently on the 1970s and 1980s. His research on British punk-related cultures has been published across a range of journals, including *Contemporary British History*, *History Workshop*, *Popular Music* and *Twentieth Century British History*. A monograph, *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976–84*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2017. He is currently researching towards a book-length study of fanzines.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Narratives from the Bassline

William 'Lez' Henry and Matthew Worley

British reggae emerged as a cultural force in the 1970s. As the heavy basslines from Jamaica reverberated across the Atlantic, they were received and transmitted nationwide by the UK's Afro-Caribbean community. There was a pre-history, of course. Through the 1950s into the 1960s, as communities formed around those who travelled to Britain from the Caribbean for work and a new life, so blues parties and fledgling sound systems—not to mention underground clubs and record shops, ramshackle studios and record labels run on shoestring budgets—served to provide an infrastructure. The reception was often hostile, with racism rife and prejudices fused to colonialist psyches. But the frequencies and mutating styles of reggae pervaded both the cultural and the urban panoramas of Britain's cities in the post-war period, soundtracking the struggles and pleasures of everyday life. It was in the 1970s, however, that

W. 'L'. Henry
School of Human and Social Sciences, University of West London, London, UK
e-mail: William.henry@uwl.ac.uk

M. Worley (✉)
University of Reading, Reading, UK
e-mail: m.worley@reading.ac.uk

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British reggae found its own voice and forged its own sounds, reflecting in the process the socio-cultural and political transformations underway as the faultlines of post-war 'consensus' succumbed to the tenets of Thatcherism.

Numerous authors have pointed to the importance of black music with regard to issues of black identity formation.[1] Yet, despite Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi's important introduction to *Black Popular Music in Britain* (2014), relatively little is known about how these identities were/are produced and communicated in the UK context.[2] Similarly, the role of the reggae sound system, 'the medium of the reggae message' (Gutzmore), has rarely been subjected to detailed analysis, despite its ubiquity within the black community.[3] So while histories of reggae exist, this book looks to explore beyond the music and towards reggae's influence on and in Britain more generally. It asks how reggae shaped and continues to shape the cultural landscape; how reggae communicated and enabled; how reggae's sound transformed musical spaces and places. The aim is to draw together academic and practitioner expertise to consider the diverse influence and underlying values of reggae sound system/bassline culture through to drum 'n' bass and grime.

Lloyd Bradley's *Bass Culture: When Reggae was King* (2000) is rightly regarded as the first major account of the history of reggae. Therein, he traces the culture's origins in Jamaica and describes how it 'conquered the world'.[4] The book provides many insights into the biographies of reggae luminaries and details their involvement in transmitting the culture to the

[1] See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Dick Hebdige, *Cut'n'Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (London: Routledge, 1987).

[2] Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds), *Black Popular Music in Britain* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2014). See also Simon Jones, *Black Music, White Youth: The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK* (London: Bassline, 2016).

[3] Cecil Gutzmore, 'The Carnival, the State and the Black Masses in the United Kingdom', *Black Liberator*, 4 (1978). For notable exceptions, see William 'Lez' Henry, 'Reggae, Rasta and the Role of the Deejay in the Black British Experience', *Contemporary British History*, 26: 3 (2012); idem, *What the Deejay Said: A Critique from the Street* (London: Nu-Beyond, 2006); Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (London: Continuum, 2011); Simon Jones and Paul Pinnock, *Scientists of Sound: Portraits of a UK Reggae Sound System* (London: Bassline, 2018).

[4] Lloyd Bradley, *Bass Culture: When Reggae was King* (London: Penguin, 2000).

UK. Crucially, too, he relates the genesis of reggae culture to the wider history of Jamaica. However, while British reggae is featured, Bradley's study ends during the 1980s heyday.[5] This will be uniquely expanded upon here, providing a 'way in' both to the history and the academic study of British reggae, as well as giving voice to notable practitioners. It will affirm the music's central place in modern British culture by featuring a diverse range of contributors, necessarily serving to broaden discussion around reggae's form, purpose and potency.

To do this, *The System is Sound* will journey from roots to lovers' rock; from deejays harnessing the dancehall crowd to dub poets reporting back from the socio-economic frontline; from the church hall to the dancehall through gospel reggae; from ragga to jungle to grime. In demonstrating how British reggae soundtracked the inner-city experience of black youth, the collection reveals how the music has morphed and melded to reshape the cultural terrain of the UK, in particular offering disenfranchised and disaffected youth an alternative platform to voice their concerns. Our suggestion is that reggae's influence continues to permeate, informing the sounds and the language of popular music while also retaining a connection to the street-level sound systems, clubs and community centres that opened-up the space to create, protest and innovate. *The System is Sound* is therefore a testament to struggle and ingenuity. Accordingly, the role that reggae music played and plays in the formation of expressive urban spaces, in which alternative black social, cultural and political views are aired and disseminated, will be presented in myriad ways.

The book begins with Paul Gilroy's ruminations on how we may think about and understand reggae across time and space. He locates reggae's 'counterhistory' and reflects as to how this can be maintained through the shifting forces of socio-economic and technological change. Lez Henry and Les Back then take us on a journey through the reggae-infused landscape of south east London, revisiting spaces and places to evoke memories and historical resonances, particularly in the form of lovers' rock; a uniquely British genre of reggae. Martin Glynn and Tim Wells both provide personal accounts of their experience as poets. Where Glynn uses his poetry to explore himself and his lived experience, Wells looks at how poetry provided points of connection that transcended skin colour.

[5] See also Christopher Partridge, *Dub in Babylon: Understanding the Evolution and Significance of Dub Reggae in Jamaica and Britain from King Tubby to Post-punk* (London: Equinox, 2010).

For Lucy Robinson, it is the life and death of Smiley Culture that offers a means to understand the politics and legacies of the 1980s, revealing how the racism of the past serves too often to reiterate the racism of the present.

The sound system has oft-been seen as a male domain. Lynda Rosenior-Patten and June Reid, otherwise known as Nzinga Sound, help reset the narrative by recalling their own contribution to reggae culture, noting in the process how other women have similarly blazed a trail. From a different perspective, Kenny Monrose digs into collections of cassette tapes, asserting their value as 'vectors of cultural transmission'. By so doing, he underlines the importance of cassettes as an archival resource from which we can recover reggae's cultural and political engagement. More broadly, Lisa Palmer's analysis of Peoples Community Radio Link (PCRL) allows us to move beyond any London-centric view of British reggae's dissemination. Hailing from Birmingham, PCRL created—despite state opposition and regional recalcitrance—an alternative cultural space to both transmit music and negotiate resistance within the black community.

The regional perspective beyond London is further explored in subsequent chapters. Tom Kew navigates the performance geography of Nottingham's blues parties, taking us into the rooms and spaces that reshaped the city's culture while also sustaining its reputation for rebellion. Peter Jachimiak returns to Birmingham via Bristol, journeying around the cities' record shops to chart the musical networks that nurtured vibrant local cultures. Melissa Chemam, meanwhile, makes the case for reggae's centrality to Bristol's reputation as a creative fulcrum, feeding into and mutating the city's rock and hip hop cultures to innovative effect.

Reggae's influence may be located in other ways. Joy White traverses the lines that connect reggae to grime sonically, socially and spatially. Like reggae, grime is disruptive and emancipatory; it forges and occupies communal spaces, following on from the example of blues dances and dancehall. But reggae also has a spiritual dimension. To this end, Carl Tracey looks at the relationship between Christianity and bassline culture through the prism of the Gospel sound system, while Robert Beckford uses reggae theomusicology, which is Rastafari inspired, to mediate the disconnect between black theology and gospel music.

Much more could be added. A subsequent volume might extend our geographical reach to other British cities—to Leeds or Huddersfield,

Manchester or Liverpool, Edinburgh or Glasgow—where sound system culture was also informative. Investigation of reggae's influence beyond black communities could be extended. If the 'punky-reggae party' and post-punk experiments with dub in the late 1970s and early 1980s are relatively well-known, then less attention has been paid to reggae's influence within Asian communities or to such musical spaces as festivals or raves. More, as always, could be said about class. Likewise, a focus on reggae's material culture would allow record labels—be they Trojan, Greensleeves or On-U Sound—to come to the fore, as well as papers (*Echoes*), fanzines (*Small Axe*) and films (*Babylon*). Methodologically, comparative analysis might be applied; oral testimony brought more to the fore.

As it is, we hope that analysing/presenting music from these novel perspectives will give rise to new observational and theoretical information on the ways by which syncretised and hybridised cultural forms impact on music lovers in the UK and beyond. Moreover, the chapters in this book invite you to experience the unlocking of intergenerational and cross-cultural social memories that provide practical mechanisms to cope with multiple (and ever-present) forms of social, cultural and political hardship. Indeed, unlocking these social memories creates pathways for us to explore 'popular racism and racial exclusion' (Back), while experiencing racialised identity formations and musical affiliations across time and space.[6] This is due to the UK being a nodal point in a multicultural system of creative processes, where various genres have been influenced by Jamaican music and culture for decades. Yet this remains largely unexplored in discussions of just how processes of a counter black identity are worked out as a form of urban politics. Consequently, the contributors demonstrate here that reggae/dancehall are 'music as politics', catering for those collectives who deem themselves to be systematically excluded by the state for not possessing a reasoned and rational political opinion. Such a situation arises because these collectives do not represent a recognised 'public body'; rather the people who are into the types of popular music represented here recognise that their 'music is politics', wherein the freedom to express, publish and promote their general interests is taken not requested.

[6] Les Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives* (London: UCL, 1996).

CHAPTER 2

Vexed History: Time and the Waning of Heart-I-Cal Philosophy

Paul Gilroy

> [One] of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time, music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire. Art thou troubled? Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee.
>
> Ralph Ellison

> Musical styles that emerge and become established are really the necessary creations of places where entire communities are struggling, not in a state of sustained oblivion, but in the face of a major, unrelenting threat: the slums of Kingston where reggae slowly takes shape, the ghettoes of New York where salsa bursts into life.
>
> Edouard Glissant

P. Gilroy (✉)
London, UK
e-mail: p.gilroy@ucl.ac.uk

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Devotees' of contemporary artists like Lil Simz, Kano, Kojey Radical and Burna Boy will doubtless disagree with me, but the premise of this essay is my impression that the moral authority of black popular music has waned. Their combative, exciting work has built new audiences and linked UK black music with the cultural life of post- and neo-colonial Africa. It demonstrates that political voices are still audible, just as they are in the residues of African American Hip Hop, but those voices have become muted. Radical artists obviously retain good intentions, but most no longer aspire to an extensive philosophical critique of the world as it appears: in racial form. They are resigned to the world in that configuration and want to make it work for them.

The reasons for this gradual change are complex. Music has been brought fully into this world. Its profane character has eclipsed its sacred and secular elements. This means that it seldom affords welcome glimpses of alternative futures or provides users with the means of transcendence. What seems to matter more than anything else is to triumph, to win and not to be a loser, here and now. The result is that neither making music in real-time nor the use of commodified musical products are as productively aligned with political movements and antiracist struggles as they were forty years ago when connections between the insurgent aesthetics and politics of sound could have been taken for granted and enthusiastically misread as a permanent state of affairs rather than a fleeting, entirely contingent association.

Those largely dormant connections can still be traced, not least through the expanded planetary circuits of 'soft power' and the 'military entertainment complex'. However, where they do survive, they appear vestigial. Vernacular versions of neoliberalism are now operative, even inside the continuing battles over racial hierarchy and inequality. They specify that the will of individuals is considered decisive while economic priorities and arguments always trump assertions of other kinds of value.[1]

Thinking about reggae requires imaginative return to a period when black trafficking in organised sound was not seen as a valuable activity and the cultural life of metropolitan cores was oddly dependent upon the creative products of the postcolonial periphery. Today, the joy and play in using music tends to fragment oppositional initiatives and disperse the dissenting energy which was once nurtured in the subaltern public

[1] Paul Gilroy, '… We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under', *New Formations*, 80–1 (2013), 23–38.

spheres where racial community was assembled. Today's precarious, individuated listeners are more likely to be isolated, lonely, stressed, depressed and anxious than their downpressed parents and superexploited grandparents were. We find them transfixed in the rapturous hyper-reality of bluetooth 'earbuds' or lodged in automotive bubbles infused with what can only ever be their *personal* playlists. Dissident political bodies are being pulled apart, disaggregated. Of course, people still enjoy music but it is now thought of as essentially disposable, a transient soundtrack to other activities. The idea of charity is braided into the normal habits of consumer culture, however, most listeners will no longer willingly spend in order to support the musicians who distract and entertain them. Paid a pittance, precarious artists strive to make a political impact. Their work seldom binds anger and opposition together or fosters the possibility of acting in concert to make the broken world anew. The music's traditional concerns with love, care, loss, death and inevitable suffering have often taken second place behind the playful iteration of stereotypes, bragging, self-assertion and personal brand-building.

We all know that the auditory aspects of political culture have gradually, but steadily been supplanted or corrupted by the dominance of spectacular visual forms. They are transmitted and mediated through screen-friendly technologies premised on the erasure of all boundaries between advertising and entertainment. Excessive visual pleasure has drawn many into the addictive webs of surveillance capitalism where music supplies accompaniment to other, inert varieties of generic 'content'. These changes also chime with a neo-liberal subjection that projects freedom essentially as an economic matter and reduces black autonomy to the various problems and processes of personal and group 'empowerment', all calculated within the framework provided by the existing political and economic order.

Capitalism is rarely considered to be a significant problem, mostly because people have been encouraged to refuse the capacity to imagine that they might live otherwise. The insomniac habits of capitalist realism promote their resignation which gets manifested in peculiarly antagonistic intergenerational patterns. The resulting outlook is inhospitable towards the claims of historical knowledge. It challenges the idea that the 'black radical tradition' can be adequately understood as an online list of what yesterday's black radicals wrote down. The political ontology of cultural resistance and dissent no longer assume irreducibly *social* form. With

the wholesale privatisation of cultural life, they are now saturated with personal feelings and made meaningful as essentially interpersonal matters.

These changes in scale and focus can be mapped through critical analysis of black music and its cultures, but they require new ways of thinking about how history is itself to be constructed. Culture must, for example, be theorised with greater complexity and enhanced resolution. This means operating simultaneously on several scales and cultivating the ability to move between sub-national, national and trans-national methods and modes of inquiry. Individual agency and affect must be placed in wider frames where sociality can be conceptualised so as to acknowledge its metabolic relationships with non-human nature.

For more than a century, music was a fundamental medium. It revealed the (meta)communicative networks that connected Africa, and linked the continent and its peoples to various diasporas. What Christopher Small termed 'musicking'[2] was an important vector for the transmission, expression and articulation of oppositional ideas and actions. Music distilled the dissident ethics and utopian dispositions that had anchored and oriented the black atlantic freedom cultures. They were creole and cosmopolitan formations. They had derived originally from the opposition to slavery and slave-trading led by enslaved Africans and their descendants. These cultural transactions included open-ended enquiries, conducted in proximity to some of the world's most intractable and terroristic racial orders, into what it was to *be* human, not just what it was to be seen—or recognised—as a human being outside the distinctive nomoi of the racially-ordered world.[3]

The End of Reggae and a New History of Humankind

I must confess that it has been painful for me to accept that reggae music's creative and political peaks have passed. What gets called reggae nowadays is often just an effect of the old music's gradual decay, its dwindling presence in an expanded digisphere where YouTube clips

[2] See Christopher Small in his books *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998) and *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1998).

[3] Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth* (New York: Telos Press, 2003).

constitute the principal archive and Wikipedia is regarded as the greatest historical authority. Reggae's creative summit resided in the long decade between 1968 and 1982. During that special period, the music blossomed, as did the US rhythm and blues and jazz with which it had become productively and densely entangled. Cross-fertilised by those connections, reggae evolved rapidly and acquired new formal attributes.[4] In turn, its generative influence would be transmitted back into those other styles, prompting further innovations, hybrids and creole mixes. Though the etymology of the word reggae suggests a different creative arc, heuristically, the well-known recordings by Count Ossie and the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari can be used to mark the early part of this phase while the computer-based creative output of London's 90s Junglists can be used to locate its terminal point.

For the purpose of this essay it is important to emphasise that the music had advanced energetically in harmony with the Rastafari movement which was being revived during the period that the Caribbean became a hotly contested geopolitical zone as part of the Cold War. The danger of communism creeping across from Cuba was a basic aspect of the celebrated era of Roots and Culture. Grounded sounds[5] affirmed the moral and political importance of everyday life while making clarion calls for solidarity with remote anticolonial struggles against Apartheid and other varieties of imperial rule. Babylon's violation of humanity's proper relationships with the world and with itself, chimed with an immediate focus on poverty, inequality and the suffering of peoples wherever they were. The figure of the sufferer was identified with the alternative moral and historical order that the music aimed to create.

This phase can be defined by what we should call its *hearticality*. Songs of protest and affirmation contributed to collective memory work. Both were shaped by the desire for decolonization and the need urgently to demonstrate cultural independence from the lingering dynamics of imperial domination. The rates at which this precious formation decayed have varied. For reasons that exceed the scope of this essay, we must note

[4] Think of the revolutionary effect of Funk on the approach to bass and drum performance pursued by Carlton and Aston Barrett or of the impact of early 1970s recordings by The Crusaders on Jamaican performers like Cedric Im Brooks and Count Ossie's Mystic Revelation of Rastafari.

[5] Paul Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).

that its positive, radical influences have reverberated longer and more productively in distant diaspora and creole locations than they have in the Caribbean itself. For example, the large international circuit of festivals and other related musical events reveals how outernational activity has become fundamental to sustaining the political economy of reggae and the livelihoods of its aging producers.[6]

In the dread atmosphere of the 1970s, reggae began its slow break from the playful and often comic patterns that had defined earlier musical styles like Bluebeat and Ska. They had all been strongly influenced by the Jump Blues of US artists like Calvin Boze, Wynonie Harris and Amos Milburn, the 'new Calypso Bebop' of Louis Jordan. A new, more serious rhetorical tone emerged. It complemented the musical innovations with which the reggae revolution was closely articulated, and corresponded to the bleak, Cold War reality of postcolonial Jamaica's economic plight. At that point, the historian and poet, Kamau Brathwaite grasped the fundamental importance of music to the independent Caribbean's cultural integrity and distinctiveness. He heard the changes that were being made, but understood them only as the emergence of oppositional 'nation language'. By placing music at the very forefront of our thinking but seeing it more prominently in relation to the claims of language, we arrive at a larger series of claims. We encounter the fateful stirrings of a language of I-niversal sufferation. That idiom was philosophically literate beyond the anti-imperial political theology of Rastafari on which it drew. It was shaped by the vivid possibility of a creole future for our planet and the utopian hope that human beings might be able to dwell peaceably, in harmony with other kinds of life. The history of Caribbean modernity offered pre-figurative guidance towards those difficult goals.

Some years earlier, Frantz Fanon had expressed something like the first of these ambitions in a justly famous passage from the final pages of *The Wretched of The Earth*:

> It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity … For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must

[6] Sonjah Stanley Niah, *Reggae Pilgrimages* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

> turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.[7]

These celebrated words reveal something of the political and philosophical context in which we should evaluate the contributions made by Cold War era Caribbean popular culture to global freedom struggles and the pursuit of autonomy by postcolonial and other racially oppressed peoples.

There is an ontological ambition in Fanon's famous phrases but they do not encourage retreat into an inventory of subjected identities and interpersonal antagonisms conceived microscopically. They refuse complicity with the shrinkage of social and political life to the dimensions of individual defeat and the imploded imperatives of revolutionary self-care. Instead, the emphasis falls on other, urgent tasks. We change ourselves by working together to change, care for, the world. First, there is an unorthodox history to be written. It departs from the particular significance of supposedly Christian people holding other humans captive and includes acknowledgements of the continuing effects of racism and capitalism from which any reasonable person would flee.

This counterhistory begins with a detailed reckoning with Europe's past crimes and a specific investigation of the impact of the race-thinking that enabled them.[8] They must not be repeated or recycled as new states and nations create themselves from the processes of anticolonial conflict. In the reggae idiom, this novel history—'the half that has never been told'—must be excavated and articulated not only on a different scale but in a new tempo. It is not a process without a subject. A different universalism awaits. It refuses to separate the desire for the true and the beautiful from the righteous pursuit of the good. Its architects are the humble, organic intellectuals who have not been led astray by Babylon's miseducation. This righteous universalism will only become plausible

[7] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963, trans. Constance Farrington). The more recent translation by Richard Philcox renders the same passage differently: 'The Third World must start over a new history of man which takes account of not only the occasional prodigious theses maintained by Europe but also its crimes, the most heinous of which have been committed at the very heart of man, the pathological dismembering of his functions and the erosion of his unity ... For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavour to create a new man'.

[8] The Jewels, *Slave Trade* (Cash & Carry Records, 1979), https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=hJ6b7d7-QJ8.

and compelling once extensive conceptual work has been completed. It presupposes a radical break with the horror of European racial conceit that must be demonstrated and understood. The resulting rupture should be heard and felt. Yet surprisingly, from this angle, the interests of common humanity can be made congruent both with the needs of a re-made Europe, and with those of Fanon's comrades and co-workers in anticolonial struggle. These efforts promise to culminate in the assembly of a novel conception of humankind elaborated under the rebel banners of Iniversality. There, all tribes are welcome while racism and what Dennis Brown once called 'prejudism' are regarded as absurd, outmoded and inappropriate.[9]

These ambitions proudly carry the imprint of slave history but they are not restricted by that bloody origin. The capacious and daring project of which they were part harnessed intellectual and military efforts in pursuit of a common benefit that is waiting to be extracted from the tangles of global class conflict that had emerged as postcolonial nations took independent shape. A critique of capitalism was consistently and centrally present. Babylon was not understood as a place. It was a *system*. Respectful appreciation of the interlinked character of human things with other forms of life was a routine starting point, both for individual reflection and for the varieties of collective reasoning that were invested with authority. We should recognise what might be trivially be described as a green outlook. I and I livity exalted in sustainable conceptions of human life, operating with precautionary principles, avoiding any triumphalism in human contact with nature, valuing the slow over the swift and turning towards natural cycles to establish a liberatory, anti-capitalist tempo in human affairs. Ital food, physical activity, and self-respect were all valued over fast food, inertia and indifference. The last traces of the Christianity remain evident in the notions of love and responsibility that were reasoned expansively from close, collective readings of scripture. This perspective awarded absolute epistemological priority to the category of experience. 'Who feels it, knows it' was a familiar rallying cry.

These revolutionary conceptual adjustments were immediately present in the layered public sphere created by use of the music. They were reaffirmed by sound systems in the dancehalls and then transmitted to

[9] Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

the whole world via the beautiful fruits of superexploited piecework in Jamaica's notoriously feudal recording studios.

The fugitive slave, Frederick Douglass had been the first writer to weigh the power of wild, slave song and music against that of respectable, disinterested philosophical inquiry. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, philosophy's mission had been augmented by reckoning with the effects of the Third Reich and the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The concept of philosophy began to appear in the song lyrics and roots poetry that distinguished the popular toasts and rhymes of that period. Its unexpected appearance in that discourse provides an important, informal measure of the wide appeal of the goals that Fanon had spelled out at a high level of abstraction. They found energetic flesh and renewed material life in the creative contributions of the sufferers and their spokespeople.

Repeated invocations of reflexive thought appeared both in music made inside Jamaica and in recordings released outernationally by Jamaicans and their creative associates in locations like London, Toronto and New York.[10] Those pointed appeals to philosophical seriousness and the rigors of deep collective reasoning signified the growing impact of dread livity among the rising youth. The resurgent Ethiopianist imaginary was not simply a transposed Christianity. The old solidary impulses had been reworked by the conflict between Italy and Ethiopia. For many affiliates of the movement Selassie was not Christ and the official churches were just weighty pieces in the Leviathan machinery of downpression.[11] The music's reinvigorated militancy carried the unhealed wounds of Jamaica's 1938 uprising[12] and the hushed up 1963 mass killing of Rastafari by the Jamaican military at Coral Gardens.[13] It was mediated by the increasing technological sophistication of the music's authors and composers: poets, DJs and producers whose work—thanks to its increasingly outernational popularity—might have been immediately lost to the transformative postcolonial movement that had borne it. That did not

[10] The example immediately in my mind is Black Uhuru's 'Stalk of Sensimella'.

[11] The Wailers' 'Talking Blues' from the album *Natty Dread* (1974) speaks about blowing up a church after it has been understood that the preacher is lying.

[12] Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaica Labour Rebellion and Its Aftermath* (The Hague: Martinus Nihoff, 1978).

[13] Horace G. Campbell, 'Coral Gardens 1963: The Rastafari and Jamaican Independence', *Social and Economic Studies*, 63: 1 (2014), 197–214.

happen, though it is clear that the music was deeply damaged by the tribalisation and gunmanisation of conflict between the affiliates of the JLP and the PNP. Max Romeo's 'Socialism Is Love' is one notable and rather understudied recording, implicated in those battles to represent the authentic voice of the poor and the perennially vulnerable.

The intention of this essay is not just to insist that the music's regular and repeated invocations of philosophical commentary and instruction should be taken seriously, but also to discern the character of the philosophical positions that were being conjured with by movement affiliates in Jamaica and beyond. Ethiopianist political language was borrowed and adapted better to denounce another Babylon and its brutal, uniformed defenders.[14] We need to understand how that rhetoric and political theology became connected to the forms and styles of music and performance. This critical ambition requires a shift away from the obsession with Sound Systems that has lately deformed the serious, analytical writing done by academics about Caribbean culture. We need to enhance understanding of what philosophy might have become in those calloused hands. We require detailed, sympathetic exposition of where the respective boundaries of art and politics would have been judged to fall by the oppositional culture to which these vernacular pronouncements contributed so conspicuously.

We should not be primarily concerned with the lyrical content of popular songs or improvised toasting. Though the implicit epistemology was, as I have said, heavily invested in the category of experience, this demotic philosophical imagination was not subject centred. If it admitted any ontological preoccupations, they were not only collective and social, but, as I have already suggested, emphatically historical. In other words, they were configured by matters of time and memory and they spoke to, and about, the dynamic inter-subjective processes that connect the production of rebel music to the cultural contexts in which its conspicuous performative power could be revealed to weak hearts, hypocrites, baldheads and treacherous bag-a-wires. The world created by this music, its users, listeners and makers, their rituals, habits and pleasures, shaped specific sites in which particular varieties of subjectivity, individuality and identity were formed, encountered and sometimes reproduced.

[14] Dr. Alimantado, 'Gimmie My Gun' from the 1978 LP *Best Dressed Chicken*; The Wailers, 'Burnin' and Lootin from their second Island Records album *Burnin'* (1973).