Death in the Arena: A Brief History of Dancehall, Time, and the Cold War

Jason Frydman

Small Axe, Volume 23, Number 3, November 2019 (No. 60), pp. 34-49 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

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In a US radio interview about his epic Jamaican novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Marlon James identifies himself as part of a "post-post-colonial generation," claiming, "The hovering power for us when growing up in the '70s and '80s was not the UK. It was the States, it was America."[1] An icon of sorts for the "post-post-colonial generation," *A Brief History* renders a different sense of time and space than James's "post-colonial" forbears, since it is critically attuned in a new way to the temporal and spatial coordinates manufactured by the "hovering power" of the United States during the Cold War, itself the organizing framework for the CIA infiltration of 1970s and 1980s Jamaica that animates the novel. In the decades following World War II, US scholars and institutions, in the service of national security, fashioned "area studies" to subdivide and manage the conflict zones of the Cold War into so many Latin American studies, Middle Eastern studies, African studies, East Asian studies, and so on.[2] This intellectual reordering sought to splinter and fragment the spirit of Afro-Asian solidarity articulated at the 1955 Bandung Conference, a spirit extended to the Americas through the

1 "A Post-Post-Colonial Take on the Violent Birth of Modern Jamaica," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 5 October 2014, www.npr.org/2014/10/05/353254226/a-post-post-colonial-take-on-the-violent-birth-of-modern-jamaica.

2 See Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 3; and Elizabeth M. Holt, "Cairo and the Cultural Cold War for Afro-Asia," in Chen Jian et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building* (London: Routledge, 2018), 483–86.

small axe 60 • November 2019 • DOI 10.1215/07990537-7912310

Tricontinental Movement inaugurated in Havana in 1966. Caribbean studies suffers doubly from this splintering and fragmentation: already divided internally by imperial languages and histories, the area studies paradigm has worked to obscure how national and regional Cold War histories intersect, depend on, and impact the global Cold War. In other words, one of the enduring legacies of the area studies paradigm for understanding the Cold War in the Caribbean has been to obscure the globality of the Cold War itself.

If area studies has attempted to naturalize global space in accordance with US national security imperatives pitted against the aspirational solidarity of a nonaligned third world in search of decolonization, postcolonial studies has had the tendency to naturalize, and mystify, a problematic sense of global time. Eponymously emphasizing the formal end of colonialism, postcolonial studies has encouraged attention to the achievement of national independence in primarily British and French former colonies, often at the expense of recognizing the contemporaneous emergence of a new imperial order under the bipartite auspices of the United States and the Soviet Union. As the preeminent theorist of global Cold War studies Kuan-Hsing Chen has argued, "Decolonization movements on all fronts, since the end of the Second World War, have been intercepted, interrupted, and invaded by the cold-war structure."[3]

The rise of Michael Manley's socialist government in Jamaica in the 1970s sought the decolonization that independence never delivered. Precisely its renewed temporality of national redemption, and the geopolitical landscape it maneuvered within, were "intercepted, interrupted, and invaded by the cold-war structure."[4] Serving from its post-postcolonial generational vantage point as a temporal and spatial corrective to the tendencies of postcolonial and area studies, fields often blind to their own Cold War origins and entanglements, Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* indexes the many sites where Jamaican decolonizing impulses met Cold War interception, interruption, and invasion. The novel takes up the tenure of Manley's socialist government, polyvocally narrating the intersection of Bob Marley's and roots reggae's global ascendance, Kingston's garrison politics, and the CIA's drug-fueled campaign of political destabilization. *A Brief History* pushes against the narrow geopolitical confines of area studies by inserting Jamaica's socialist moment into a global Cold War frame. Furthermore, the novel uses the history of Jamaican music, culminating in the nearly mythical conflict between roots reggae and dancehall, to chart the Cold War's ideological conflicts over time, temporality, and futurity.

In its concern with revolutionary socialism in the anglophone Caribbean, and reflecting a growing impulse across scholarly and artistic fields to revisit that historical moment, James's novel engages similar terrain as two contemporaneous monographs about Grenada: Shalini Puri's *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* and David Scott's *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Like *A Brief History*, the titles

3 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 119.
4 Ibid.

announce a preoccupation with temporality, and each text prioritizes questions of memory and narrative authority over the period's material and ideological conflicts, a period when socialist revolution seemed possible even if always threatened by the enduring forces of entrenched inequality and imperialism. As we will see, despite their generic divergences, Puri, Scott, and James all stage how the shattered dreams of the anglophone Caribbean Left pulsate in a present that attempts to foreclose the alternative futures imagined in the 1960s and 1970s.

Striking a dissonant note with the two monographs, however, James's novel also includes the voices and memories of young lumpen slum residents conscripted into the violent world of Jamaica's garrison politics. Referred to as "tools you use once then destroy,"[5] these disposable subalterns introduce a temporality, rooted in the dancehall music of West Kingston's ghettos, that does not conform to the model of utopian futurity and traumatic failure that Puri, Scott, and many of James's characters put forward. Against the disappointments of a generation of Caribbean political subjects who sang "Better Must Come" in anticipation of "Redemption Time," *A Brief History of Seven Killings* points readers to a jaded, subaltern temporality encoded in dancehall music that rejects the revolutionary utopianism woven into the post-independence Jamaican soundscape. The novel stages this temporal conflict at the center of Jamaican popular music—and global Cold War culture—through the status of revolutionary Cuba and the *riddim*-based technique of dancehall song composition, both of which converge in the itinerary of the "Death in the Arena" riddim, to be explored below.

Puri's *Operation Urgent Memory* and Scott's *Omens of Adversity* offer a broadly consistent understanding of the sense of time active during actually existing anglophone Caribbean socialism. Early on in his excavation of the history and afterlife of the Grenada Revolution, Scott claims that "these were years when revolutionary futures were not merely possible but *imminent*; not only imminent, but *possible*."[6] In 1979, during Manley's second term as prime minister in Jamaica, the popular socialist New Jewel Movement, led by Maurice Bishop, seized power in Grenada from long-term strongman Eric Gairy. After nearly four enthusiastic yet tense and treacherous years and fueled by profound conflicts within the revolutionary government, elements of the armed forces assassinated Bishop in 1983, thus paving the way for the US invasion and the restoration of neocolonial political structures and relations.

After the electoral loss of Manley's socialist People's National Party (PNP) to the CIA-backed Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) in the 1980 election, the fall of the Grenada Revolution, Scott contends, and subsequent US invasion "constitute[d] a *watershed* event in the generational experience of time and history." No longer buoyed by the possibility of alternative futures, socialist or otherwise, Caribbean subjects found and still find themselves in the aftermaths of that era: "*Aftermaths* in which the present seems stricken with immobility and pain and ruin; a

5 Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (New York: Riverhead, 2014), 138.
6 David Scott, *Omens of Adversity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 4 (italics in original).

certain experience of temporal *afterness* prevails in which the trace of the futures past hangs like the remnant of a voile curtain over what feels uncannily like an endlessly extending present."[7]

Looking ahead to our discussion of the novel, precisely these remnants, in their congealed musical form, will become the sonic raw material of a dancehall temporality embodied by the disposable subalterns of *A Brief History* that do not share this sense of afterness because they did not vest that moment with the same sense of possibility, of alternative futures.[8]

Nonetheless, for many of the Grenadians, Jamaicans, and fellow travelers whom Scott, Puri, and James document in their texts, the collapse of socialist possibilities, "the promise and the betrayal," as Puri names it, is technically, formally traumatic.[9] This loss is characterized by a fractured historiography incapable of reconstructing the past at either individual or national levels, an incapacity that *A Brief History* tackles through its multiple narrators, living and dead, narrating disjointedly from different times and places. Puri also characterizes this past as an open wound rather than a processed event:

> So deep are the silences, so intense the emotions, so divergent the views, that any writer on the subject risks failing to do justice to their complexity. But the risks of failing to try may be even greater. Memory of the Grenada Revolution remains an organizing fracture in both the Grenadian and the wider Caribbean present. It is my contention that the Grenada Revolution is in many ways a *current* event, a chapter with still unfolding consequences for Caribbean history.[10]

The collapse of revolutionary socialism and the particular microhistories through which it transpired form a "fundamental traumatic knot that both halts memory and makes it urgent."[11]

For Puri, Scott, and James, these "still unfolding consequences" derive from multipronged efforts to silence revolutionary socialism's "traumatic ending."[12] With no full reckoning, the mourning remains incomplete. The forces of neoliberal retrenchment conspire to shut down and exclude traces of utopian revolutionary energy from contemporary discourse. "The Grenada Revolution," Puri notes, "forms no part of the history curriculum taught in Grenadian public schools. Calypso commentaries written after 1983 that recall the Revolution are rarely played on radio stations." Puri's mourning work, then, consists primarily of rescuing those shards of revolutionary memory that refuse to be contained by official histories, that make themselves felt in graffiti, reggae and calypso, and gossip. So not only were calypso and reggae commentaries "the soundtrack of the Revolution," but after the US bombing of Grenada's radio station destroyed that nation's calypso archive, "each calypso that appears in this book is a memorial to lost calypsos."[13]

7 Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 21, 6 (italics in original).
8 For a discussion of a nonrevolutionary temporality within the Jamaican intellectual Left in this historical moment, see Donette Francis, "Interim Time: Recasting the Revolutionary Jamaican 1970s," *Small Axe*, no. 58 (March 2019): 52–61.
9 Shalini Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2014), 7.
10 Ibid., 1 (italics in original).
11 Ibid., 7.
12 Scott, *Omens of Adversity,* 21.
13 Puri, *The Grenada Revolution*, 9, 12.

Scott's mourning work, by contrast, deconstructs those institutional processes that form the official history of the Grenada Revolution, from the trial of the Grenada 17, the central committee of the New Jewel Revolutionary Party held legally responsible for the assassination of Maurice Bishop, to the Truth and Reconciliation Program meant to lay the revolution to rest, which Scott reads as an attempt, like nearly all truth-and-reconciliation initiatives, to foreclose the possibility of utopian futures altogether through a ruse of neoliberal state-making:

> The story of the Grenada 17 and the political-legal aftermaths of the collapse of the Grenada Revolution is not merely a minor episode in the history of a geopolitically insignificant part of the world; it is a chapter inseparable from the larger story of the emergence of a world in which the socialist past can appear in the present *only* as a criminal one and in which liberal democracy parades as the single—and, if need be, militarily enforceable—direction of a worldwide political order.[14]

Scott identifies how the legacy of Cold War anticommunism endures in the practices of "transitional justice," those legal programs meant to shepherd nations from colonial apartheid structures and intrastate decolonization conflicts to liberal democracy.[15] Through this process, "the socialist past can appear in the present *only* as a criminal one," exemplifying the ongoing Cold War struggle over historical time and its possible futures.

A Brief History presents numerous characters who embody the temporal trajectory from utopian dreams to traumatic aftermaths mapped out in Scott's and Puri's analyses. Uncoincidentally, these characters intersect with reggae and dancehall music in crucial ways, indicating how Jamaican music both encodes and mediates the political conflict over Cold War time. From the late 1960s, roots reggae scored the global soundtrack of utopian anticipation, with its Rastafarian themes of black liberation and the fall of Babylon, the enduring institutions of power derived from slavery and colonialism. By the late 1970s, however, reggae itself was a contested terrain. Bob Marley's international success prompted Western record labels to sign many roots reggae acts and to package and promote them for white Euro-American consumption. Simultaneously, wielding his "rod of correction," a gift from Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and fashioning himself after the biblical Joshua, PNP leader Michael Manley co-opted the reggae music of ghetto sufferers for his political campaigns against the JLP.[16] Finally, the always restive Jamaican music scene, ensconced in what Sonjah Stanley Niaah calls its "geography of refuge" in downtown studio-yards and sound system dances, pursued its unceasing quest for the new words, sounds, and rhythms bubbling up from the streets, captive to no higher power than the collective authority of bodies on the dance floor.[17]

14 Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 164 (italics in original).
15 See ibid., chap. 4, "Evading Truths: The Rhetoric of Transitional Justice."
16 See Anita Waters, *Race, Class, and Political Symbols: Rastafari and Reggae in Jamaican Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1985), 90–140.
17 Sonjah Stanley Niaah, *DanceHall: From Slave Ship to Ghetto* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 48.

These bodies would increasingly respond to dancehall music built on the sonic wreckage and shrapnel of roots reggae's "futures past." Never named directly in the novel but referred to as "the Singer," Bob Marley nonetheless represents the spirit of roots reggae that fuels a sense of revolutionary possibility throughout Jamaica. Here, the character Bam-Bam wonders about the potent dissemination of that sense of possibility:

> Me not sure how you do it. Maybe it was the bass, something you can't see but feel and *who feels it knows it*. But a woman will talk for herself, let her tongue loose in her own backyard, cursing with each wring of the shirt and pant that she washing, saying she tired of the *shitstem* and the *ism and schism* and is high time the *big tree meet the small axe*. But she didn't say it, she sing it so we know that it's you. And plenty in the ghetto, in Copenhagen City, in Rema, and for sure in the Eight Lanes sing it too. The two men who bring guns to the ghetto don't know what to do since when *music hit you can't hit it back*.[18]

Traveling the politically fragmented terrain of West Kingston's ghettos, the dissemination of Marley's utopian longings accumulates an invisible force that confounds the CIA operatives Barry Diflorio ("It's not even over and I miss the Cold War already") and dissident Cuban bomb-making specialist Doctor Love, who are busily arming Josey Wales's Storm Posse as a sort of paramilitary wing of the JLP. They are tasked with assassinating Marley at his Hope Road home in order to sabotage the upcoming Smile Jamaica Peace Concert, which would allegedly marshal the positive energies of reggae on behalf of the PNP, who had rescheduled the 1976 elections to within ten days of the concert (19). As Diflorio and Doctor Love train the hit squad Wales has assembled to assassinate Marley, their chat leads Bam-Bam to reflect: "It sound strange how he put your name beside people we never hear 'bout, Allende, Lumumba, a name that sound like a country that Kunta Kinte come from. . . . The white man say we're fighting for freedom from totalitarianism, terrorism and tyranny, but nobody know what he mean" (7, 73). Through such failures of communication and disjunctures of perspective, the novel, as Sheri-Marie Harrison observes, "attempts to encapsulate a mid-1970s political moment in the Caribbean that was implicitly global, especially insofar as it embeds the attempt on Marley's life in a larger narrative whose threads include the nonaligned tricontinental movement, the Cold War, and the OPEC crisis."[19]

The character Tristan Phillips extends Bam-Bam's reverie over that sense of revolutionary possibility disseminated through Marley's music. He looks back at a moment of resilient hopefulness that in spite of the attempt on Marley's life would lead to the 1978 One Love Peace Concert (chaired in real life by Trevor Phillips) and the subsequent West Kingston truce that threatened to terminate the violent clientelism on which the status quo of political power depended:

18 James, *A Brief History*, 36; hereafter cited in the text. The italics indicate quotations of Marley's lyrics.

19 Sheri-Marie Harrison, "Global Sisyphus: Rereading the Jamaican 1960s through *A Brief History of Seven Killings*," *Small Axe*, no. 54 (November 2017): 11.

> There was this one time when we could'a do it, you know? We could'a really do it. People was just hopeful enough and tired enough and fed up enough and dreaming enough that something could'a really happen. . . . Even people who usually expect the worst did, if only for two or three month, start to think peace a little then a lot, then peace was all they could think about. Is like how before rain reach you can taste it coming in the breeze. (568–69)

Capturing a moment of possibility before the truce collapsed, before the 1980 elections that would leave over eight hundred dead and Manley out of power, Phillips melancholically recounts the aborted fate of the "Rasta revolution" (362), capturing something of "the promise and the betrayal" that Puri writes about in the Grenadian context.

Echoing the numerous friends, acquaintances, and others Puri gives space to in her book, the character Nina Burgess in *A Brief History* embodies a similar traumatized response to the violent end of the era of socialist possibility. Witness to the assassination attempt at the Singer's residence on Hope Road coordinated by Josey Wales and contracted by the CIA, she flees Kingston out of dread, first to Montego Bay, in the hopes of finding an American bauxite engineer who will get her out of Jamaica (a neat play on the dual meaning of *extraction* in both espionage and economic discourses), and then finally to New York, as an undocumented migrant, working in health care under an assumed name so as to evade Josey Wales's certain intentions to eliminate any witnesses to that night's events. Her Caribbean past remains "a *current* event," as the political enforcers of 1970s garrison politics take their places in the 1980s cocaine-smuggling posses of North America, coming dangerously close to her Bronx hospital room.

If *A Brief History of Seven Killings* resembles Puri's approach in its representation of the temporal-affective arc of revolutionary (im)possibility, both texts also hew to the adage of Bob Marley, "The half has never been told." Just as Puri seeks out those memories and impromptu memorials actively excluded from the forward march of history, James's novel includes the voices and memories of those disposable subalterns conscripted into Jamaica's garrison politics, where transnational cocaine-moving street gangs shoot up neighborhoods, concerts, and even Bob Marley's house in the name of the PNP or JLP. These disposable subalterns, though, with names like Bam-Bam and Demus, "boys who meant nothing to the world still spinning" (3), introduce a countertemporality rooted in the dancehall music their very names evoke: Bam-Bam shares a name with Sister Nancy's foundational hit; Demus shares a name with part of the duo behind the dancehall classic "Murder She Wrote," Chaka Demus and Pliers; and, of course, their Don, Josey Wales, shares a name with a 1980s dancehall legend as well, who himself in grand Jamaican tradition drew his moniker from a Hollywood western, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, starring and directed by Clint Eastwood.[20]

20 Lisa Del Sol offers illuminating analyses of these characters against the lyrics of the songs they are connected to, in "Rhythm (*Riddim*), Violence, and Sexuality in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*" (unpublished manuscript).

In this consistent association of gunmen with dancehall names, gunmen tasked with killing Bob Marley and sabotaging the prospects of a Rasta-mediated truce in the ghetto, *A Brief History* integrates a structuring conflict in Jamaican musical historiography, the conflict between "international reggae" and local dancehall, a conflict rooted in the feeling among many traditionalist fans of Jamaican music that dancehall killed the reggae star.[21] The novel thus invites readers to process the Cold War's conflict over time and space through the lens of Jamaican music, attuned both to how geopolitics inflected that music and to how that music inflected geopolitics. Ostensibly aligning peace-loving utopian optimism with the sort of roots reggae that would go on to find a global audience through albums distributed by English and American record labels, and dancehall music with what Louis Chude-Sokei has called "an aesthetics of raw, materialistic presence" in jaded narratives of local ghetto violence, both the novel and Jamaican music itself complicate such neat arrangements.[22] While dancehall—and the gunmen nominally associated with it in *A Brief History*—does encode an anti-utopian temporality resigned to the deep structure of global/local power relations and skeptical at best toward the "redemption time" conjured in the 1960s and 1970s, James's novel directs readers' attention to the way dancehall temporality embraces instead what Amiri Baraka, writing in 1966, dubbed the "changing same" of black music, a concept here applied to dancehall's subaltern competition for new musical articulations of old truths, unfettered by extractive corporate and political pressures or, in Baraka's words, "the harnessing of Black energy for dollars."[23] Thus rather than forcing an either/or choice between reggae and dancehall, James suggests that dancehall models for the present a fugitive autonomy inherited from Jamaican music's political and religious traditions and implicitly carried forward by the book itself.

In order to best approach this fugitive autonomy we could look back at the emergence of reggae music in the 1960s and its profound imbrication in the geopolitics of its moment: Jamaican independence and the dismantling of the British Empire, the rise of the Cold War superpowers, the Cuban Revolution, and the tension between Pan-Africanism and socialism as paths to decolonization. Breaking with the rhythmic foundations of American R&B so popular at the time, the distinctive Jamaican skank on the offbeat (one AND two AND three . . .) that undergirds ska, rocksteady, and reggae emerged right around the time of independence, 6 August 1962. Up-tempo and thoroughly Jamaican, ska embodied both the excitement of the independent nation and the uniqueness of what that nation had to offer. However, it would be a mistake to reduce ska to celebration. Drawing on Rastafarian desires for literal and metaphorical repatriation to Africa, in compositions for the Skatalites such as "Addis Ababa," the trombone genius Don Drummond incorporated minor key melodies that evoked Ethiopia

21 For more on this schism, see Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton, *The Rough Guide to Reggae*, 3rd ed. (London: Rough Guides, 2004), 120–40. For a traditionalist history of reggae music, see Lloyd Bradley, *This Is Reggae Music*: *The Story of Jamaican Music* (New York: Grove, 2001).

22 Louis Chude-Sokei, "Post-nationalist Geographies: Rasta, Ragga, and Reinventing Africa," *African Arts* 27, no. 4 (1994), 80.

23 Leroi Jones [Amiri Baraka], "The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music)," in *Black Music* (1967; repr., New York: Akashic, 2010), 207.

and all else "east of the River Nile," as Augustus Pablo would later name one of his songs.[24] These songs carry a longing for a utopian elsewhere, embodied in a translation that Michael Veal describes as "the Afro-Caribbean-Protestant-Rastafarian longing for political liberation recast no longer as Christian heaven, but as African Zion."[25] The musical invocation of this African Mt. Zion, through yearning horn lines, minor pentatonic harmonies, and Nyabinghi hand drumming, often undercuts the upbeat joy of ska.

This fugitive, melancholic response to independence forms part of a complex affect in ska attuned to the Cold War conjuncture that pressed heavily on the island. A focal point of ska's response to the moment was revolutionary Cuba. As Patrick Iber has recently noted, "The Cold War in the Americas . . . would be less about East-West conflict than about rejection or acceptance of Cuba and its intellectual, political, and military influence."[26] The JLP leadership in power for the transition to independence hewed to repressive anticommunist Cold War protocols in their tight alignment with the United States. Through gestures such as excluding Fidel Castro from Jamaica's independence ceremony and refusing to establish diplomatic relations with him, though, the JLP raised the question of the very meaning of independence itself and, as we will see below, invited popular comparisons to the boldness of Castro's leadership.

Ska music makes audible the competing narratives of decolonization, independence, freedom, and liberation at work in the Cold War and refracted through the Cuban Revolution. Speaking through the aurality and materiality of the 7-inch 45 rpm record, Coxsone Dodd, head of Coxsone Recordings (later famous as Studio One), would pair the Skatalites' 1964 A-side single "Fidel Castro" with Clancy Eccles's B-side "River Jordan." The Skatalites' aggressive staccato horns find their counterpart in the sanctified hand clapping accompanying Eccles's proclamation, "It will be a terrible day / when my God shall pass through this land / to redeem His people by His hand."[27] This vinyl pressing suggests Castro's communist revolution might hold the key for Jamaica to cross a metaphorical Jordan into a redeemed promised land.

Jamaica had crucial links with Cuba throughout the twentieth century, links that especially redounded on the Rastafari and music scenes. Large numbers of Jamaicans worked the American-dominated Cuban sugar plantations in the early part of the century, and Marcus Garvey visited these Jamaican agricultural laborers in Cuba during the 1910s and 1920s.[28] Through such tours of the Jamaican diaspora in Latin America aboard the Black Star Line—Garvey's shipping venture to promote black economic and cultural independence—he helped consolidate his stature for Jamaicans sensitive to the global crisis of black oppression, especially

24 For a beautiful introduction to Drummond and his impact on Jamaican music and literature, see Kwame Dawes, "Don Drummond—the Forerunner: Jazz and the Reggae Poetic Archetype," in *Natural Mystic: Toward a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1999), 151–70.

25 Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Sounds in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 202.

26 Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 118.

27 The Skatalites, "Fidel Castro" / Clancy Eccles, "River Jordan" (Kingston: Coxsone Recordings, 1964), 7-in. 45 rpm vinyl.

28 Rupert Lewis, *Marcus Garvey* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2018), 46–47.

Rastafarians, who consider Garvey a prophet. Key members of the Skatalites, saxophonists Tommy McCook and Roland Alphonso, were born in Cuba (as were Marley's percussionist Alvin "Seeco" Patterson and his backup singer and wife Rita Marley). Garvey's demands for racial justice formed a crucial element of Rastafarian ideology, and certainly the antiracist objectives of the Cuban Revolution helped endear Castro to the Skatalites. As musicians increasingly followed Drummond's lead into Rastafarian camps and embraced philosophies of Black Power, the religion migrated from a marginalized religious cult into one of the loudest voices speaking out against the growing political repression of what Obika Gray calls the right-wing JLP's "authoritarian democracy" of the 1960s and its failure to address the systemic exclusion of blackness from the limited material developments of independence.[29]

While by no means a centralized religious institution, Rastafari had, in the public imagination beyond the music scene, associated itself strongly with the Cuban Revolution, which provides some background to *A Brief History*'s Edward Seaga stand-in Peter Nasser worrying precisely about "Rastas looking like they turning socialist" (73). A riot in Coronation Market on 7 May 1959 broke out when market vendors defended a Rastafarian being beaten by policemen, pelting the officers with vegetables and then setting alight a police van and a Fire Brigade lorry that had arrived during the melee. The pathbreaking 1960 report *The Ras Tafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* recounts how police eventually established control over the scene and from there moved into the Back-o-Wall area to retaliate against the Rastafari community: "Some brethren had their houses broken up, about 57 were arrested, a fair number of beatings are alleged to have taken place, and many Locksmen were forcibly shaved." In light of the instigating role of the police in this affair, the report concludes, "The judicial sentences passed on apprehended Ras Tafari merely confirmed the Leftist interpretation that this Government was a 'Fascist' agent of imperialist capital. Dr. Fidel Castro's successes in Cuba gained local significance."[30] Furthermore, despite a long history of Rasta "political withdrawal" from an inherently corrupt shitstem,[31] in 1961 Reynold Henry, the son of the major Rastafarian leader Rev. Claudius Henry, was arrested along with a group of Jamaican and African American revolutionaries and sentenced to death for murder and plotting the overthrow of the Jamaican government. One piece of evidence was a letter found at their camp inviting Castro to invade Jamaica and promising local support for the takeover—a letter putatively composed "by an undercover police informer."[32]

29 Obika Gray, *Radicalism and Social Change in Jamaica, 1960–1972* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), chap. 1. For a fuller portrait of political repression in this moment, see also 87–128.

30 M. G. Smith, R. Augier, and R. Nettleford, *The Ras Tafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* (Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University College of the West Indies, 1960), 20.

31 Stephen A. King and Barry T. Bays, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 46.

32 Deborah A. Thomas, "Rastafari, Communism, and Surveillance in Late Colonial Jamaica," *Small Axe*, no. 54 (November 2017): 79n72.

In a context of what Deborah Thomas has called "increasing Cold War anticommunist paranoia," Cuba would serve as a bogeyman for the next twenty years.[33] Forces on the right, led most vocally by Seaga himself, would routinely excoriate Manley's solidarity with Castro on issues such as labor and educational exchanges, as well as support for Castro's intervention on behalf of Agostinho Neto's Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) as part of the antiapartheid struggle. *A Brief History* repeatedly features right-wing denunciations of "moving closer to communist Cuba" as demonstrable evidence of the totalitarian motivations behind what Manley called Jamaica's "Democratic Socialism" (23, 84).

Another entanglement with Cuba also helped shape the Cold War consciousness of Jamaican music. Independence coincided with two other major events: the Cuban Missile Crisis and the release of the first James Bond movie, *Dr. No*, set in nearly independent Jamaica with a plot turning around the secret presence of a missile technology installation on the island. As James Robertson has argued in his reading of the film's addition of a CIA agent to Ian Fleming's original plot, the coincidence of independence with the Cuban Missile Crisis highlighted the "imperial transition" at work, as British colonial rule passed over to the covert operations of an imperially minded US government fretting about the possibility of "another Cuba" emerging in the Caribbean.[34] As the *Rolling Stone* journalist Alex Pierce in *A Brief History* (partly based on Marley biographer and *Spin* journalist Garth White) comments, "Even I can smell a Cold War and it's not even a missile crisis" (84). If the missile crisis threatened to wipe Jamaica, only ninety miles away from Cuba, off the map, James Bond helped put Jamaica on the cultural map for many. This cultural profile would be developed globally by the popular Skatalites song "James Bond Theme," which sutures the cosmopolitan swagger of Sean Connery and bebop improvisation to a Jamaican rhythmic foundation that connotes utopian longings for a promised land.

The jazz element of Jamaican music continued to form a site of Cold War contestation as ska gave way to rocksteady and later reggae. The US government appropriated music as a cultural Cold War propaganda weapon. The CIA and the State Department promoted international concerts of twelve-tone music to exemplify the cultural freedom available to artists of the "free world," while their international promotion of jazz music meant to indicate the vibrancy and inclusiveness of the US ethnic-racial melting pot.[35] One point of intersection between this campaign and reggae introduces us to the latter's the concept of the "version," an indispensable part of reggae and later dancehall temporality.

In 1965, Dave Brubeck's quartet toured Eurasia as State Department jazz ambassadors. Partly in response to Soviet propaganda's exploitation of US racial inequality, the US

33 Ibid., 74.

34 James Robertson, "Rewriting *Dr. No* in 1962: James Bond and the End of the British Empire in Jamaica," *Small Axe*, no. 47 (July 2015): 56.

35 Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 2000), 179–97. See also Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

government embraced jazz as a counterargument, cultural proof of the inventiveness of the American melting pot, with an important, if submerged, role for African Americans. On his tour, Brubeck saxophonist and cocomposer Paul Desmond heard a group of Turkish street musicians playing a "Bulgarian melody" in 5/4 time. From that encounter Desmond would go on to compose "Take Five." Brubeck's West Coast sound did not go unnoticed in Jamaica: in November 1962 the Jamaica *Star*'s weekend culture section reprinted a *Time* magazine feature on the racial politics and resentments of this lucrative, white-dominated scene, going so far as to criticize the petulance of black jazz musicians for refusing to play gigs that participated in the whitewashing and economic plundering of jazz.[36] In 1968, Jamaican saxophonist Val Bennett would offer his own commentary. He "versioned" "Take Five" and labeled it "The Russians Are Coming," ironically commenting on the blowback of attempting to weaponize what Timothy Brennan calls "imperial jazz."[37] Here, through Jamaican version culture, State Department jazz becomes an unintentional conduit bringing sounds from the other side of the Iron Curtain to a Jamaican music scene defiantly refusing to embargo the communist world (one of Manley's first acts as prime minister would be to normalize relations with Cuba), funking up the Brubeck quartet's West Coast jazz sound with the politicized bass-heavy syncopation of reggae.

Versioning is part of the larger system of Jamaican music Peter Manuel and Wayne Marshall have called the "riddim method." While ska, rocksteady, and early reggae 45 rpm singles pair two independent songs on the A and B sides, as seen above with the politically significant pairing of "Fidel Castro" and "River Jordan," it soon became common to put the song with lyrics on the A side, and the instrumental, or dub, version on the B side. This would allow performers to DJ/toast/emcee over a rhythm track (or riddim) familiar to audiences, improvising topical lyrics live at the dance or in the studio for dissemination. Literally dozens of DJs would ride the riddim in a musical-journalistic competition connecting all parts of the Jamaican island and diaspora through dancehall. In this "riddim-plus-voicing" system, "the riddim can take on an independent life of its own," as generations of musicians build tracks from "classic 1960s–1970s riddims, many of which, rightly or wrongly, have come to be treated as if they were effectively in the public domain."[38] One dazzling effect of the riddim method is that every new voicing on a classic riddim carries with it all the other songs built on that riddim, and not only other songs but other historical contexts. The best selectors can continuously "juggle" songs on the same riddim, sometimes moving dancers through the linear evolution of a riddim, and sometimes inducing total temporal vertigo by jumping between contexts and producing a Benjaminian "shock" of unanticipated "constellation" between two songs-and-contexts.[39] A cumulative feature of these constellations has been the haunting of the Jamaican musical

36 "Crow Jim May Mar Jazz," *Week-End Star*, 3–9 November 1962, 1, 5.
37 Timothy Brennan, *Secular Devotion: Afro-Latin Music and Imperial Jazz* (London: Verso, 2008).
38 Peter Manuel and Wayne Marshall, "The Riddim Method: Aesthetics, Practice, and Ownership in Jamaican Dancehall," *Popular Music* 25, no. 3 (2006): 464.
39 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 254–55.

archive, as producers from the late 1970s onward such as Junjo Lawes, working with engineers such as Scientist, composed spectral, dubbed-out versions of the classic riddims. The transition from an acoustic reggae classic such as Ernie Smith's 1974 "Duppy or Gunman" to the evacuated, ghostly soundscape of dancehall legend Yellowman's 1982 "Duppy Gunman" sonically charts the increasingly inescapable, high-powered violence plaguing the island.[40] *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, whose opening narrator is himself the ghost of assassinated politician Sir Arthur Jennings, borrows this spectral art of renarration as it jumps through time, place, and character, toggling, as we have seen, between moments of open-ended possibility and retrospective disillusion.

The "Death in the Arena" riddim in particular brings together the multiple streams of analysis at issue in this essay, from the place of Cuba in the Jamaican imaginary to the Cold War contest over historical temporality and futurity *A Brief History* hauntologically narrates through Jamaican music. In 1965 Cuban-born Jamaican saxophonist Roland Alphonso versioned African American drummer Bernard "Pretty" Purdie's "Funky Donkey," calling it "Death in the Arena," a mysterious reference to the early Christian martyrs. The travels of the "Death in the Arena" riddim would not relinquish this reference, however. As political violence escalated downtown in the 1970s, Studio One's Brentford Disco Set would update, or "re-lick," the riddim in 1978 and call it "Dub in a Rema," punning on the precariously located West Kingston area Rema, scene of numerous battles between JLP and PNP gunmen. Perhaps to invite the intertextual link to this track, Rema is one of the few Kingston neighborhoods whose actual name James preserves in *A Brief History*. Over this re-licked riddim, with Jackie Mittoo's lean electronic keyboard replacing the earthy vibrato of Alphonso's saxophone on the song's signature hook, DJ Jah Buzz would then call for an end to internecine political violence: "Love in the arena / no tribal war in the ghetto I will say / go 'way with your tribal war."[41]

At the rival recording studio Channel One, Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare, the drum-and-bass team known as the Revolutionaries, would also re-lick the "Death in the Arena" riddim, under the alternative titles "Boom in the Arena" and "Castro's Bid," onomatopoetically likening Castro's explosive anti-imperial revolutionary gambit to the odds of early Christians in the lion's den, fulfilling their prefiguration in the Hebrew Bible's Book of Daniel, a chronicle of the Israelites' exile in Babylon. Linval Thompson, a singer who bridged the late 1970s roots period and early 1980s dancehall, would lay down such a powerful version of the song "Train to Zion" over "Boom in the Arena"—especially the 12-inch discomix with U Brown toasting—that the Death in the Arena riddim was subsequently also known as the Train to Zion riddim. Referencing once again Garvey's shipping venture, Thompson sings, "Death in the arena / but

40 See also my "Narco-Narratives and Transnational Form: The Geopolitics of Citation in the Circum-Caribbean," *Postmodern Culture* 26, no. 1 (2015), esp. 15–18.

41 Jah Buzz, "Love in the Arena" / Brentford Disco Set, "Dub in a Rema" (Kingston: Studio One, 1978), 7–in. 45 rpm vinyl.

we getting on the Black Star Liner / riding on the Black Star Liner / going to Zion."[42] Linking Rasta martyrology to Garveyite Black internationalism, mediated through Cold War politics, this single released on the Socialist Roots record label embodies the memorious accumulations of Jamaican music turned toward a redemptive, revolutionary future.

Marlon James's disposable ghetto subalterns pledge allegiance to this accumulation of memory, but they find their roots not in Rastas like Bob Marley and Linval Thompson, but in the "stylish nihilism" of the Rude Boys, who, as Chude-Sokei details, "terrorized the island, modeling themselves on American films and glorifying in their outlaw status."[43] This dancehall-era substitution of icons also entails a temporal substitution, as Rasta socialism's temporality of redemption gets supplanted by the Rude Boy's imminent future of spectacular rise and fall. Bam-Bam, addressing the Singer in his internal monologue, points readers to how the temporal conflict inheres in the very song structures of international roots reggae and dancehall: "Boy like me don't sing your song. He who feels it knows it, you say, but it's long time since you feel it. We listen to other song that ride the Stalag Rhythm, song from people who can't pay for no guitar and don't have a white man to give it to them" (36–37). Bam-Bam testifies to the economic exigencies that partly fueled "the riddim method." As musical instruments were too expensive, down in the ghetto figures like Sugar Minott and Big Youth began singing and DJing over popular rhythm tracks. A DJ or singer's success relied on his or her instant knowledge of the whole archive of rhythms and versions, and their improvisation "intertextually" plays with the entire history of Jamaican music and its sociohistorical contexts. Versioning Marley's song about an innocent victim of gun violence, "Johnny Was," Bam-Bam continues: "We sing other songs, songs from youth who can't afford to make song so we ride the real rock rhythm and skank because only women dance. And we sing song that we make up in our sleep that if you ride like lightning you going crash like thunder. And the singer think Johnny was, but Johnny is, Johnny change and Johnny coming to get him" (79). For Bam-Bam, making new songs with instruments supplied by white men such as Island Records cofounder Chris Blackwell, the producer of such seminal Bob Marley albums as *Exodus* and *Natty Dread*, demarcates the rupture between Marley and the street, between his new Uptown digs and the reality of the ghetto.

Bam-Bam's sentiments reterritorialize the classic analysis offered in this period by Amiri Baraka about how white production of black music represents "exploitation of energy for profit," forcing black music to constantly innovate and elude this exploitation, a process both constituted by and productive of "the blues impulse," the changing same of black music "in the West."[44] Bam-Bam rejects roots reggae for its contamination by white power, its commercial

42 Linval Thompson and U Brown, "Train to Zion" / The Revolutionaries, "Boom in the Arena" (Kingston: Socialist Roots, 1977), 12–in. 45 rpm vinyl. See also the Revolutionaries, *Revival* (Kingston: Cha-Cha Music, 1982 [1973–76]), vinyl.

43 Chude-Sokei, "Post-nationalist Geographies," 81.

44 Baraka, "The Changing Same," 180. For a sensitive limning of the problematic of Baraka's essay and the racialized aesthetics of the Black Arts movement, see Jason Robinson, "The Challenge of the Changing Same: The Jazz Avant-garde of the 1960s, the Black Aesthetic, and the Black Arts Movement," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 1, no. 2 (2005): 20–37.

packaging of original song compositions into albums destined for listeners with the money for a home turntable. He aligns himself with the public consumption of the dancehall, with foundational rocksteady and reggae riddims such as Real Rock and Stalag fractured and transmogrified in the engineering booths of Tubby, Jammy, Scratch, and Scientist, and which provide the key to the countertemporality encoded in this musical system. With his statement, "If you ride like lightning you going to crash like thunder," Bam-Bam rejects the utopian temporality of roots reggae redemption, the promise of something new, that fuels the 1970s Caribbean Left (79). Instead, through the shattered and spectral assemblages of dancehall he apprehends the changing same of subalternity, embracing the Rude Boy's spectacular destiny to rise quick and die young in a blaze of glory, exploited and disposed of but fulfilling his role in lightning and thunder.[45]

A shattered and spectral assemblage, voices dropping in and out like the basslines and vocal snippets of a dubbed-out dancehall re-lick, yet in its dialectical form metonymically narrating the continuous epic sweep of Jamaican history: this is also the novelistic form of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Thus Josey Wales, who conscripted Bam-Bam into his posse and planned his execution, narrates his own story (and by extension that of the novel) through dancehall's countertemporality of the changing same. As even the Don of all Dons, Papa-Lo, begins to turn "Rasta socialist," begins to hesitate about the ruthless violence necessary to maintain his position, Wales criticizes: "So he start to act like he no longer like the world he himself help create. You can't just play God and say I don't like man no more so make me wipe slate clean with the flood and start again. Papa-Lo start thinking too deep and start thinking that he should be more than what he is. He's the worst kind of fool, the fool who start believing things can get better" (43). This passage reveals how the conflict between reggae and dancehall homologizes the ideological conflict over temporality and futurity. Just as Bam-Bam refuses Marley's songs composed new from whole cloth, the novel's criminal mastermind Wales refuses a historical vision that promises a clean slate, a fresh start, and a better future. Instead, he foretells, "Better will come, but not in the way he think. Already, the Colombians start talking to me, they tired of them loco Cubans who sniff too much of what they should only sell, and the Bahamians who are of no use since they teach themselves how to freebase" (43). As Colombian cocaine begins to transform the hemispheric drug trade, Wales will version his mentor Papa-Lo's rise to the top. 'Pon the harder faster riddims of cocaine, Josey Wales locks down JLP and CIA support and builds one of the preeminent transnational drug cartels of the 1980s and early 1990s, the Storm Posse, James's pseudonym for Lester "Jim Brown" Coke's Shower Posse.[46] In his pursuit of this agenda he assassinates the architects of the

45 See Anthony Bogues, "Power, Violence, and the Jamaican 'Shotta Don,'" *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39, no. 6 (2006): 21–26.

46 Kevin Edmonds, "The CIA, the Cold War, and Cocaine: The Connections of Christopher 'Dudus' Coke," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 14 July 2010. See also Kevin Edmonds, "Guns, Gangs, and Garrison Communities in the Politics of Jamaica," *Race and Class* 57, no. 4 (2016): 54–74.

West Kingston truce and hastens its collapse, ensuring the persistence of garrison politics as usual, and thus his own success.

In 1994, at the tail end of the moment when these transnational Jamaican gangs born out of the island's garrison politics loomed large in the crack cocaine trade, dancehall artiste Spragga Benz turned the diasporic longings of Linval Thompson into a popular gun song over Bobby Digital's re-licked Train to Zion/Death in the Arena riddim. In "No Fun Ting," Benz DJs over hard, minimalist electronic instrumentation—completing a technological transformation anticipated by Jackie Mittoo's 1978 substitution of keyboard for horn—and offers contradictory advice to gunmen. On the one hand, the chorus of the song repeats:

> Tek mi advice mi bredren
> Cau Rudebwoy living a no fun thing
> You no have no time fi a laugh and a grin
> You haffi serious from you a deal inna gun thing
> Mek up yuh mind fi bun bwoy skin.

On the other hand, should you elect to "bun bwoy skin," Benz cautions you:

> Try move under cover, don't be brawling
> Always humble, that's the key to living
> Cau smart gunman no mek police know him . . .
> Cau we living inna rotten Babylon system
> Weh informer sell you out for five shilling.

Both lyrically and musically, the song testifies to the Rasta/Rude Boy, reggae/dancehall dialectic that structures Jamaican music, with the harsh minimalism of the riddim offering spectral recollections of Jah Buzz's call for an end to tribal war and Linval Thompson's longing for the Black Star Liner, just as the lyrics counterpose righteous antiviolence with jaded resignation: "Inna rotten Babylon system / . . . yu haffi ruff / and yu haffi live like a cruff."[47]

Aligning with the dancehall-identified, disposable Rude Boy subalterns Bam-Bam and Demus, who are systematically hunted down and executed in *A Brief History*, Benz recognizes that better futures probably won't come, that his listeners may "haffi live like a cruff" to survive. In this, he is faithful to a ghetto historiography whose temporality embodies the changing same of garrison subalternity: Dons rise and Dons fall, and new generations rise with their ever-hungry ruthlessness.[48] When Manley's socialist government falls in 1980, when neither socialist nor capitalist promises of "better must come" get realized, these gunmen of the ghetto experience no trauma, no dashed dreams, no leftist melancholy. It is just a new version of the same song: no train to Zion, just death in the arena.

47 Spragga Benz, "No Fun Ting," *Jack It Up* (New York: VP Records, 1994).

48 See also Nadi Edwards's reading of Elephant Man's and Spragga Benz's "Warrior Cause," with its roll call of storied Jamaican "bad men" rendering "a ghettocentric archive that fixes Kingston as a site of memory constituted by violence." Nadi Edwards, "Notes on the Age of Dis: Reading Kingston through Agamben," *Small Axe*, no. 25 (February 2008): 14–15.