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"HOW GODFATHER PART II OF YOU": THE GANGSTER FIGURE AND TRANSNATIONAL MASCULINITIES IN MARLON JAMES'S *A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS*

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Gangster
Jamaica
James Marlon
masculinities
queer
transnational

Set in Kingston, New York and Miami in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, James's novel A Brief History of Seven Killings *charts the transformation of politically affiliated Jamaican gangs into transnational criminal organizations. The novel references various incarnations of the "gangster" in the context of mid- to late-twentieth-century Jamaica: the rudie, the shotta and the don. In this essay I consider how, through its engagement with the iconography surrounding the gangster figure both within Jamaican popular culture and in the global mass media,* A Brief History *examines and complicates models of masculinity associated with this figure. In the process, I suggest, the novel at once reflects on and contributes to evolving Jamaican and transnational discourses of masculinity. Reading* A Brief History *as a gangster narrative, I position it within an increasingly global tradition of gangster fiction and film. The novel's multiple narrative voices and perspectives, along with its eclectic range of cultural reference points, render the gangster icon – a central component of the genre – ambiguous and plural. I argue that through his*

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reworking of the gangster figure, James both queers the gangster genre and extends its transnational reach.

Marlon James's 2014 novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, contains multiple references to classic gangster narratives and globally infamous gangster figures. Towards the end of the novel, Josey Wales, a character partly based on the Shower Posse leader Lester "Jim Brown" Coke, is visited in prison by Doctor Love, a rogue CIA consultant working with the Medellín Cartel. Saying to Josey, "Nobody forced your hand, nobody stopped you from turning into fucking Tony Montana" (641), Doctor Love alludes to the protagonist of Howard Hawks' 1932 film *Scarface*. Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is also referenced by the novel's hit-man character John-John K. who quotes the words of Don Vito Corleone when he says of Medellín drug lord Griselda Blanco, "somebody made her an offer that she couldn't refuse" (591). In addition, Eubie, the fictional New York-based Storm Posse head enforcer, compares himself to Gotti (674), an Italian-American gangster who features in *The Godfather Part III*, and the *Rolling Stone* journalist Alex Pierce, surprised by Eubie at his house, says sarcastically: "How *Godfather Part II* of you" (638). These references are key examples of the novel's self-conscious and playful engagement with the gangster genre. James's comment in an interview with Kima Jones that the "biggest influence on me was *The Godfather Part II*" further highlights this engagement (Jones n.d.).

Alongside the novel's references to classic American gangster narratives such as *Scarface* and the *Godfather* trilogy are allusions to Perry Henzell and Trevor Rhone's *The Harder They Come* (1972), a Jamaican gangster film which, Deborah Thomas notes, was the starting point for "the proliferation of a transnational black gangster genre" (2011, 147). In this essay I position *A Brief History* within a global tradition of gangster fiction and film which, like the criminal organizations that constitute its primary subject matter, crosses and exceeds national boundaries. I explore how the iconography surrounding the Jamaican gangster figure – in its various incarnations of rudie, don, shotta and yardie – is similarly characterized by transnational exchange. Michael McMillan observes that the archetypal "rude bwoy" outfit "would have a rhizoidal quality about its assemblage, rather than being sourced from one stylistic root" (2016, 66). Emphasizing the "rhizoidal quality" of both James's novel and the gangster figures depicted within it, I look at how *A Brief History* references, problematizes and reworks dominant images and narratives of badmanism in Jamaican popular culture and in the global mass media. In doing so, I consider the novel's commentary on, and intervention in, local and transnational discourses of masculinity. I argue that the novel's multi-scalar negotiation of masculinities invites a rethinking of both the gangster figure and the gangster genre. My reading of *A Brief*

History therefore contributes to the growing body of scholarly work on masculinities in Caribbean literary and popular culture. In addition, by highlighting the versatility and global scope of the gangster genre, this essay seeks to globalize critical debate on a genre that is usually read within a US-centric framework.

The next section situates James's novel in relation to the global gangster genre. This is followed by two sections examining how the novel references and reflects on various iterations of the gangster figure in the Jamaican popular imaginary, and in the global mass media. The subsequent two sections focus on the relationship of James's "badman" characters to hegemonic and "borderline" models of masculinity (Hope 2012–2013, 105). In the concluding section, I assess how the novel's diverging and idiosyncratic narrative voices and perspectives serve to fragment and pluralize the "gangster myth" which is central to the genre (Horsley 2009, 46–47).

A Brief History and the gangster genre

Inspired by the iconic Chicago-based gangster Al Capone and remade in 1983 as the story of a Cuban drug dealer in Miami, *Scarface* is one of a group of 1930s gangster films which, according to Fran Mason, is "usually referred to as the 'classic' narrative" which established the conventions of the gangster genre (2002, xiv). The *Godfather* trilogy, while not one of the foundational narratives, is seen by many as "the definitive gangster drama" (Keeton 2002, 135; see also Davis 2010). *A Brief History*'s references to gangster films that have been highly influential in not only shaping the genre's conventions but also constructing the "mafia gangster" as "a cultural figure of mythic proportions" in the American public imagination (Gardaphe 2010, 111) invite a reading of the novel as gangster fiction.

Yet to regard *A Brief History* simply as a variant of a primarily North American tradition of gangster fiction and film would be to overlook the global reach of both the novel and the gangster genre. Mason questions "the view that [the gangster genre] can be understood simply as a set of conventions created in the early 1930s which are then replicated or slightly varied during the course of its 70-year history" (2002, xiv). This view is dominant in genre criticism of the 1970s and still evident in more recent accounts of the genre, which continue to refer back to "classic" gangster films such as *Scarface*, Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1931) and William Wellman's *The Public Enemy* (1931; Mason 2002, xiv; *Telegraph* 2016). Mason argues that this way of reading gangster narratives is problematic in that it obscures the genre's "variety and flexibility", restricting it to a limited set of iconographies, narrative structures and ideological frameworks (2002, xiv). This

approach to gangster narratives is particularly problematic, I suggest, when considering Jamaican fiction and film, bearing in mind that the "classics" are all Hollywood films produced and set in North America.

A Brief History's multiple reference points complicate its intertextual relationship to the classic American tradition of gangster narratives. James's character Josey Wales describes a scene from Kingston's "Lady Pink" bar:

> Lerlette, the skinny girl, is up onstage, she the one who always want to dance to Ma Baker … Every time the song end with the chorus, *she knew how to die!* Lerlette split right down on the ground and hold up her two hands in gun pose like she's Jimmy Cliff in *The Harder They Come*. (James 2014, 41)

In this passage, Lerlette's performance associates the character Ivanhoe Martin in *The Harder They Come*, based on the legendary Jamaican outlaw figure Rhyging (Thelwell 1992, 182), with the semi-mythic leader of the American Barker gang, Ma Barker, whose story is conveyed through the lyrics of a 1970s German disco band.[1] While critical accounts of the gangster genre have tended to locate its origins in the prohibition-era of the United States, these allusions draw attention to the transnational circulation of the gangster narrative. Furthermore, Lerlette's "gun pose", echoing both Jimmy Cliff's and Ma Barker's, unsettles the long-standing association of the gangster icon with male historical figures, characters and actors.[2] The passage encapsulates how *A Brief History* at once reflects upon and contributes to an evolving and increasingly global genre.

1 The song "Ma Baker" by Boney M. was released in 1977.

2 Gardaphe notes that gangsters are "typically represented by a male figure" and the gangster as cultural icon reflects "changing notions of masculinity" (2010, 110).

The "classic" gangster narrative is associated with North American society of the 1920s and 1930s. Fred Gardaphe comments on how the concept of the gangster, which "emerged in response to the evolution of corporate capitalism in the early twentieth century", gained currency as a result of Prohibition and the Great Depression, both of which led to a rise in organized crime (2010, 110). He also considers how infamous gangster figures of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Al Capone, John Dillinger, "Baby Face" Nelson and "Pretty Boy" Floyd, stories of whom circulated in the national media, served as inspiration for gangster fiction and film (110). Others have considered the classic gangster narrative's emphasis on the plight of ethnic minority groups, Italian-Americans in particular, with limited access to the American Dream (111; Fenwick 1996, 629; Bouchard 2011, 68). Jonathan Munby draws attention to the continuing emphasis on disenfranchized communities in contemporary gangster narratives, observing that "the black 'gangsta' films of today draw on the power of 1930s 'classic' prototypes, which addressed similar problems of an American ethnic lower class struggling to overcome problems of cultural and economic ghettoization" (2014, 3).

In the UK in the 1990s there was a proliferation of what Grant Farred terms "yardie fiction", a form of gangster fiction popularized by Victor Headley's

bestselling novel *Yardie* (1992). According to Farred, yardie fiction depicts "the spread of crack cocaine, the proliferation and intensification of gang warfare" and the formation of a black urban "criminal subclass" in late twentieth-century Britain (2001, 293). Donald Gordon's *Cop Killer* (1994), Karline Smith's *Moss Side Massive* (1995) and Courttia Newland's *The Scholar* (1997) and *Society Within* (1999) are all novels set in British inner-city areas which focus on gang warfare, the illegal drug trade, and the experiences of a ghettoized black urban underclass. Meanwhile, Henzell and Rhone's 1972 film *The Harder They Come* preceded a number of Jamaican gangster films set in inner-city Kingston, including Chris Browne's *Third World Cop* (1999) and *Ghett'A Life* (2011) and Storm Saulter's *Better Mus' Come* (2011), as well as films by US-based filmmakers that portray the operations of Jamaican gangs in the United States, including Hype Williams' *Belly* (1998), Cess Silvera's *Shottas* (2002) and Trenton W. Gumb's *Gangsta's Paradise* (2004).[3]

3 See Emiel Martens' contribution to this special issue for a discussion of some of these films.

This expanding archive of gangster fiction and film reflects the transnational dimensions of organized crime in an era of globalization. *A Brief History* can be positioned in relation to both the localized tradition of Jamaican gangster narratives and the broader global gangster genre. Set in Kingston, New York and Miami in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, James's panoramic novel charts the transformation of politically affiliated Jamaican gangs into transnational criminal organizations. While existing studies of the gangster narrative have mapped the emergence of American gangster fiction onto the rise of corporate capitalism and organized crime in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, I propose that James, along with Headley, Henzell and others, resituates the genre in relation to late twentieth-century global capitalism, the "war on drugs", and the global expansion of Jamaican gangs. This repositioning of the gangster genre involves an engagement with the specifics of the gangster figure in the context of mid- to late-twentieth-century Jamaica and its diaspora.

The gangster figure in the Jamaican popular imaginary

A Brief History comments on the mythologizing of the gangster figure – as rudie, don and shotta – in Jamaican popular culture. Writing in 1967, Garth White defines the "Rude Bwoy" as follows:

> Rude bwoy is that person, native, who is totally disenchanted with the ruling system; who generally is descended from the "African" elements in the lower class and who now is armed with ratchets … In addition rude bwoys are largely centred in those urban areas that suffer from chronic depression. (White 1967, 39)

White's definition locates the "rudie" in terms of gender, race, class and geography. He goes on to claim that the violence committed by the "rude bwoy" is motivated by "his ambitions to help liberate the 'sufferer'" (43). Carolyn Cooper has similarly drawn attention to the association of the word "Rudeboy", in Jamaican popular music, with "an indigenous tradition of heroic 'badness' that has its origins in the rebellious energy of enslaved African people who refused to submit to the whip of bondage" (2004, 147). In these accounts the rudie functions as a symbol of resistance against the enduring legacies of colonialism in Jamaican society. As such, the Jamaican rudie of the 1950s and 1960s shares some common ground with the "classic" American gangster of the 1920s and 1930s, similarly portrayed in popular culture as an "outlaw hero" rebelling against an unjust system (Horsley 2009, 45). McMillan makes this connection in his analysis of Jamaican "rude bwoy" sartorial style, which, he argues, "drew inspiration" from American gangster movies (2016, 66).

As White and, more recently, Donna P. Hope point out, this construction of the rudie as a rebellious anti-hero is associated with 1960s Ska and Rocksteady, the music of inner-city Kingston in a newly independent Jamaica (White 1967, 40; Hope 2012–2013, 112). If the rudie figure depicted within Jamaican popular culture of the 1960s and early 1970s symbolized the potential liberation of the black urban underclass and the associated promise of Michael Manley's project of democratic socialism, the figures of the don and shotta are associated instead with dancehall and, correspondingly, with a different period in Jamaica's post-independence history: the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, characterized by garrison politics, gang warfare and illegal drug trafficking. Hope observes that the don and shotta are "praised in dancehall culture", and suggests that, as embodiments of an "extreme form of aggressive/violent masculinity", they often serve as "role models" for young men (2010, 58, 65). The role of the shotta as "an ultimate signifier of masculine status" extends beyond popular music to film (61), where shotta characters are often played by dancehall artists (Thomas 2011, 158). The rudie, don and shotta, then, have acquired mythic status within Jamaican popular culture; the rudie has been romanticized as a heroic rebel, and the don and shotta function as symbols of hypermasculinity.

A Brief History explores the history of the rudie, don and shotta icons through multiple references to Jamaican music and film, as well as to American music, film and television. Through Alex Pierce's story, James reflects on the making of the rudie myth in Jamaica:

> Every Jamaican can sing and every Jamaican learned to sing from the same songbook. Marty Robbins's Gunfighter Ballads … This is the story of the gunmen of Wild, Wild West Kingston … Every sufferah is a cowboy without a house and every street has gun battle written in blood in a song somewhere … It's not just

> the lawlessness. It's the grabbing of a myth and making it theirs, like a reggae singer dropping new lyrics 'pon di old version.' (James 2014, 83–84)

The key intertext in Alex's account of the Kingston-bred "rudie-cum-gunman" (84) is Marty Robbins' 1959 album of Western songs, *Gunfighter Ballads*. By presenting the cowboy figure of Western music and film as the prototype for the Jamaican rudie, and "lawless" West Kingston as a variant of the American Wild West, Alex Pierce is romanticizing the rudie as outlaw. Yet Alex's narrative also resituates the cowboy icon both geographically and culturally, shifting it from the rural setting of the American Western genre to the inner-city setting of Jamaican reggae music. With the words "every street has a gun battle written in blood in a song somewhere", Alex acknowledges the extent to which the geography of West Kingston is, thanks to reggae music, inscribed in the Jamaican popular imaginary. There is something creative and empowering about the idea of Jamaican rudies "grabbing" the cowboy icon and "making it theirs". The imported language and images of the Western genre have, according to this narrative, inspired the rudies' own myth-making, a process which is compared to a reggae singer "dropping new lyrics 'pon di old version".

Whereas Alex's narrative reflects on the rudie myth, Bam-Bam's account of his initiation into the Copenhagen City gang aligns him with the hypermasculine persona of the shotta:

> and then I'm at state theatre with Josey Wales because Harry Callahan is back with *Enforcer*, and the other bad man because boy with gun is man not boy, and every time Clint Eastwood shoot up a boy Josey Wales sing people are you ready? we sing Bow! Oh Lord, and shoot up the screen till all we see is hole and smoke. And everybody would have run out of the theatre but they know they better keep rolling the film or we'll come up into the screen room and enforce. (James 2014, 75)

Bam-Bam is a teenage boy from inner-city Kingston. His recollection in the above passage evokes a scene in *The Harder They Come* where young men in Kingston, including the film's protagonist Ivan, watch Sergio Corbucci's *Django* at the cinema and shout at the cinema screen, rendering the viewing experience interactive. Set in 1976, the passage therefore has multiple intertexts, referencing simultaneously a 1976 Hollywood police thriller, a 1972 Jamaican crime film, and a 1966 Spaghetti Western. Bam-Bam and the other boys' performances of badmanism are filtered through both Clint Eastwood's act as the cop anti-hero Harry Callahan, and Jimmy Cliff's role as the quintessential rudie Ivan. Part of an internal monologue accompanying Bam-Bam's actions as he "enforces" JLP (Jamaican Labour Party) votes in Rema while high on crack cocaine, the scene therefore offers both a reenaction of

James Fargo's 1976 film *The Enforcer* that repositions it within the context of mid-1970s political tribalism in inner-city Kingston, and an updated version of the cinema scene in *The Harder They Come* that replaces boisterous shouting with gunfire and intimidation of cinema staff, a change in keeping with the augmented violence of a volatile West Kingston just two weeks before the general election.

While Bam-Bam identifies with the shotta icon, Josey Wales performs the role of the don. Described in the novel's "cast of characters" as "head enforcer, don of Copenhagen City, 1979–1991, Leader of the Storm Posse" (x), and partly based on Lester "Jim Brown" Coke, Josey enjoys the "high levels of social power" within the ghettoized space of inner-city West Kingston which are, according to Hope, "encapsulated in the glamourized personas of the Don, Area Leader or Shotta" and connected to dancehall's "discourses of violent masculinity" (2010, 56). The relationship between the don and shotta figures and dancehall culture operates on a number of levels. Firstly, as Cooper explains, some dancehall songs contain "gun lyrics" and gunfire sounds, and dancehall DJs "often assume a *badman* pose" (2004, 158; 159). Secondly, as Thomas observes, films about shottas, such as *Shottas* and *Belly*, feature "dancehall and hip-hop artists in leading roles" (2011, 158). Thirdly, as Dennis Howard notes, some "gangsters and dons have been aspiring artistes; likewise, some artistes have been aspiring gangsters and dons" (2010, 10). Fourthly, drawing again on Howard, in the late 1970s and early 1980s dons played an important role in the promotion of dancehall music (2010, 11).

In *A Brief History*, the naming of James's character Josey Wales highlights this multi-layered correlation between the don and shotta icons and dancehall culture. The character's name links him with the posturing of the dancehall deejay as shotta, since Josey Wales is also the stage name of a Jamaican dancehall deejay (Joseph Stirling) prominent in the 1970s and 1980s (Howard 2010, 11, 13). The fact that the dancehall deejay Josey Wales named himself after the movie character Josey Wales played by Clint Eastwood in Eastwood's 1976 Western film *The Outlaw Josey Wales* further complicates the associations of this character's name. In addition to being based on a Shower Posse don, the character Josey Wales is affiliated, through his name, with both a Jamaican dancehall deejay posing as a shotta and a fictional American outlaw. The name "Josey Wales", then, in keeping with the style of *A Brief History*, has multiple reference points and blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. It draws attention to the transnational cross-fertilization of cultural influences from which the Kingston-based don and shotta icons have emerged. In addition, the various allusions encompassed by his name point to the complex relationship of this character's badman performance to hegemonic models of (white) masculinity.

The Jamaican gangster figure in the global mass media

It is partly through the novel's close engagement with the rudie, don and shotta icons in Jamaican popular culture that *A Brief History* interrogates the "yardie myth" circulating in European and North American media discourse (Small 1998, 20). "Yardie" is a term used outside Jamaica to describe members of transnational criminal organizations rooted in the "yards" of inner-city Kingston, such as the Shower Posse and the Spangler Posse, and this is the sense in which it is used by Geoff Small in *Ruthless: The Global Rise of the Yardies* (1994). Small himself comments, however, on the problems with the shifting significance of the term "yardie", explaining that where "the noun used to refer to a Jamaican, especially one who had recently arrived on the British mainland, it is now a byword for a violent black criminal" (1998, 16). The definition of a yardie as a Jamaican abroad, which draws on the association of "yard" with "home" (Chevannes 2001, 129), and the definition of a yardie as a Jamaican gang member, are conflated. This attests to the way in which mass-media representations of yardies have popularized the damaging idea that *all* Jamaicans, and particularly black male Jamaicans, are potential criminals. As Rivke Jaffe notes, representations of yardies across a range of North American and European media, including news reports, fiction, films and investigative journalism, have "stigmatised and criminalised African-Jamaicans, both in Jamaica and in relation to Jamaicans in the diaspora" (2014, 163).

This discourse surrounding the term "yardie" has, moreover, contributed to what David Scott calls "the 'culture of violence' fallacy" (1997, 142). Scott explains that Jamaica's "culture of violence" is "understood to be a historically constituted behavioural pattern", dating from the Spanish conquest, that "pervades the fabric of Jamaican society" (145). The problem with this perspective, Scott argues, is that it "turns on a conceptual essentialism", and that by "locating the problem at the level of 'culture'" it "lets politics and politicians off the hook" (146). Thomas makes a slightly different point when she observes that "viewing violence as a primordial aspect of Jamaican culture mobilizes a certain kind of essentialism". She draws attention to the racial stereotype underpinning the notion of a "culture of violence", which "hark[s] back to earlier forms of scientific racism that defined black populations as natural, wild, and uncontrollable" (2011, 55). The concept of a "culture of violence", according to these arguments, links violence not only to cultural identity, but also to racial identity. Yardie discourse draws on "images and representations of black criminality" which, Paul Gilroy observes with reference to race relations in postwar Britain, "have achieved a mythic status" (1987, 118). The "yardie myth", to borrow Small's terms, replicates and reinforces not only racial and cultural stereotypes, but also gender stereotypes. Karim Murji identifies characteristics of

the yardie figure as depicted in press accounts, including "aggression, sexual promiscuity, and conspicuous consumption, in the form of fast cars and showy jewelry", commenting that in these accounts, "the yardies are not just racialized but also sexualized, in ways that reaffirm stereotypes of 'dangerous black masculinity' as potent, threatening, and elemental" (2009, 185–6).

In *A Brief History* James queries the "'culture of violence' fallacy" associated with the yardie myth. Firstly, as we have seen, the novel embeds the figure of the Jamaican gangster – demonized and decontextualized in British and North American media discourse – within the cultural, political and socioeconomic environment of inner-city West Kingston in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Secondly, the novel's characterization of rudie, don and shotta characters also locates them within wider civic, national, regional, hemispheric and global contexts. By incorporating within his extensive "cast of characters" not only Jamaican gang members, enforcers and dons, but also policemen and politicians, CIA directors and operatives and a Cuban CIA consultant, journalists, a bauxite engineer, a world-famous singer and a Columbian drug lord, James broadens the book's scope well beyond Kingston's inner-city. In an interview, he comments: "1976 Jamaica was bigger than just Jamaica … 1976 is a violent story, it's a Bob Marley story, it's an election story, and it's also a Cold War story and a drug war story" (Jones n.d, 6). James suggests here that it is impossible to tell the story of Jamaica without taking into account the multiple contexts of garrison politics,[4] which connected the violence within inner-city West Kingston to national elections; Cold War politics, which connected both of these to CIA and Soviet interests; and the global "war on drugs", since the activities of Jamaican gangs, which delivered cocaine produced in South America to consumer markets in the United States and Europe, were not confined to Jamaica.

It is by including these wider contexts within his story of Kingston in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s that James challenges the "'culture of violence' fallacy" (Scott 1997, 142). As Murji explains, the notion of Jamaica's "culture of violence" reinforces the idea that "violence is somehow a cultural proclivity, or 'in their roots'". Violence is therefore seen as originating in Jamaica, and yardie violence abroad is viewed as a "foreign import" (2009, 191). Working against this perspective, *A Brief History* demonstrates that responsibility for the violence within West Kingston lies not only with the Kingston-based gang members, enforcers and dons, but also with the politicians who are working with the dons in order to win the votes of West Kingston inhabitants, with the CIA which is supporting JLP politicians by supplying arms in an attempt to prevent Jamaica from becoming the next communist republic, and with the producers and consumers of cocaine. James conveys all this by positioning Josey Wales at the epicentre of an international network:

4 Meeks defines garrison communities as "militarized inner-city communities that held allegiance to one or other of the dominant parties and ensured almost monolithic single-party voting on election day" (2007, 69). These politically homogenous communities date back to after the 1962 election when the JLP government's housing scheme eradicated squatter settlements in the West of Kingston, built low-income housing and allocated it on a partisan basis (Sives 2010, 65).

> Medellín on line two. So I let Louis the con man sweet me up with his con-plan … I tell him that he's in Copenhagen City now, otherwise known as the palm of my hand, and if I feel like it, any minute now I can make a fist … I don't tell him that I about to set up a man in Miami and one in New York. I don't tell him that *yo tengo sufficiente español para conocer que eres la más gran broma en Sud-América* … And I say to the politicians and the Americans sure, to prove that me is the don of all dons I going do what need to be done. (James 2014, 43–44)

"Louis the con man" is Louis Johnson, a CIA field officer who appears elsewhere in the novel arming Copenhagen City gang members.[5] The passage above suggests that Josey is being contracted by JLP politicians and the CIA to mobilize Copenhagen City gang members in the assassination of "the Singer", the character based on Bob Marley, due to his perceived alignment with the PNP (People's National Party) and – by extension – the communist threat. At the same time, Josey's opening sentence, "Medellín on line two", his demonstration of his proficiency in Spanish, and his reference to his plans to set up men in Miami and New York indicate that he is secretly taking orders from Columbian drug lord Griselda Blanco.

Josey's involvement with the Columbian drug cartel is reinforced in a later conversation with Doctor Love, a CIA consultant who "come to Jamaican on the CIA plane ticket but with order from Medellín" (170). Doctor Love asks Josey if he wants to impress "bigger fish" than the politician Peter Nasser and the JLP leader Edward Seaga: "Bigger than that. Bigger than this country, *chico*" (169). He goes on to explain that Medellín may want to use Jamaica as a route for shipment of cocaine to the United States, since collaborations with Puerto Ricans and Bahamians are not working out, and suggests to Josey that he might do something to attract their attention (171). The implication here is that in orchestrating the assassination of "The Singer", Josey had multiple motivations, including pressures from not only JLP politicians and the CIA, but also Medellín. The attempted assassination of "The Singer", the event around which the novel is structured, is therefore a focal point where the various narrative strands of a story "bigger than just Jamaica" intersect. By positioning his rudie, don and shotta characters in relation to both the distinctive locale of West Kingston and wider contexts within and beyond the city and nation, James contests mass-mediated representations of "yardies" as "excessively, spectacularly ruthless" (Thomas 2011, 74), and of Jamaica as a "lawless, criminogenic space" (Jaffe 2014, 159).

5 See, for example, the final sentence of the first instalment of Bam-Bam's narrative: "We, the Syrian, the American and Doctor Love out by the shack near the sea" (15). Here, "the Syrian" refers to JLP politician Edward Seaga, "the American" to CIA field Officer Louis Johnson, and "Doctor Love" to Luis Hernán Rodrigo de las Casas, officially a CIA consultant but secretly working for Medellín.

Badmanism and hegemonic masculinities

James situates his rudie, don and shotta characters in relation to both local and global discourses of masculinity. Studies of Jamaican, Caribbean and –

more broadly – global masculinities have drawn upon, critiqued and modified R. W. Connell's influential concept of hegemonic masculinity. Building on Antonio Gramsci's work, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as follows: "The concept of 'hegemony' … refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted" (2001, 38). Connell emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity is not a "fixed character type", since dominant models of masculinity are subject to change over time. He also makes it clear that hegemonic masculinity is not a norm, since "few men actually match the 'blueprint' or display the toughness and independence acted by Wayne, Bogart or Eastwood" (2001, 33). It is, rather, as Connell's example of Hollywood icons illustrates, an ideal by which men judge themselves and are judged against. Connell's theory has been criticized for its "abstract and cursory" attention to race (Edwards 2016, 53), and for its assumption that hegemonic masculinity is "singular" and "monolithic", even when operating at a global level (Beasley 2008, 97–98); Christine Beasley comments on the problems with this way of thinking, which is based on an understanding of globalization as "a one-way uniform process" (98). Contributing to what Beasley terms the de-massification of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Keith Nurse points out that "masculinity is … multidimensional, since gender relations are intertwined with class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality and nationality", and that it is therefore "more appropriate to speak of multiple masculinities rather than 'one' masculinity". He also draws attention to the "power differential within masculinities", where "some masculinities are hegemonic and dominant while others are subordinated and marginalized" (2000, 7).

In *A Brief History* references to John Wayne and Clint Eastwood to some extent invite a reading of the adolescent gang members Bam-Bam and Demus in terms of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. However, Connell's ideas are of limited relevance to James's novel, which explores the intersecting power relations of gender, sexuality, race and class, and where characters encounter multiple, competing models of masculinity. Bam-Bam's and Demus's performances of masculinity are partly modelled on those of American cowboy and cop antihero figures. Towards the beginning of his narrative, Bam-Bam recalls how his father fought four men "like a man, even punch them like John Wayne in a movie, like how a real man supposed to fight" (James 2014, 12). His reference to John Wayne demonstrates how his ideas on what constitutes a "real man" are derived from Hollywood Westerns. In a later scene, images of Clint Eastwood as Harry Callahan in *The Enforcer* inspire Bam-Bam, Demus and others to shoot at the cinema screen, and subsequently to "fir[e] up a house and shop" in the PNP neighbourhood of Rema (75). Yet the fact that these exemplars of hegemonic masculinity, Wayne and Eastwood, are white American men, complicates any attempt to read these scenes purely in

terms of gender dynamics. The notion of white masculinity as – to return to Connell's definition – the "culturally exalted", dominant model of masculinity is highly problematic, particularly in the context of postcolonial societies such as Jamaica. If, as Connell notes, the majority of men do not manage to inhabit the ideal of manhood embodied by Wayne and Eastwood, for non-white men the tension between their performance of masculinity and these supposedly universal "blueprints" is particularly marked.

In *A Brief History* James explores this tension through repeated references to Eastwood's character Harry Callahan in the narratives of Bam-Bam and Demus. These references, while at times seeming to align these two characters with the fantasy image of Eastwood as Harry Callahan, more often draw attention to the discrepancies between the fictional Dirty Harry's slick performance and their attempts to emulate it (James 2014, 39, 248). Following the failed attempt to assassinate the Singer, a character based on Bob Marley, Demus is left "in the gully outside Trenchtown" (246). The extract below is taken from a long stream-of-consciousness passage lasting five pages:

> a sign that say Rose Town Walk Ride Drive and Arrive Alive another one saying Slow: School both sign bursting with old bullet hole every hole I see I hear a blam or a bok or a pow like Harry Callahan *did he fire six shots or only five* and my gun gone and maybe I leave it in the garbage fields dunes fields dunes and *in all the confusion to tell you the truth I forgot myself in all this excitement but being this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world and will blow you head clean off, you've gotta ask yourself a question do I feel lucky well, do ya punk* and Harry blam hands stop shaking please stop shaking nobody love me nobody care my head don't think them ways it must be the coming down from the drugs. (James 2014, 248)

The image of Harry Callahan is conjured up for Demus by the bullet holes he sees in the road signs. However, the difference between Harry and Demus is immediately highlighted by the use of italics for Harry's words, and is reinforced in the contrast between Harry's dialogue and Demus's thoughts. Harry has "the most powerful handgun in the world", whereas Demus has no gun and is therefore powerless and vulnerable in an area where – due to his affiliation with the JLP – his life is in danger. Harry's hands skilfully use the handgun while Demus's shake. Harry is composed and in control whereas Demus is disoriented and suffering from drug withdrawal symptoms. Harry, as a symbol of hegemonic masculinity, is cold and emotionless, while Demus feels deprived of "love" and "care".

In his portrayal of Bam-Bam and Demus, James comments on the conflicted relationship of African-Jamaican masculinities to models of (white) hegemonic masculinity disseminated globally through Hollywood. At the same time, the novel positions these and other characters' badman performances

in relation to a history of subordinated (black) masculinity. Hilary Beckles reflects on the gendering of enslaved black men as feminine by white men "whose hegemonic masculinities determined that being 'kept' and 'kept down' were symbolic of submissive inferiority" (2000, 229). The "hypermasculine spaces", the "extreme form of aggressive/violent masculinity", and the "anti-male homosexuality/pro-promiscuous heterosexuality" that Hope associates with dancehall culture can be seen as a legacy of the feminizing of enslaved black men, as well as a form of resistance to the ongoing emasculation of African-Jamaican men on the socioeconomic margins of legitimate society (Hope 2010, 65; 2012–2013, 112).

The "power differential within masculinities" that Nurse identifies can be seen in interactions between James's gang member characters and the police. Demus describes how the police took him and two other young men to prison for a week, on suspicion of rape: "They kick me in the face, hit me with the baton, whip me in the balls, beat me with the cat o'nine like them name buckra massa, and break my brethren right hand" (James 2014, 54). As Demus's comparison of the police to "buckra massa" and his reference to the "cat o'nine" makes clear, there are echoes here of the "white–black male encounter" which underpinned the colonial enterprise (Beckles 2000, 228). Beckles claims that, in a variety of ways, "slave owners denied that enslaved black men were 'men' in the sense of their ascribed normative characterization of manhood" (223). The emasculation of enslaved black men by white male slave owners resurfaces in the language and actions of the policemen, which feminize Demus. For example, Demus recounts how the police call him a "sodomite" (James 2014, 53) and then they "slap me like me is woman" (53). Later, they burn him and call him a girl when he screams (53). Demus subsequently acquires a gun, and the next time he encounters policemen he shoots two of them, "one in the head and another in the balls because I want him to live with no use for him cocky for the rest of him life" (54). The gun enables Demus to reassert his masculinity and, within the social world of the "ghetto", to move from a position of extreme subordination to one of power and dominance.

James's characters' rudie, don and shotta identities are therefore negotiated in relation to two forms of hegemonic masculinity: on a global level, cinematic images of white American masculinity; and on a local level, the hypermasculinity symbolized by dancehall culture's shotta icon and connected to a history of subordinated black masculinity. As such, the novel illustrates that hegemonic masculinity is "hierarchical and plural" rather than singular and monolithic, as Connell's model implies (Beasley 2008, 98). Rather than reproduce stereotypical images and narratives of black masculinity, *A Brief History* registers how, to borrow Maurice Hall's words, "slavery, colonialism, and now globalization have produced" performances of Jamaican masculinity "that are multiple and conflicted" (2011, 31).

Badmanism and borderline masculinities

Although the myth of the violent, aggressive and hypermasculine don or shotta figure is a key reference point in dancehall culture, critics have drawn attention to tensions, both within the space of dancehall and in the broader context of Jamaican popular culture, between articulations of masculinity that reinforce this myth and those that question or destabilize it. Donna Hope draws attention to the shifting terrain of masculinity in post-millennial dancehall culture, exemplified in Vybz Kartel's use of hair extensions and skin bleaching. She observes that the "fashioned and styled bodies of dancing men in tight pants in the centre of dancehall are based on a softened, feminized self-portrayal and thus directly reject and overturn dancehall's hardcore machismo" (2012–2013, 119). Hope argues that the growing popularity of these kinds of feminized masculine performances, which she terms "borderline masculinities" (105), both "highlights the development of transitional and transgressive sites of male identity formation" within Jamaican popular culture and "suggests that hegemonic masculinity is now in transition" (119, 108). She acknowledges that "borderline masculinities" have long existed in Jamaica, but proposes that they have become more prominent in the post-millennial moment (107).

Commenting on the same phenomenon, Nadia Ellis considers what it means for the performance of badmanism. Referring to a "loosening of the strictures around masculine expression", she observes how "we had moved from Bounty Killer's incredulity, on the cusp of the new millennium, that 'tight pants come in again', to five years later, tight pants being exactly the thing that bad men wore" (2011, 8). Ellis goes on to suggest that "badness", which has "long referred to male power and prowess in Jamaica, particularly in its gun-toting variety", has become "a signifier of queer" (10). Dancehall culture, then, in Ellis's reading, is a contradictory space where competing models of masculinity collide. In the context of the street dance, she claims, homoerotic performances not only exist alongside homophobic lyrics, but are actually enabled by them. She offers as an example a remembered scene of men dancing together to Buju Banton's "Boom Bye" (1992), where the lyrics create a space that is so emphatically not "gay" that the male dancers' performance is not interpreted as queer, and so – paradoxically – is not subject to the censorship that would be applied to it in other public spaces (17).

Whereas Hope and Ellis present the rise of "feminized" or "queer" badman performances as a post-millennial phenomenon, Kei Miller refers to a "long line of drag performances in Jamaican folk culture, a genealogy, as it were, of island cross-dressers – from what we call "roots theatre" straight (pun intended) to the ghettos and the killing fields of Jamaica's inner cities." He connects this to "the long line of bandits from our stridently heteronormative

island who were not above wearing a bit of drag" (2013, 106). These include Christopher "Dudus" Coke, the Tivoli Gardens don and Shower Posse leader who was captured wearing a wig, and Natty Morgan, "the most dangerous murderer in Jamaica at the time", who used both guns and women's clothes to escape from the police (106). In an article on visual artist Ebony Patterson's *Gangstas for Life* series, Veerle Poupeye makes a similar observation. Poupeye notes that Patterson's series was inspired by a news report on "some of Jamaica's most wanted criminals" who used skin bleaching, regarded as a "typically female" practice, to elude the police (2015, 10). She considers how the series reflects on "the increasingly feminised male aesthetic in dancehall, which stands in contrast with its hypermasculine and often homophobic rhetoric" (10). Poupeye goes on to argue that "while Patterson's androgynous, racially ambiguous Gangstas speak to the cultural now, they also resonate with older cultural practices and representations." To illustrate this, she connects Patterson's feminized gangster figures both to a tradition of cross-dressing "Actor boy" Jonkonnu masquerade characters and to the photographic portrait of the iconic rudie Ivan in *The Harder They Come* which, she points out, "marries male sartorial style and demonstrative gun slinging" (12).

Miller and Poupeye's reflections raise the question of whether the increasing prominence of what Hope terms "borderline masculinities" in post-millennial dancehall culture, exemplified in the performances and public image of Vybz Kartel, is in keeping with a Jamaican popular tradition which has always made space for complex and contradictory articulations of masculinity. In *A Brief History* James explores the association between badness and borderline masculinities that Hope, Ellis, Miller and Poupeye frame in different ways. The two characters that highlight this connection most clearly are Weeper and Eubie. Both are head enforcers. It is appropriate, then, to align both characters with the shotta icon of Jamaican popular music and film as "an ultimate signifier of masculine status", to return to Hope's commentary. However, they each, in different ways, challenge the "hypermasculin[ity]" and "hyper-heterosexuality" often connected with this figure (Hope 2010, 65, 118).

Possibly based on Shower Posse leader Vivian Blake (Carey 2016), Eubie comes not from "the ghetto" but from a middle-class background: "some good house with two good car and a good education too" (James 2014, 492). Describing him as a privately educated Ivy League college dropout who "leave Columbia to sell weed because there was nothing Columbia could teach him about making money he don't already know", Josey presents Eubie as even more of a "thinking man" than Weeper (467). If Eubie's socio-economic background and education feminizes him, his carefully styled appearance enhances this: Josey comments how he "cut him hair every two week, talk like he stay in a posh high school for the full seven years and

always wear a silk suit no matter the weather" (466). Weeper adds to this impression when he says that Eubie "must be the only man in Jamdown to get pedicure" (467) and describes him as a "cha boy" (467), a Jamaican patois term meaning "a male who dresses and acts flamboyant" (Reynolds 2006, 26).

Although Eubie's refined and elegant badman performance might seem to be at odds with the shotta figure's aggressive machismo, the silk suit with an unused "white kerchief" carefully placed in the pocket (James 2014, 482), the impeccable self-grooming, and the comparison to a "cha boy", all recall the "cool and smart style" of the "rude bwoys" (McMillan 2016, 66). As McMillan explains, the "rude bwoy" style was modelled not only on the "sharp suits" featured in American gangster movies, but also on the outfits of their Caribbean precursors, the 1950s "saga bwoys", whose dress incorporated "the flamboyant use of color" (64–65). This sartorial flamboyance can be seen in the portrait shot of Ivan wearing a patterned shirt, striped flares and bright yellow beret in *The Harder They Come*. McMillan links the "rude bwoys" to the figure of the "black dandy", dating back to the eighteenth century, who "disrupts the status quo, as he is hypermasculine and feminine" (62). Rather than subverting the classic badman persona, then, Eubie's feminized badman pose recalls and reconfigures the contradictory merging of the hypermasculine and the feminine that characterized the iconic rudie.

Weeper's character combines the hypermasculine and the feminine in a different way. He has been to primary and secondary school, and read books in prison, often quoting Bertrand Russell (James 2014, 42). In assuming the role of a "rudie in glasses" (65), Weeper deviates from hypermasculine performances such as "the avoidance of 'nerdiness' associated with being a bookworm, and a hostility to school as a feminized space" (Hall 2011, 48). Despite his early resistance to rudyism, when he is arrested by the police for walking in the wrong part of the city and naively believes that "surely a boy wearing glasses can't be a rudie" (James 2014, 66), Weeper eventually develops a rudie identity characterized by his trademark broken glasses. Weeper's sexual orientation also distinguishes him from the archetypal shotta; Josey comments on his ongoing correspondence with a man he met in prison, and the majority of Weeper's own narrative in the fourth section of the book centres on his sexual liaisons with men. Weeper's capacity for violence and aggression to some extent aligns him with dancehall culture's mythic anti-heroes; Josey notes that "everybody know Weeper is the fucker that will kill a boy right in front of his father and have the father count his last five breath" (65) He also enacts the shotta's role of promiscuous hyperheterosexuality through his frequent sexual encounters with women. However, his relationships with men complicate his badman performance.

Weeper's transgression of gender norms therefore operates differently to Eubie's; his queerness is expressed not only through appearance and self-

styling but also through his choice of sexual partners. The fact that it is Weeper's drug addiction rather than his sexual identity that eventually leads to his assassination seems to indicate that his sexual orientation, which is widely known, does not undermine his social power. In fact, his status as a head enforcer may be the reason why his transgressions go unpunished, as is indicated in Josey Wales' comment: "Weeper earn the right to do what he want to do, even if it is some sodomite business" (69). Ellis asks what "could be badder – fiercer, braver, more unaccountably acting with impunity – than, say, male cross-dressing in Jamaica?" (2011, 10). Weeper's story similarly suggests that the badman, who operates above social strictures as well as the law, may not have to conform to the gendered scripts and moral codes of a society which, in many contexts, is intolerant of non-heteronormative identities and practices.

Gardaphe considers the connection of the mafia gangster to traditional conceptions of masculinity, and asserts that it is through certain writers' reinvention of the gangster figure "that we begin to see new possibilities through the old images" (2010, 119–120). To some extent a similar case can be made for *A Brief History*, where the badman performances of characters such as Eubie and Weeper at once invoke and undermine the ideals typically embodied by the rudie, don and shotta in Jamaican popular culture, and can therefore be seen as examples of "borderline masculinities" (Hope 2012–2013, 112). Yet in its portrayal of badman identities and stories the novel engages with a popular cultural framework which has not always upheld the myth of the hypermasculine don or shotta. *A Brief History* draws upon and augments the tension between conflicting articulations of masculinity which is not only found in postmillennial dancehall culture, but can also be traced back through a more extensive archive of Jamaican folklore and popular culture. In doing so, the novel contributes to the reinvention of both the gangster figure and the gangster genre.

Conclusion: queering the gangster genre

Gardaphe comments on how, due to "powerful mass media exposure", since the 1920s the gangster has acquired the status of "cultural icon" in US society, and Lee Horsley describes the ways in which gangster novels and films have contributed to the making of the "gangster myth" (2009, 46–47). She identifies two opposing ways in which the gangster figure has been constructed:

> Sharing so much common ground with respectable, law-abiding citizens but at the same time functioning outside the law, the gangster serves both as a figure admirable for his toughness and energy, defying an unjust system, and, looked at from another angle, as a parallel in his activities to the criminality of supposedly honest society. He both collides with and replicates this society's legitimate structures. (Horsley 2009, 46–47)

Here Horsley draws attention to the capacity of gangster narratives to comment on an unequal and corrupt social and economic system. In her reading, the gangster is either romanticized as an "outlaw hero" rebelling against an unjust system or demonized as a "public enemy" whose behaviour – resembling that of "legitimate" businessmen – exposes the criminality at the heart of capitalism (45, 46). Either way, the gangster figure serves as a vehicle for sociopolitical critique. A particular target of this critique, Horsley goes on to suggest, is the philosophy of the American Dream, which is parodied in the economic success of the "criminal big shot" (47). In his discussion of Hollywood gangsters, Mac Fenwick similarly considers the symbolism of the gangster figure as an "economic rebel" whose exploits defy a system which, despite the rhetoric of the American Dream, denies many people's access to it due to "class and/or racial barriers" (1996, 629).

Horsley and Fenwick's observations demonstrate that, at least in the context of early to mid-twentieth-century North American society, the gangster icon was politically charged and potentially subversive. Indeed, as Munby points out, it was due to the Hollywood gangster film's "controversial" and "transgressive" qualities that this genre was subjected to "continual moral and political censure" in the 1930s and 1940s (2014, 1). Munby argues that the attempts of "Hollywood watchdogs" to impose on gangster films the moral message "crime doesn't pay" ultimately did not succeed in curbing the many "competing meanings" of gangster films. *A Brief History* harnesses the gangster narrative's subversive potential in its exposure of the racial, class and gender hierarchies operating within Jamaica and the United States in the late twentieth century, in its commentary on neoliberalism and cold war politics, and in its attention to the fine line between legal and illegal activities in a context where criminal leaders collude with politicians and CIA operatives.

However, the gangster's function as a "cultural icon" – a defining feature of the genre – is complicated by the transnational scope of James's novel. *A Brief History* extends the parameters of the gangster genre not only in terms of geographical setting and cultural reference points, moving as it does between Kingston, Miami and New York, but also in terms of voice and narrative structure. Centring on Josey Wales' ascent to power and equally spectacular downfall, the novel in some ways adheres structurally to the genre's "rise and fall narrative" (Mason 2002, xiv). Yet Josey's is not the only story, nor is he the only gangster figure in the novel. If the proliferation of terms used to describe gang members – rudie, don, shotta and yardie – already disturbs the uniformity of the American "gangster myth", *A Brief History*'s many narrative voices fracture it almost beyond recognition. The novel features several rudie, don and shotta narrators who differ in terms of racial and cultural identity, age, social status, gender and sexual orientation. Due to their diverging badman performances, these characters cannot be reduced to a single cultural icon. Furthermore, each character's badman identity is negotiated in relation

to multiple intertexts and competing models of masculinity. In this respect, too, the gangster icon is rendered ambiguous and plural.

Alison Donnell has drawn attention to resonances between queerness as an undoing of identity categories and "investment in points of rupture and indeterminacy", and the cultural, ethnic and national diversity of the Caribbean region (2012, 218–19). Her definition of "Caribbean queer" can be connected to the content, style and form of *A Brief History*. James's characters' badman performances blur the boundaries between not only femininity and masculinity, homosexuality and heterosexuality, but also Jamaican and American cultural paradigms. This fluidity is reflected in the novel's multifaceted movement across national borders. James's complex remodelling of the gangster figure therefore enables a queering of the genre. In *A Brief History*, a genre that traditionally "celebrates archetypal heterosexual [white] masculinity" (Mowlabocus 2007, 137) is recast as a site of both transnational mobility and evolving "borderline" masculinities.

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