Post-Nationalist Geographies: Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa

Louis Chude-Sokei

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The whole world is Africa... Black Uhuru

Hear me now raggamuffin: we run all sounds, and we run the nation. So me we just control the borderline.
Anonymous Pirate DJ

Ring the alarm, another sound is dying...
Tenor Saw

Because "Africa" has been called upon to justify so many movements of liberation and exploitation, and because it has functioned not only as a physical reality in the making of Western culture but also as a central concept in the canons of institutional (and revolutionary) knowledge, it is hard to mark a clear space between the layers of discourse and desire, and any Africa which may lie beyond. It is in many ways very difficult to extricate what is said of Africa from what Africa says of itself. Perhaps it is impossible. But if indeed "Africa" spoke, how would it speak and what would it say? What "itself" would it express, and could the sound of that voice be understood by ears still ringing with myth?

After all, a native sound connotes a system of native knowledge, and as Paul Gilroy has so well argued, national and cultural belonging—especially within the various populations of the black diaspora—cannot be fully understood in the realm of literacy and print media. Native knowledge cannot be accurately traced or located in the writings of the literate few. Instead it is articulated in and disseminated by what I call the sound/culture nexus: that discursive space where Africa ceaselessly extends and invents itself in an epistemological matrix coded not in words but in sound. Why sound? Because the discourse in sound is separate from those of the literary, of the logos; it is a space independent of the centered semantic structures of science, freed from the objective bias of literacy. It is necessarily the space of oral knowledge, the space of both magic and postmodern technology. Indeed, for this generation within a black diaspora, sound is closer to culture than "race" ever was.

For me, Africa speaks in those shadowy historical moments which go unrecorded, those moments of reflection when diaspora asks the question asked by Harlem poet Countee Cullen in 1925: "What is Africa to me?" But in these moments, the language is opaque, as with all oracular dispensations, and the events which mark them often very threatening. Take for example the stoning of Bunny Wailer. On the level of popular knowledge—as opposed to the towers of "critoque"—the stoning of this semilegendarily Rastafarian singer, the last living member of the original Wailers (Bob Marley and Peter Tosh both dying in the 1980s), signifies a crucial moment in diaspora. For you see, Wailer was more than just a singer: he was perhaps the last living symbol of black revolutionary desire from his generation. And his was a generation that helped thrust a mythic "Africa" to the forefront of black popular culture in the West Indies and, via reggae music and Rastafarianism, the world.

His being stoned in Jamaica by this new generation, the raggamuffin generation, signifies that something has radically changed in certain subhuman circles of the diaspora. Certainly Africa constantly changes, but the meanings of Africa change too; they change and are adapted to fit the local notions of black identity and cultural survival. In this case the "Africa" central to a Rastafarian Pan-Africanism has been symbolically dislodged. The generation which celebrated Marcus Garvey as a prophet and Africa as "Zion" has been assaulted by the children birthed by it. This is because new economic and cultural conditions require new gods and symbols; old ones stagnate or become malevolent and repressive. In short, what we have in the raggamuffin/dancehall1 (sub)cultural movement is a very harsh popular critique of what Africa means to us at this moment in a post-/neo-/omni-colonial world.

Emerging out of the Seaga-Thatcher-Regan/Reagan triumvirate of the 1980s and fueled by a booming international cocaine trade, raggadancehall stepped boldly onto the diasporan stage as first an overturning of that Rastafarian mythos which celebrated a universalized notion of black racial and cultural identity; an essentialized vision of diaspora which exercised a sort of oppressive control over Jamaican cultural production. In its most sincere moments Rasta fetishized black cultural origins, rooting them in a fixed source of "anciency" called, according to the Old Testament, "Ethiopia." And as the Rastafarian influence in reggae music grew and came to dominate in the 1970s, this obsession became a kind of oppression control over Jamaican black cultural production. In its most sincere moments Rasta fetishized black cultural origins, rooting them in a fixed source of "anciency" called, according to the Old Testament, "Ethiopia." And as the Rastafarian influence in reggae music grew and came to dominate in the 1970s, this obsession became a sort of oppressive control over Jamaican cultural production.

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They also investigate the noir-ish street-level intrigacies of a postcolonial underclass navigating a global network of immigrant communities. Outsiders to the culture of ragga (Jamaican and non-Jamaican) tend to find these narratives rude, crude, scatological, and “slack.” This, however, is what DJs (read MCs, or rappers) describe as “strictly reality.” Everything from local politics and crime to ghettot morality, from graphic depictions of murder to very explicit and pornographic details of the bedroom, gets put to rapid-fire boom-beats and is broadcast throughout the global community of Yardies, a network of immigrant community property, belonging only to the moment of expression, range from the sublime terrifying to the incredibly stupid.

Take for example the latest masterpiece in the “gun talk” genre, that subcategory of ragga chats which are devoted exclusively to the celebration of guns and the street credibility and power derived from them: “Shine and Criss” by the massive Shabba Ranks. Some of these tunes are explicitly metaphorical, celebrating the fierce competitions within sound culture; but these metaphors get strained due to that proximity between life and art, that closeness between a metaphorical “Sound-boy Killing” and, in the words of Terror Fabulous, “Literally Killing.” I quote this track at length, not because it is definitive but because it is the latest and the most self-conscious of the genre. It is also a major hit:

Oil up all a the gun dem, keep them shine and criss
A copper shot, you fe carry inna you gun,
mek a bwoy turn purple any time him get it, Lawd...

I don’t trust no shadow when me come after dark
Me kill first and a me last pop off
Tell them say that gunshot do all of the talk...

The opening sample (“Original Gangster”) is of course the ultimate statement of ghetto-political authenticity in Afro-American “gangsta rap.” And this is where the potential in a hip hop/ragga cross-cultural discourse was first articulated on the street level. But what Shabba does in “Shine and Criss” is offer a view into the mind of a Yardie whose world is one of extreme violence, a world that has no time for what Bajan writer George Lamming called “The Pleasures of Exile.” Guns are a sign of entirely different assumptions about cultural positioning; or as Mad Cobra has said in his massive “Shot No Talk”: “Fe me gunshot/don’t hold no argument.” Some of these tracks are so vivid and violent that they are merely long, wrenching descriptions of slow torture and boasts about the most brutal ways to kill—not only one’s enemy, but his family and friends (and one ridiculous line which pops up every now and then involves the murder of the family cat!). Indeed, some tunes are explicitly metaphorical, celebrating the fierce competitions within sound culture; but these metaphors get strained due to that proximity between life and art, that closeness between a metaphorical “Sound-boy Killing” and, in the words of Terror Fabulous, “Literally Killing.” I quote this track at length, not because it is definitive but because it is the latest and the most self-conscious of the genre. It is also a major hit:

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where the more Afrocentric embraced the Marley vision, the ghetto youth, the “bad-boys,” were smuggling in specialized weaponry like M16s, Glock’s, and Bushmasters, killing each other and following their favorite sound systems around the island. And, of course, the cocaine and marijuana trade was booming. In fact, it was booming in such a way that in the 1980s a few of the more enterprising Yardies invested some of this money which came to the ghetto in—believe it or not—state-of-the-art digital computer technology. Thus began what Jah Fish (Murray Elias), an avid follower of Jamaican music, has called the “the modern era” of Afro-Caribbean sound and culture.

This, then, should help describe the ragga-muffin sound, what Dick Hebdige has called “an ultra-modern maisonette where all the surfaces are clean and shiny”: a highly produced digital and floppy-disc-driven sound from a country which, ironically, has no significant computer technology to speak of. The ragga youth are immersed in this technology, fascinated with it in much the same way that early reggae mixers and producers were with multitrack technology. For them this technology and the highly experimental rhythms that they produce in it—as much akin to German and Eastern European avant-garde synthesizer music as to West African percussion and calypso—allow them to play with the signifiers and symbols of cultural history in the ontological space of sound. It also plucks them into an information network spread across the Atlantic, one focussed on the potential for cultural and economic exchange in the New World instead of a fixation with their roots in Africa.

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one is, in the words of Don Gorgon Ninjaman, sentimentality and intimacy—a world where people pick up the mike today and attempt to "ram up session" demand not equality but that their bans "ride and provide."

It is also important to note that the particular uses of language in ragga/dancehall sound culture tend, as was my point earlier, to consciously separate them from blacks met in New York, Miami, or London. They use language, as many Afro-Caribbean immigrants have, to signify and create cultural difference within the nationalist monolith of "blackness." Despite the fact that Pan-Americanism is in many ways an invention of the West Indies, the specific cultural dynamics of the ideology require that culture often be elided for the sake of "race," that the specifics of one African experience be lost in the Atlantic for the sake of an ahistorical, transcendental "ness." This has created certain hostilities which conven-

iently escape the annals of black historiography—nationalist or otherwise—because they would strip "racial" affiliations of their often merely rhetorical power. The longstanding tensions between Jamaicans and black Americans in Harlem—between Garvey and the Harlem "Niggerati," for example—attest to this crisis of affiliation. This use of language and culture, this particular intraracial silence, functions as a reaction to the shock of seeing each other; to be ambivalently placed between an assumption of racial affinity and the differential truths of black history. Once again, the "borderline" that figures so prominently in ragga/dancehall sound.

None of this, however, is to suggest that there is no ground of commonality—as with history, racism, slavery, exploitation. Not even the most nihilistic "dogheart" DJs would assert such a thing. By now it is clear to me that diaspora is a memory bank of signifiers and symbols of black authenticity constructed over the last century or so and is moored by an assumed racial/cultural commonality. Without this assumption there really is nothing to talk about; there really is no "we" or, in some cases, "them." But due to it, the assumption, there is now more exchange between and among blacknesses than there has been since the slave trade! The ragga response, however, is not to accept themselves as passive victims in an overwhelming Babylonian structure, not to represent themselves as "wailers," as victims of history belonging to a helplessly innocent race. This can be seen in the incredible boasting and self-assertions that are typical of dancehall and the "fearless" rude-boys who "ride the riddim." Instead, they see themselves in many ways as being free within Babylon to destroy history and rebuild community—to, in T.S. Eliot's words, "murder and create."

Listening Guide

Considering that the ragga/dancehall industry is a singles industry releasing over 200 new singles a week, and considering that its infrastructure is still very close to the West Indian grassroots and sound-system subculture, it is at this point very difficult to obtain those specific tracks which characterize the form at any given moment. Most fresh singles reach certain American record stores in a limited quantity and are snatched up by select musicians, DJs, and those "in the know." And the albums which are widely available tend to feature a DJ's two or three hits and acres of bad material. However, acknowledging this scenario, many independent and major labels have made available dozens of compilations featuring the major hits of the last few months. (These, of course, are notoriously late since there is such a high turnover rate of hits and artists and since things get laughably old in a matter of days.)

I would suggest any of the following compilations since they all fairly well give an idea of what I have been trying to describe:

**Bam Bam It's Murder.** Features the major hits "Murder She Wrote" by Chaka Demus and Pliers and "Them A Bleach" by Nardo Ranks. This is very available and highly recommended.


**Strictly the Best,** vols. 1–13. These tend to balance well the more pop-oriented sounds with the vicious, hardcore slam-jams. Number 3 features Pinchers' huge hit "Bandelero" and Ninjaman's "Test the High Power," which is the most well-articulated description of being at a sound session that I have ever heard.

Also, **Roof International:** Cosmic Force Records have put out a series of dancehall compilations that are well respected in the DJ community. Still, any compilations that you find—especially those that feature bhanga/bangara rhythms or very experimental rhythms that sound nothing like reggae—should serve to make your points clearer.

As for major label albums, I will suggest only a few:

**As Raw As Ever** and **X-tra Naked** by Shabba Ranks. These two American albums have won Ranks two Grammy awards and an Afro-American audience that even Bob Marley couldn't get. The latter features the Yard hit "Ting-a-Ling" and a number of American R & B crossover smashes.

**From Mi Heart** by Cutty Ranks. Includes a handful of very good tunes. But the classic is **The Stopper,** featuring the hit title track.

**Don Dadda** by SuperCat. This album is highly recommended. Features the hit single "Ghetto Red Hot" as well as the classic "Nuff Man A Dead." If you can find the Massive B. hip hop remix of "Ghetto Red Hot" you will have found the most successful ragga/hip hop fusion single to date.

**Ragga/without Soldier** by Daddy Freddy. Despite an incredibly bad debut solo album, this second full album by Daddy Freddy is very highly recommended. In my humble opinion, it ranks as the best and most diverse full ragga album available. Daddy Freddy chats on hard Yard riddims as well as gangsta-hip hop beats and jazz-funk tracks. It's on Chrysalis records so it is widely available. Definitely check this one out.

Anything you can find from Ninjaman "the Don Gorgon," "the People's DJ," will blow your mind—if you can get through his dense Patwa and virtuoso lyrical style. He has ruled in Jamaica for years, and his early albums (pre-1993) feature some incredible verbal, rhythmic, and narrative adventures. His latest is **Nobody's Business But My Own,** featuring "Married To Mi Gun," "Mi Belly Move," and "(The World) Between Her Legs."

**Patra** has recently been signed as the first major female DJ, and her album on Epic, **Queen of the Pack,** features tracks that are definitely "the boom."

And no list would be complete without mentioning 1993's DJ kid sensation, Buju Banton. Nineteen years old, gruff, and truly wicked, his American debut is the aptly titled **Voice of Jamaica.**

This list, of course, is not definitive and is based on my own collection and my experience as a selector/DJ with the sound system Ebony Tower International.
Unfortunately this equation tilts too often to the “murder” side—as in two recent ragga hits, “Murder She Wrote” and “Murder Dem!”—due to the intense competition, violence, and wanton bloodshed central to the crack/cocaine trade, the Jamaican record industry, and the vagaries of ghetto living and grassroots capitalism. Nevertheless, the ragga are here, there, everywhere, stalking the ever-extending streets of diaspora with a lethal and dangerous style. Imagining freedom within the virtual networks of dissemination and consumption, they circulate, never achieving a fixed moment of landfall. They follow their sound and their sound follows them, defiantly asserting noisy difference in the center of that dream space called diaspora.

Now big up all massive, London massive, New York bad bwoy, Toronto massive—all crew! Rude bwoys a foreign and rudie’s a Yard big up cause you know say all a we a Jamaicans. And we know that no dubbie-dubbie sound-bwoy can cross the border, cause if him test it, him a go dead—pure gun-shot inna him head! So come now, my selector, come with a next riddim cause we no know that no dibby-dibby sound-bwoy dem. Come, raggamuffin, enter inside this ya sound…

Skyjuice, selector from Metromedia Sound System

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A slightly different version of this paper was presented at a conference titled “Art, Aesthetics and Politics in Africa and the Caribbean,” which was held at the University of California, San Diego, in 1994. It is being published with the proceeds of that conference.

1. Dancehall and ragga music are terms used often interchangeably to describe the new computer-driven musical forms coming primarily out of Jamaica in the wake of traditional reggae music and culture. Although some of it sounds merely like hype-reggae, most of it sounds nothing like its predecessor at all. These terms also describe the musics’ attendant cultural superstructure—attitudes, styles, language, and sociopolitical orientation. Originally the dancehall was (and still is) the physical space—an open field, a rented auditorium—in which sound systems strung up and held public dances. It is in this context that the discourses of Jamaica’s urban, working-class culture worked themselves out in sound and expressive culture.

But I prefer to think of a difference between reggae and dancehall in much the way many see the distinction between hip hop and rap: the latter is more commercial, dealing with the music that has gotten mass attention and become streamlined for popular tastes; whereas the former also connotes a culture and is more disensual of popular acceptance.

2. Testimonial report by Welton and all Ladino author Geoff Marcy.

3. I prefer reggae to Dancehall. But I still see it as the form of reggae that dancehall and hip hop descend from almost exclusively. It features the use of pre-recorded instrumental tracks (“versions”) or strategic breaks in a tune as spaces for the DJ to improvise new, spoken lyrics. This form of reggae has only recently gotten the international attention it deserves, but has ruled in Jamaica even when Bob Marley was the global “Reggae Ambassador.”

4. Sound systems are one of the black diaspora’s most enduring and frequently unacknowledged cultural institutions. Although variations can be found throughout diasporic history, the form they have today can be traced back to those mobile discotheques in Jamaica during the late 1950s/early 1960s which would set up in empty fields around the more economically depressed areas in Kingston. Cane cutters, who were taken to Miami for brief stints of migrant labor would return to Jamaica with the latest R & B records and play them on homemade stereo customized to produce a level of volume that was nothing less than insane. Especially the bass frequencies. These rapidly became the only social and cultural space that catered to the ghetto dwellers. Shunning popular media—monorail radio and television which expressed the views of a culturally insecure elite—these systems became the primary space of cultural discourse in the vernacular. Indeed, it is this sort of discourse that renews African arts and celebrates Garvey where the national media evaded such issues; it is here that the fissures in the official narratives of race and nation were opened up for popular scrutiny, inculcating in the development of ska, rocksteady, and then reggae and ragga.

With the migration of Jamaicans to London in the late ’50s, sound systems became a space of exile where for a loud bass-thick moment, “home” could be invented there in the midst of Babylon. With the success of West Indian musics and styles in England, the sound-system structure was picked up by various youth subcultures who recontextualized it, eventually creating the digital sound cultures we see throughout Europe today. And the technical and musical innovations developed in ghetto studios because of the need to circumvent the limitations of poor equipment have become standard in state-of-the-art dance music as production in the West.

In New York, this alternate media structure was central to the formation of hip hop music and the foundation of its attendant subculture.


5. The test is the earliest music fully acknowledged as indigenously Jamaican. In the late 1950s it mixed all music of African and Latin percusion was the foundation upon which subsequent musical forms were built. Oddly enough, after years of bass-dominated harmonies, mento has returned in Jamaica music via sampling technology which seems to inspire artists to dig into the past and rehash (remix) their roots.

6. A much better and more specific discussion of the sexual politics of dancehall can be found in Carolyn Coopers ““Endy Play in the Dancehall,” Jamaica Journal 22. In “Punany.”—crude slang term for the female genitalia. Usage very popular in ragga.

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