

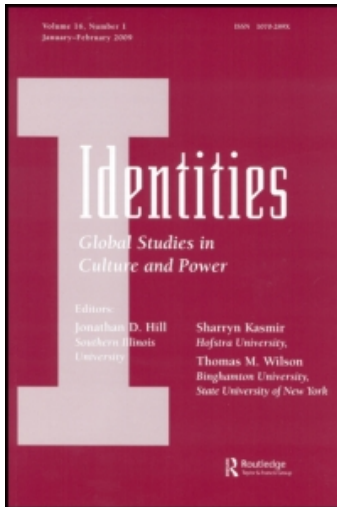
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### BLACKNESS ACROSS BORDERS: JAMAICAN DIASPORAS AND NEW POLITICS OF CITIZENSHIP

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## **Blackness Across Borders: Jamaican Diasporas and New Politics of Citizenship**

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*“Blackness across borders” outlines the effects of the currently weakened hegemony of the creole multiracial nationalism that had been consolidated by political and intellectual elites at the time of independence. The essay examines how intensified transnational migration and the proliferation of media technologies have contributed to a situation in which urban popular expressions of blackness have become paramount within contemporary invocations of Jamaican particularity. Arguing that these factors have facilitated the amplification of a diasporic consciousness, this essay explores how working-class Jamaicans negotiate American (and in particular, African American) hegemony through this consciousness. It seeks to illuminate the ways newly powerful notions of national belonging and transnational racial mapping affect the development of nationalist discourses and strategies “at home,” arguing that Jamaicans use “America” in part to mitigate the effects of a global political economy that has reinstated the national-racial hierarchies of an earlier imperial moment.*

*Key Words: diaspora, blackness, Caribbean, popular culture*

On 16 June 2004, the first ever Jamaica Diaspora Conference was called to order in Kingston.<sup>1</sup> For two days, the government of Jamaica hosted over five hundred delegates—half living in Jamaica, half Jamaicans living abroad—who had gathered to discuss ways that overseas Jamaicans might have more of a stake in what was happening at “home,” not only culturally but also economically and politically. During the conference, Prime Minister P. J. Patterson outlined five Cabinet-backed incentives for overseas Jamaicans to invest in the country, including improved passport services and the issuance of an investment bond targeted specifically to overseas nationals. He also proposed the establishment of a Jamaica Diaspora Foundation “through which Jamaica will speak to overseas Jamaicans about national development and other issues” (*Daily Observer* 2004a), an annual Diaspora Day, and the establishment of “trade councils” throughout the Diaspora.

The editorial that appeared after the conclusion of the conference in the *Observer*, one of Jamaica's two daily newspapers, argued that the profound significance of the event lay in its having officially initiated "a process of redefining Jamaica—its expansion from an island territory to a concept of a people" (*Daily Observer* 2004b). Indeed, with the 2.6 million Jamaican nationals living in North America and Great Britain roughly equaling the number of Jamaicans living "on the rock," and with a reported 42 percent of overseas Jamaicans having attained a tertiary education (*Daily Gleaner* 2003), the recognition of a new sense of peoplehood would seem to herald new possibilities for transforming Jamaica's political economy. The editorial continued, "There must be a continuous relationship between those of us who live on the island and the offshore communities. The critical issue is how to build these seamless relationships" (*Daily Observer* 2004b).

This is an issue with which many Caribbean governments have been preoccupied for some time. Because migration has long been a central development strategy throughout the Caribbean—for individuals, families, and governments—states in the region have attempted to devise ways of "hanging on" to their migrated populations. They have done so by recognizing dual citizenship, tapping migrant communities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada to fund hometown associations and political campaigns, and in some cases granting overseas nationals the right to vote in elections locally. The suggestions outlined at the Jamaican Diaspora Conference in 2004, then, were in step with more general regional attempts to facilitate national development by harnessing the economic resources of the Jamaican diaspora in the United States, Britain, and Canada. Of course, government directives, such as those listed above, have not only been designed to "hang on" to their populations but also to "catch up" with them, as many migrants have taken the lead in creating and maintaining transnational networks to advance their own multifaceted and multilocational goals. Scholars attuned to these practices have argued that contemporary processes of transnationalism and globalization have not only altered the ways people conceptualize space, community, and citizenship but have also transformed nationalism and processes of racial identification (e.g., Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc 1994; Carnegie 2002; Clarke 2004; Clarke and Thomas 2006; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1992; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Sutton and Chaney 1987).

The intensification of transnational migration and the creation of Caribbean diasporas have also raised another major issue for Caribbean states, one that has to do with the level of "Americanization" occurring throughout the region. With United States economic,

political, and cultural influence strengthening over the course of the twentieth century, the nature of many governments' much cherished postcolonial independence has been called into question. Yet Caribbean people have always engaged "America" critically, negotiating its power and promise while actively building new notions of national belonging and racial mapping. These new notions have had complex, and sometimes unexpected, effects on Caribbean nationalisms, even as these nationalisms are being reformulated "at home." If we agree that "social spaces are constructed in tandem with processes of racial formation" (Brown 1998: 291), then new understandings of space and community—such as those reflected during the Jamaican Diaspora Conference—raise important questions regarding emergent concepts of blackness, both in Jamaica and among Jamaicans (and their descendants) elsewhere. For example, how might we situate contemporary black America with respect to new configurations of diasporic blackness? Where does Jamaica stand in relation to (black) America, and how might this standing be interpreted differently by different generations of Jamaicans reflecting, as it does, the changing spheres through which black identities are forged? To begin to answer these questions, we must consider the two sets of issues raised here—migration and the reconfiguration of nationalisms and Americanization and the reconfiguration of blacknesses—within the same spatial frame of analysis.

In her analysis of black Liverpoolians' cultural politics across generations, Jacqueline Nassy Brown develops the concept of "diasporic resources" (drawing from Paul Gilroy's [1987] notion of raw materials) to give a sense of the kinds of cultural and political practices that are available to them at different moments. Predominant among these practices have been African American musical forms and political struggles, leading Brown to conclude that "black Liverpoolians actively appropriate particular aspects of 'black America' for particular reasons, to meet particular needs—but do so within limits, within and against power asymmetries, and with political consequences" (1998: 298). Within this essay, I reflect on these issues in relation to processes of racialization among Jamaicans. I am interested here in how the concept of "resources" is constituted over time, when and where these resources circulate, and toward what ends they are used.

Ultimately, I argue, the manipulation of diasporic resources services a project of racial vindication that, although it addresses different specific needs and operates differently in the United States and Jamaica, nevertheless is a project generated and implemented transnationally. That this is not a new project is made abundantly clear through the rich historical and literary scholarship on the various

political, economic, and social connections that have been forged between black folk in the United States and beyond throughout the twentieth century. I am thinking here, in particular, of work examining early twentieth century pan-Africanism in a range of metropolitan sites (e.g., Edwards 2003; Gilroy 1993; James 1998; Stephens 2005; Watkins-Owens 1996), radical political activism during and after World War I (Kelley 1994), and post-World War II anticolonial and Civil Rights mobilization (Biondi 2003; Kasinitz 1992; Von Eschen 1997). Yet today's transnational racial vindication projects seem to circulate less through formal and informal political networks and more through mass mediated popular cultural forms. This is a shift that mirrors others, such as a diminished faith in the social and political promises of nationalisms, the seeming exhaustion of the notions of autonomy and responsibility in the current geopolitical context, and the increased prominence of consumerism as a locus of identity formation. As a way to map these kinds of shifts and the circulations that I believe are critical to contemporary racial projects, I mobilize material from a range of mediated sites. These include newspaper commentaries about the informal adoption of Black History Month in Jamaica; responses to United States-produced black television shows gleaned during extended ethnographic research on nationalism and national cultural production in the mid-1990s in Jamaica;<sup>2</sup> and depictions of Jamaica in African American media productions (in this case, in the hip hop film *Belly*). I do this, in part, to flag the point that contemporary diasporic resources, while potentially drawing people together—materially or symbolically—in ways that are useful to them at particular historical moments, are never innocent of the broader conditions of power that shape their availability in specific sites at specific times.

### Modern blackness in Jamaica

By the late 1990s in Jamaica, when urban popular expressions of blackness became paramount within contemporary invocations of Jamaican cultural identity, the creole multiracial nationalism that had been consolidated by political and intellectual elites as central to national identity at the time of independence in 1962 had been displaced (Thomas 2004). This was a significant shift because it marked a partial triumph of the ideologies, styles, and political and economic practices developed by working-class and poor black Jamaicans over the notions of respectable citizenship that have been (and to a degree, still are) promulgated by political and cultural elites, middle-class professionals, and most religious communities. As a result, it reflected a

broader transformation in terms of who (and what) has public power to define and represent Jamaican culture in the contemporary era.

Because the British colonial state had linked hierarchies of education and status to color, culture, and gender, anticolonial movements throughout the West Indies had to struggle not only for political independence but also to legitimate and value indigenous and syncretic cultural practices that had been denigrated under colonial rule. In Jamaica, this latter struggle took the form of cultural policy that sought to promote a new idea of cultural citizenship by highlighting aspects of Jamaica's "folk" culture, now foregrounded as the country's African heritage. While this policy, and the expressive cultural institutions it supported, broadened the public space in which notions of national identity could be debated, it also privileged a particular kind of creole multiracial citizenry and a specific vision of progress, one that prioritized the cultivation of respectability—a value complex that emphasizes education, thrift, industry, self-sufficiency via land ownership, moderate Christian living, community uplift, the constitution of family through legal marriage, and leadership by the educated middle classes.

Although this vision of progress has been critically important for many Jamaicans, it has not been the only one available; rather, it has existed in constant tension with other, more explicitly racialized, visions and values that have often also been framed transnationally and have, as a result, challenged the legitimacy of territorially defined boundaries of belonging. The best well-known examples of the latter include the Garvey movement and Rastafarianism, but the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865, the Claudius Henry Rebellion in 1960, and the Rude Boy phenomenon that developed in the 1960s all reflected this alternative cultural and political sensibility among black Jamaicans. It is this sensibility that undergirds what I call "modern blackness," a late twentieth century subaltern aesthetic and politics from which working-class Jamaicans make claims on the earlier forms of nationalism that excluded urban popular expressions of blackness in its constitution of cultural identity.

The ascendance of modern blackness in the public sphere has been the result of a confluence of factors that have had a variety of (sometimes unexpected) effects. One of these factors has been the intensification of transnational migration and the proliferation of media technologies, which have facilitated the amplification of a diasporic consciousness. Another has been the increased political, economic, and social influence of the United States, which has opened avenues for many black Jamaicans to circumvent the colonial hierarchies of color, class, gender, culture, and progress that were institutionalized by the

British. These two factors are related, of course, because after independence and the closing of emigration channels to Britain, many more Jamaicans began to avail themselves of the perceived opportunities presented by migrating to the United States. And although the nature of the influence of American cultural practices on poor and working-class Jamaicans has been vigorously debated since the turn of the twentieth century, the current period of “fragmented globality”<sup>3</sup> (Trouillot 2001: 129) has given these debates new vigor not only in Jamaica but throughout the region as a whole.

As David Murray has noted for Martinicans during the mid-1990s, “America, or more particularly a set of mostly media-generated images of ‘black’ America, occupied an increasing amount of attention in discussions about self and society” (2002: 159). Because young people were the primary consumers of these images, Murray found that youth had become the “new metaphor through which dissatisfaction or disappointment with Martinican society was voiced” (2002: 158). Similar processes were afoot in Jamaica during this period, and the generational difference Murray identifies—a difference that seems to mark a particular shift in political worldview<sup>4</sup> and a changed geopolitical environment—has also been key to the consolidation of what I am calling modern blackness in Jamaica.

That youth often occupy the contested terrain of nationalists’ deferred (or even derailed) development dreams does not preclude them from elaborating their own. In other words, on one hand, current processes of globalization throughout the Caribbean have generated increased rates of violent crime, unemployment, and poverty at the same time as structural adjustment programs have reduced government expenditure on health care, education, literacy programs, and other social services thereby heightening conditions of instability for the majority of Jamaican families. On the other hand, contemporary neoliberal capitalist development has also created new possibilities for realizing ambition, and new opportunities for advancing new or previously marginalized ideologies and practices regarding citizenship and subjectivity. In Jamaica, for example, youth have actively transformed aspects of old colonial hierarchies of race and gender (Cooper 1993; Hope 2004; Thomas 2004; Ulysse 1999), in part through their consumption and resignification of aspects of African American style within contemporary dancehall culture. To understand the meanings of America and diasporic blackness, then, we must pay attention to what different Jamaicans *do* with America. More particularly, what use do Jamaicans make of *black* America? Alternatively put, what has black America allowed variously situated Jamaicans to *do* in terms of reconceptualizing the meanings of belonging and community? And

finally, if we understand power as “capillary” (Foucault 1979)—as never fully possessed by any one entity but as circulating through diaspora and always enacted within broader relations of dominance—how might we conceptualize the relationship between black America and black Jamaica as reciprocal?

## Black America in Jamaica

One of the more controversial recent additions to the Jamaican cultural and educational scene has been the informal adoption and recognition of Black History Month in February. During the mid- to late 1990s, many cultural commentators viewed local interest in this African American commemoration as further evidence of Jamaicans’ interest in adopting anything emanating from the United States. For example, Basil Walters, a frequent contributor to the *Daily Observer*,<sup>5</sup> has argued “it has always been a part of our national psyche to adapt and adopt anything that Americans do, whether black or white. Thus, in recent times, the celebration of Black History Month has become fashionable in Jamaica, and the emphasis is on fashionable” (1997). Walters and others saw Black History Month as an “imported” event that would appeal to certain intellectuals but that would remain irrelevant to the lives of the majority of Jamaicans.

Verna Lee Davis-Daly, an occasional columnist for the *Daily Observer*, worried that “we bombard our young black populace with black music, black theatre, black art and other positive predominantly ‘black American’ experiences. What happens, however, is that we sometimes unwittingly bypass our simple, available sources of relevant black history” (1997). Similarly, *Gleaner* columnist Peter Espeut (1997: A4) argued for greater attention to Jamaican “heroes”:

I am disappointed that in this imported Black History Month, we are not hearing much about our own black heroes. It is as if we are being distracted from our own Jamaican situation by discussions about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King—great men for their milieu, mind you; but what does that say to Jamaicans in our situation? What about our struggle?

The consensus among these writers seemed to be that because 90 percent of Jamaica’s population is black, “we would need neither the approval nor the encouragement of the USA to study black history twelve months of the year” (Reynolds 1997). Indeed, many noted that Rastafarians have always celebrated black history, suggesting that their example would be the more meaningful one for Jamaicans to follow.



This line of argument against invocations of Black History Month was rooted in the parsing of demographic differences. Several commentators suggested that in the United States, where African Americans constitute only about 11 percent of the total population and “feel that the contribution of their people to the creation of the superpower that the U.S.A. now is has been undervalued” (Espeut 2004), the setting aside of a period of time during which these contributions are explicitly recognized was justifiable and an important way to redress social inequalities. But, as Peter Espeut questioned, does this translate to the Jamaican context? “Are we in the same position?” he asked. “If in Black History Month we call to mind the great contribution of Jamaicans of African descent, who then do we talk about for the rest of the year? Columbus?” (Espeut 2004). Others also argued this line. In a letter that was published in both daily newspapers, Rupert Johnson, a Jamaican living in Canada, maintained that the rationale for celebrating Black History Month in the United States had to do with African Americans’ minority status, and he questioned whether this rationale made sense in a Jamaican context (Johnson 2003). Notably, both Espeut and Johnson mobilized these questions to enter into a discussion about the status of history in Jamaican educational institutions. “In a Eurocentric country like the USA, maybe the best black people there can hope for is a Black History Month,” Espeut wrote, following an exhortation that Jamaican history—stories of both heroes and traitors alike—be taught with more complexity in secondary schools. “I for one will not be satisfied with a Black History Month in Jamaica. I want the whole truth! Every month of the year!” (2004). Similarly, Johnson (2003) concluded his letter by asking the following questions:

What is the real rationale for designating the month of February Black History Month? Is it because Jamaicans want to demonstrate solidarity with their Black counterparts in the United States and Canada? Or is it because the entire educational system is still Euro-centric in scope, thus neglecting our African and Caribbean Heritage?

Similar issues were raised in a 2002 column written by Hughlin Boyd in the *Jamaica Observer*. His column sketches the similarities and differences of the history and positioning of black people in the United States and Jamaica, focusing in particular on slavery, segregation, and the granting of political suffrage, to demonstrate that Jamaicans do not need Black History Month as acutely as black Americans do in their attempts to develop and express national (and racial) pride. Yet at the same time, Boyd argues that celebrating Black History

Month would go a long way toward supporting “our brothers and sisters to the North who have to struggle daily for inclusion in the American society” (2002). The motivation underlying his call to “build a bridge between the African Americans and us,” however, could perhaps be seen as mercenary. “It is said that the black population in the US is one of the largest in the world outside of Africa,” he writes. “The social benefit to Jamaica can be enormous, bearing in mind that some prominent African Americans are of Jamaican heritage” (Boyd 2002).

Whatever the motives, we see in this debate about Black History Month an active appreciation and negotiation of the *symbolic* limits of diasporic community through reference to national histories and national boundaries. Even within those commentaries that refer to potential solidarities with African American “brothers and sisters,” these siblings tend to be positioned as fictive kin. Actual brothers and sisters who have migrated to the United States and who are, in many cases, experiencing United States racial discrimination alongside their “skinfolk” (Williams 1996) are not referenced. Thus, African America and Jamaica are positioned and imagined as two distinct spaces, and the United States becomes the foil against which Jamaican racial pride and prejudice is measured.

Yet the potential for intensified public discussion of black America to disturb ideologies of racial tolerance that circulate among many middle- and upper-class Jamaicans is something that Peter Espeut provocatively hints at in the following passage: “The alacrity with which we in Jamaica have embraced [Black History Month] is not just another example of our penchant to copy all that is American. In Jamaica, race is still not accepted as a subject for polite conversation in middle and upper class circles” (1997: A4). Espeut is proposing that because Black History Month is seen as an imported rather than indigenous event, it opens conversations that might not otherwise occur. What seems critical here is his suggestion that expressions of racial pride or style from the United States are taken on in Jamaica as a way to enter into public conversations about race among those who might otherwise consider such discussions “impolite,” and by so entering, to direct attention to the dynamics of racial formation both within Jamaica and transnationally. Michael Burke, a young columnist for the *Jamaica Observer*, has been the most vocal in this regard, consistently using his columns during Black History Month to discuss what he sees, on one hand, as the continued lack of racial self-esteem among, for example, Jamaican men who refuse to date dark-skinned women and among Jamaican women who use bleaching creams on their skin, and, on the other hand, as the complete erasure of discussion about the ways slavery and colonialism continue to affect

Jamaicans in the present (e.g., Burke 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003, 2004, 2005). Black History Month, in this way, becomes a resource through which Jamaicans might frame an ongoing local dispute regarding the degree to which Jamaican nationalism has “succeeded” in eradicating racial divisions in the service of the national motto—“Out of Many, One People.”

Because this is a dispute that has tended to break down along class lines—with lower-class Jamaicans remaining the most adamant about the ways race and class interact to reproduce their marginalization with respect to political and economic power—it thus becomes important to question the assertion that black America does not resonate with the majority of Jamaicans, whose attention instead should ostensibly be directed toward black Jamaican heroes. Paulette, a lower-middle-class woman in her early thirties whom I had come to know well during the course of my extended fieldwork in a rural hillside community just outside Kingston, reflected with me on her own process of “coming to consciousness” about her heritage and history. She remembered that her parents did not emphasize a “black history” to her while she was growing up. Nevertheless, as she grew older, she began learning more about Jamaican history by listening to Muta-baruka’s radio show on IRIE-FM about African and diasporic history,<sup>6</sup> and by reading about African Americans, information that was supplemented by the television programs broadcast during Black History Month. “They’d show certain programs on TV and I’d see how they’d handle black people, and I’d get so emotional that I’d turn off the TV,” she recalled. “It’s just recently I can really sit down and watch. I don’t know if it’s embarrassment or anger or what. I’d watch these programs and probably go out on the road and see [the one white landowner living in the community] and just hate him. I’d think, ‘you’re one of those.’”

Paulette also mentioned that she would teach her daughter, who was three years old at the time, about black history so that she would “know and love herself,” especially since she anticipated that her daughter would ultimately attend a university in the United States:

It’s important to let her know that OK, she’s of a different color, but she has to love self however people might say that you’re black so you’re not beautiful. Even here now, people are bleaching out their skins and all of that. I have to make her know that regardless of what people might say [in the States], she will be proud of where she’s coming from. Because I’m not going to grow her like how my parents just sort of had me and they never really sat and shared a lot of things with me. You have to make them know, and you do this by telling them about the history.

Paulette's personalization of aspects of the history of race relations in the Americas and her preparations for her daughter's expected migration speak to more general processes associated with globalization and identity formation. Her generation, having come of age during the 1970s flowering of black power and "Jamaica for Jamaicans," was supported in their efforts to develop ideas about racial value that differed from their parents by a much-changed national context. Moreover, the technological and communications developments that had taken place since her parents' youth made external opportunities (such as a tertiary education in the United States) seem more easily accessible in some cases than those available locally. Like columnist Michael Burke, therefore, Paulette was less reticent to articulate a notion of Jamaican identity that was positively racialized and influenced by African American cultural productions and political histories.

Paulette's comments thus demonstrate that *history matters* to the development of personal and community consciousness and that the histories that matter are not limited to Jamaica and the West Indies but can also include those of black people in the United States. This is an insight that was first made by Constance Sutton and Susan Makiesky-Barrow (1987)<sup>7</sup> based on their research (during the 1950s and early 1970s, respectively) in a Barbadian community of sugar workers. Viewing migration as a "bidirectional rather than unidirectional phenomenon" (1987: 86), they noted that after the 1962 imposition of immigration reforms in Britain and the 1965 opening of migration channels to the United States, Barbadians had developed an increased consciousness of American racism and admiration for African American militancy in large part as a result of migrants who had returned to their communities with not only additional economic resources but also new ideas forged through their experience of life in the United States and Britain and through their encounters with both African Americans and other West Indian migrants. A heightened racial consciousness seemed to have developed alongside an intensified pan-Caribbean (and sometimes pan-African) sensibility, leading many by the 1970s to frame their opposition to local and global inequalities through the language of race. Although for Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow racial consciousness circulated through people (return migrants), for Paulette it was television shows like the miniseries *Roots* that gave her additional purchase on race and class relations within her own community and nation, and that provided another language through which to develop what she called her "black consciousness." In both cases, African America—in its models of leadership and its cultural productions—became a diasporic resource that extended its relevance across national borders by helping to provide insight into the kinds of

structural inequalities faced by poor and working-class people not only in the United States but also elsewhere in the black Atlantic world. For Paulette, this was a resource that could also inspire the pride needed for surviving experiences of racial and class prejudice, both within Jamaica and those expected overseas.

Yet the circulation of African American cultural production occurs within broader relations of power and privilege, and this is what so many commentators are identifying as they decry the encroachment of American blackness on the nationalist sensibilities of Jamaicans. In other words, as several scholars have argued, diaspora is not a unified field of experience and should be theorized in terms of power relations and asymmetries across communities, relations that are about race and nation, but that are mediated by class and gender (Brown 1998; Campt 2004; Edwards 2003). These insights should direct us toward two related points of inquiry. The first has to do with how current processes of globalization have fostered new identities or facilitated a new dominance of older, marginalized ones through lateral borrowing among black communities worldwide, what Liza McAlister, in her analysis of Haitian Rara transnationally (2002), would call the co-production of identity among diasporic groups, themselves differently positioned in relation to dominant racial systems of power in the United States. The second important line of critical inquiry has to do with the ways borrowing among communities is completely imbricated within the hegemonic social, economic, and political relations that make particular cultural and political practices originating, in this case in the United States, available to black communities elsewhere.

In other words, performances of African American blackness have been used as means to identify belonging and racial power in a range of sites throughout the black world (and beyond), yet the relations between African Americans and black people elsewhere are fraught with tension because of the globally hegemonic position of the United States and the dominance of American media. In Jamaica, on one hand, lower-class black Jamaicans have adopted and adapted some of the political and cultural trends that are portrayed in United States media featuring African American themes. On the other hand, the difficulty of extracting personal and national development goals from the shadow of the United States has perpetuated an ongoing resentment. This resentment has occasionally been extended to black Americans who, despite the stylistic appeal of African American popular culture, and despite the political appeal of transnational racial solidarity, are nonetheless suspect because they carry the banner of the United States.

The United States, however, does not have a monopoly on the cultural production of blackness globally. Because of the worldwide popularity of reggae music and dancehall and because Jamaican cultural and political struggles have become the dominant referents of black consciousness in other areas of the diaspora, representations of Jamaican blackness have come to challenge the hegemony of American blackness as the means through which black Atlantic communities index cultural and political citizenship. Raymond Codrington (2006) shows, for example, that in London a new generation of black British musical performers (many of whom are descended from African rather than West Indian migrants) are using hip-hop as a medium through which to counter the dominance of reggae and dancehall, forms that they consider the hegemonic means through which earlier generations of black Brits forged a racial identity. Similarly, Denise Noble (2005) has remarked on the relatively privileged status of Jamaican culture within notions of black Britishness. She argues, however, that this privileged status produces contradictory effects, because Jamaican culture is seen at one and the same time as “a highly successful ‘home-grown’ Black ‘urban’ culture” and an “internal threat to national security,” one that is exceedingly violent and that dangerously challenges notions of British multiculturalism (2005).

Moreover, the boundaries of variant blacknesses are never as rigid as nationalists would have us believe. For example, people with West Indian background often “pass” for African Americans in key roles within popular African American institutions such as the music magazines *Vibe* and *The Source* or as well-known hip-hop video directors. This kind of passing has political dimensions as well and thus disturbs the kind of culturalist, ethnic distinctiveness discourse that Jemima Pierre shows perpetuates racist notions of African American inferiority (2004).<sup>8</sup> Paying closer attention to what circulates, who consumes, how communities are affected, and how political solidarities are forged and broken draws attention more fully to how global-local interrelationships create and reproduce power dynamics embedded within the production of diasporic resources. West Indians, after all, have also long been integral players in African American political and cultural struggles in the United States (James 1998; Kasinitz 1992) and have, in fact, co-produced some of the most influential popular cultural genres usually identified with African Americans like hip-hop (Hebdige 1987; Gilroy 1993), genres that developed alongside their counterparts (like dancehall) “at home.” For this reason, Jamaicans in Jamaica have a profound sense that their political struggles and cultural expressions also travel globally, influencing the constitution of transnational black worlds every bit as much as African Americans.

In fact, many of the young people with whom I conducted ethnographic research during the mid- and late 1990s passionately believed that the circulation of ideas, practices, and styles between Jamaica and the United States was reciprocal and that cultural appropriation was a selective two-way process, albeit one that was uneven. This explains why many youth, in contrast to both an older generation of middle-class professionals and the generation of working-class Jamaicans politicized by the various movements during the 1970s, might not have seen America as an evil empire encroaching from the north. Contrary to the dominant image of the culturally bombarded and besieged Jamaican, powerless either to resist or critique that which is imposed from “elsewhere”—the image often proliferated by those who disparaged the growing influence of the United States—youth asserted that David could not only challenge Goliath but could also influence what Goliath listened to, how he dressed, and what he liked. This insistence reflects an emergent sense of where Jamaican blackness stands in relation to Americanness, and particularly African Americanness, within the realms of popular culture and style—genres that circulate transnationally through media representations. Yet these mediated images also construct hierarchies among blacknesses, hierarchies that are often rooted in stereotypes about norms that are believed to belong to one or another black group. One of the effects of these hierarchies is that even those mediated explorations of the relationships among, for example, black Jamaicans and African Americans represent these communities as bounded groups with separate spheres of influence and separate futures, rather than groups that are always already complexly intertwined sociopolitically, economically, and culturally.

### **Black Jamaica in (African) America**

Some of the most well-worn tropes about Jamaican blackness within mainstream United States media revolve around sexuality and exotic danger and the extent to which these generate a sense of what Obika Gray has called authentic “badman-ism” (2001). These are hierarchies that are also implicitly engaged by black American popular cultural productions such as the hip-hop movie *Belly*, released in 1998 by Lionsgate/Fox Studios, and directed by Hype Williams, best known for his string of popular hip-hop videos in the mid-1990s. *Belly* is the story of best friends Tommy and Sincere (played by rappers DMX and Nas, respectively) who grew up together on the streets of Queens, New York, and who support themselves by robbing local businesses and dealing dope. Their story is ultimately a morality tale that indexes the power dynamics among blacknesses through space and language.

One night after robbing a strip joint, Tommy hears about a new form of heroin that is on its way to the United States via “conduits in Jamaica and throughout the West Indies.” Tommy decides this could be a lucrative new business for him and enlists the support of Sincere. Tommy then drives to the Long Island estate of Jamaican drug don Lennox (played by dancehall DJ Louie Rankin) to ask for financial backing and Jamaican suppliers. Lennox promises to think about it, warning Tommy not to cross him because he is “the toughest rassa claat Jamaican in the United States of America.” Lennox’s language here is an important, yet subtle, tool through which Williams indexes the realism of *Belly*’s underworld. Unlike many Hollywood films in which African American actors portray Jamaican characters, Williams actually hired Jamaican artists for *Belly*. This is significant because in this film, as opposed to movies like *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, the accent as well as the proficiency with Jamaican patois are critical registers of the kind of “authentic” badman-ism Williams needs to portray in this narrative.

With Lennox fronting the money for the new business, Tommy organizes a crew to travel to Omaha, Nebraska, to set up their distribution system. The money starts to roll in for the New Yorkers at the expense of the local crew led by Rico, who sports giant spectacles and styles his pressed long hair in a flip. Resenting the competition, Rico places an anonymous call to the FBI to rat out Tommy’s crew. The feds descend on the headquarters of Tommy’s business in Omaha and the crew falls.

Meanwhile, Lennox calls in a favor from Tommy, and they travel together to Jamaica. As they are driven through the Kingston streets with Tommy coughing from the strength of the Jamaican spliff they are smoking, Lennox shows Tommy the “pure sufferation” of Kingston’s ghettos and takes him to a dancehall session. There, he points out Kingston’s top don, Sosa, who is so well protected that “no one can touch him,” Lennox says, “not even me. It will have to be a man from out of the country.” That man, of course, is Tommy, and he is happy to oblige. By the time Tommy returns to New York, the FBI has seized his home and he goes on the run.

Back in Jamaica, the news comes in that Lennox was behind the hit on Sosa, and Sosa’s crew, led by Chiquita, a dancehall queen cum assassin, mobilizes to avenge their leader’s death. They travel to New York and ambush Lennox at home. In the gun battle that ensues, Lennox manages to kill all of Sosa’s men, but Chiquita surprises him by jumping him from behind and slitting his throat from ear to ear. Here is where we see most clearly how Williams maps a hierarchy of badness onto regionalized and nationalized modalities



of blackness. At one end of the spectrum is Omaha-based Rico, who is portrayed as “soft,” on one hand because of his “country” hairdo and style of dress, and on the other because he rats out the big city boys who are dipping into his business. Within the context of urban America, Tommy is the one who inspires fear, but he seems anxious in the Long Island home of “the original don dada” Lennox and awkwardly out of place on the streets of Kingston. But in the end, the baddest of them all is a Jamaican woman who kills Lennox not with the impersonal technology of guns but by getting close enough to slit his throat.<sup>9</sup> As represented in Hype Williams film, then, Jamaican blackness is the most powerfully violent, rich, and unpredictable of the three, but it also perishes in the end.

This has the effect of redirecting *Belly*'s narrative away from an exploration of the points of convergence and divergence among diasporic blacknesses and toward an exegesis of African American spiritual redemption, in one case via a return to roots and in the other through adherence to an alternative modernizing movement. Upon Tommy's return to New York after a brief stint in a Decatur county jail, he is tapped by the FBI to infiltrate a Nation of Islam-type organization to kill the Minister. Yet as he studies the religious texts, he begins to change his own thoughts about his purpose in life. Sincere, in the meantime, decides that he and his family need to get out of New York and implores his partner Tionne (played by TLC's “T-Boz” Watkins) to consider moving to Africa with their baby girl Kenya. The film ends on New Year's Eve 1999, and the new millennium is ushered in with Lennox dead, with Tommy declining to assassinate the Minister at the last minute, and with Sincere in Africa where he is experiencing life, according to the concluding voiceover narrative, “like a whole new beginning.”

While *Belly* attempts to portray the complexity of diasporic inter-relationships, the film's conclusion recenters the African American narrative it starts with, and as a result, it does not delineate a more complicated sense of generational transitions within African Americanness and Caribbean Americanness that are not bound by geography. Instead, it reproduces a notion of hard and fast intradiasporic difference and clear territorial separations. These separations are generated as one effect of broader hegemonies that shape intradiasporic power relations, thereby centering the African American narrative and refusing the complex overlaps that might be invoked by including figures like the Notorious B.I.G., KRS One, and Busta Rhymes—hip-hop paragons who were either born in Jamaica themselves, or whose parents were—within the cultural landscape of *Belly*. These figures occupy the liminal space of Caribbean Americanness and embody the

overlap among national, transnational, and racial subjectivities. By sidestepping a deeper rendering of these (ultimately, very intimate) relationships, Hype Williams (who himself grew up in Queens with his Oklahoman father and Honduran mother) stops short of fully engaging the ways new diasporic resources have been created in and through the processes of African American/Afro-Caribbean identity formation among second generation West Indian Americans. Had the film highlighted—rather than erased—these sorts of connections, it might have more fully mined the popular cultural networks it introduces for emergent generational trends within diasporic relationships.

### **Generational racial formation and transnational belonging**

Although *Belly* presents us with a stylistic depiction of how blacknesses might be imagined as coeval yet not coextensive, this is not only about style. Popular cultural representations are also diasporic resources that both reflect and reimagine the implications of a history of black Atlantic circulations, a history whose parameters have been shaped by geopolitical and economic concerns that have changed over time. As a result, generation is a critical analytic tool through which to investigate transnational and racial subjectivities because it gives us a way to situate expressions of racial solidarity and difference within the context of changing relationships among political structures, labor opportunities, and socioeconomic mobility. For example, we know that relationships among West Indian immigrants in the United States and African Americans have always oscillated between cooperative and tense due to the changing class composition of West Indian migrant pools, to the broader political economy of labor surrounding migration streams, and to more general waves of nativism in American society (Watkins-Owens 1996). But if current processes of globalization have changed the ways people conceptualize national community, and if new conceptualizations of what makes up the national space are also shaped by and shape new understandings about racial community and belonging, then we must also identify not only the kinds of resources on which different generations of people draw to co-produce new ideas about race and nation but also the ways generational cohorts imagine and mobilize the concept of “resources” itself in different ways.

Several scholars have begun to do this kind of work. In her study of first- and second-generation West Indian migrants in New York City, for example, Mary Waters (1999) argues that although first-generation West Indians tended to identify themselves across the board in relation to their national origins (and in doing so, to distance

themselves from African Americans), their children self-identified in ways that were shaped largely by their class background and education. In other words, those second-generation West Indian Americans who self-identified as ethnically West Indian tended to come from middle-class backgrounds or had parents who were involved in ethnic voluntary organizations. Those who identified as Americans (and particularly as African Americans) tended to be poorer students whose negative assessments of their own future possibilities were rooted in their conviction that American racial prejudice severely limited their chances in life. These findings led Waters (and many of her interviewees) to assert that becoming American, and specifically becoming African American, was associated with poor performance in school and, therefore, ultimately with downward mobility.<sup>10</sup> Other researchers, however, are beginning to investigate the ways in which identifying with aspects of African American political history and cultural production has helped second-generation West Indian Americans to succeed beyond the confines of their ethnic enclave and to negotiate their own relationships to both West Indian and American racial (and national) formations through consumption and political activism (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; LaBennett 2002; Clarke 2004; Stoller 2002). In doing so, they impel a broadened understanding of “diasporic resources,” one that not only reconfigures West Indian Americans’ relationship to racial prejudice in the United States but also to class discrimination and older notions of respectable citizenship in the Caribbean.

On one hand, therefore, diasporic resources include the kinds of music, foods, fashion, and political sensibilities that accompany people and media as they circulate and that become the raw materials from which communities of black folk in various locations might draw to produce innovative racial and national subjectivities at particular moments in time. On the other hand, because *people* (through remittances) have become Caribbean countries’ largest foreign exchange earners, they are themselves important resources, or as Garth Green (this volume) has put it, the region’s new primary “natural resources.” Jamaicans *themselves* have become diasporic resources mobilized in a transnational sociocultural and political sphere toward national development goals that now, by necessity, must be explicitly formulated in transterritorial terms.

What was notable about the Diaspora Conference I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, then, was ultimately its attempt to imagine a new means by which to survive globalization—by changing nationalist notions of collective belonging in ways that would broaden what it means to be both American and Jamaican. Jamaican communities

abroad were positioned as representing not only significant economic interests but also a fair amount of political power—power that could be used for the advancement of Caribbean interests in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. As the *Observer* editors argued,

Jamaica as a nation state does have influence beyond its size and economic power, driven substantially by the creative energy of its people, at home and in the Diaspora. If those abroad can be organised politically, there is the capacity to add another dimension to Jamaica's capacity on the international stage. But perhaps more critical is their ability to help add insulation against the turbulence of the globalised environment (*Daily Observer* 2004b).

The invocation of globalization here is strategic, and the proposal that diasporic Jamaican's might ameliorate its effects stands as a response to the diminished power of Caribbean (and other Third World) states to provide the resources citizens need in an environment in which the United States, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank set the terms for social and economic development.

Thus, Jamaicans' use of America to advance new goals and new understandings of community becomes a critical node in transforming nationalisms "at home," and in the mitigation of the effects of a global political economy that through the development of new spatial relations of production has reinstated the national-racial hierarchies of an earlier imperial moment. Redefining the spatial reach of Jamaica and America has become part of a broader project of racial vindication, one that is manifest not only through performative consumption but also through a politics of citizenship that draws on nationalist identifications while extending notions of community across territorial boundaries. Black America and black Jamaica, therefore, exist in *one* transnational sociocultural and political field, a field that is characterized by power relations that are historically contingent yet dynamic. Only a commitment to apprehending diaspora as process rather than as a historical event or state of being can empower us to more complexly render the ways this field transforms over time.

## Notes

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1. This conference was the outgrowth of a symposium held 20 October 2003 at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies entitled "The Jamaican Diaspora Reciprocal Relations: Way Forward."
2. From September 1996 to December 1997 and then during the summers of 2000 and 2001, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a rural hillside Jamaican community just outside Kingston to gain insights into the ways working- and middle-class Jamaicans apprehended and mobilized national initiatives and institutions regarding Jamaican cultural identity and to see what expressive materials they themselves generated to provide a sense of self and belonging.
3. Michel Rolph Trouillot uses the term "fragmented globality" for the effects of contemporary neoliberal capitalist processes, which have widened the gaps between rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped, north and south (2001).
4. Here, I mean to evoke Lisa Rofel's discussion of the importance of generation, both as an analytic category and as a critical factor in the formation of sociopolitical cohorts (1999).
5. The *Jamaica Gleaner* is the country's premiere daily paper and is the longest continuously published newspaper in the Western hemisphere. Owned by a family whose holdings include longstanding sugar interests, the paper tends to reflect a more conservative position on many issues having to do with national development. The *Observer*, Jamaica's other morning daily, tends to be more left-leaning and reports more often on American (and African American) topics, including sporting events such as the NBA Finals, scandals such as the Jayson Blair fraud and the Kobe Bryant case, and musical collaborations between hip hop and dancehall artistes. The *Observer* has also been more consistently critical of Colin Powell, who as an African American with Caribbean roots was expected to stand up for the region as a whole but who has disappointed many West Indians by playing a role in Aristide's removal from Haiti, in ignoring CARICOM's collective stand against the United States-led war in Iraq, and in undermining support for the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.
6. Mutabaruka is a Rastafarian dub poet known for his afrocentric (and revolutionary) lyrics.
7. This essay was originally written in 1973 and published in 1975 but was republished in the 1987 volume.
8. The recent debate about Affirmative Action in higher education provides an example of some of the political dimensions of African, Caribbean, and African American identity formation across generations. The *New York Times* report on a 2004 meeting of Harvard University's black alumni noted that celebrations of the increased number of black undergraduates at elite colleges and universities were tempered by concerns about exactly where these black students were coming from. At that meeting, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Lani Guinier argued that "the majority of [Harvard's black undergraduates]—perhaps as many as two-thirds—were West Indian and African immigrants or their children, or to a lesser extent, children of biracial couples" (Rimer and Arenson 2004). This means that only about a third of the students were "from families

in which all four grandparents were born in this country, descendants of slaves,” prompting several professors to question whether Affirmative Action policies were benefiting those whom they felt “were intended as [the] principal beneficiaries.” For these professors and administrators, African Americans whose roots in the United States were generations deep were being “left behind” (Rimer and Arenson 2004).

9. Unfortunately, space limitations make it difficult to fully explore the gender implications of this movie and how they articulate with broader gender dynamics within Jamaica (but see Barnes 1997; Cooper 1993; Ford-Smith 1997; Thomas 2004; and Ulysse 1999 for more extensive treatments). Suffice it to say here that although Chiquita may have been the fiercest killer here, her ferocity does not signify that she is the “top don.” Rather, the power she wields in this instance is symbolic of more general ideologies about violence and retribution in Jamaica.
10. See Pierre 2004 for an extended critique of these arguments, and a discussion of how the deployment of ethnic identities draws from older culture of poverty language and can be manipulated to undermine resistance to racism (see also Kasinitz 1992 for insights into how this has transpired within the realm of formal political action in New York City).

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