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Projecting the ‘natural’: language and citizenship in outernational culture!

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Projecting the ‘natural’: language and citizenship in outernational culture!

‘British’ reggae/dancehall deejays¹ demonstrate their ‘mastery’ over the English language, during the performative moments when their lyricism ‘damages’ its ‘status’ by exposing its racist underpinnings in a language that its lofty ‘Standard’, cannot begin to perceive as such. The deejay performance is an obvious case of the ‘mastery of form’ and the ‘deformation of mastery’, according to Spencer’s (1995) reinterpretation of Baker’s (1987) concept. They argue that the Afrikan² competently mastered the outer form of European expressionism, be it language or other types of abstracted rhythmicity; but chose to cloak their mastery in conscious acts of deformation. For this reason ‘conscious’ deejays choose not to express themselves in their ‘mother tongue’ (standard English) but opt for another linguistic frame, ‘patwah’ – which becomes the performative ‘deformation of mastery’. By assessing how deejay lyricism challenges the notion of neutrality in citizenship, an opening is provided for investigating the complex ideas that surround blak³ identifications with particular types of

¹ My usage of deejays in this paper are those performers who ‘chat lyrics’ on Reggae/Dancehall rhythms.

² Afrikan spelt this way is reclamation of a self that is free from the racist depictions of the ‘African’ as the antithesis of the European. This notion is premised on the Afrikan as a central historical presence that subverts the idea that we made no meaningful contribution to ‘world history’ or ‘civilisation’.

³ My usage of blak without the ‘c’ denotes a conscious move by many ‘black Britons’ to separate themselves from the connotations of black as an overly negative sign. For instance, the colour of doom, oppression, dirt, misfortune and so forth, which is why blak has much currency in the countercultures of the Afrikan diaspora as an alternative way to conceptualise our presence in post-war Britain. Furthermore it is a distancing from the idea that black is synonymous with any experience of marginalisation or oppression, as this notion of blak is premised on an Africentric

Jamaican word/sound that have, via the medium of the reggae Sound System, traversed the 'black Atlantic'. For it is ultimately my evaluation of the associative power of the deejay's usage of symbolic language that will best demonstrate how it posits an alternative way of perceiving a black self, that is beyond the scope of a hegemonic 'black' British identity.

Recognising the 'enemy'

Mi bornah England mi know mi blak mi nah seh mi British,
cau to sumah di politician blakman don't exist.
Papa Benji

For a black writer to be born into the English language, is to realise that the assumptions on which the language operates are his enemy. James Baldwin

Wogs the matter, feeling browned orf, nigger mind, you can
always go black home, you'll feel all white tomorrer.
Childhood memory

The above epigraphs demonstrate the importance of recognising that the manner in which you perceive yourself through language, is intrinsically linked to the 'assumptions' located within the language itself. These assumptions will affect the individual on a social, cultural, political and psychological level, as these factors will determine the manner in which you interact with those who share your worldview, and those who oppose it, your 'enemy'. As a child I often pondered as to why/how my fellow 'countrymen' could hurl such vile abuse at me; often calling me a wog, a nigger, a spade or a coon, without considering my feelings? Why, through constant

stance that seeks to disrupt the validity of Euro/ethno-centric dogma as a paradigm for determining the human subject.

reminders that I should ‘go black home’, could I not be accepted ‘today’ as a citizen in the land of my birth? Why was I expected to wait until ‘tomorrer’ for the climate of racial intolerance to change, when in fact ‘tomorrer’ (meaning leave these shores and ‘go black home’) for the conscious black never comes? This type of questioning led me to take an avid interest in not only what was being said, positive or negative, but also how it was being said, by whom, and for what purpose. I therefore saw many similarities in the depiction of the black ‘other’ across the class spectrum, as I struggled to positively identify myself within the English language as something other than a wog/nigger/spade/coon, or even a ‘savage’, which is what my secondary school librarian once called me.

In the epigraphic ‘childhood memory’ the various takes on the phenotypic difference of today’s black skinned ‘other’ becomes offset against the right to ‘feel all white (right) tomorrer’. Belonging, as framed within the misguided hope that acceptance is ever on the horizon, is complexly linked to welcoming/suffering the types of abusive language that many blacks miss-takenly believe is somehow acceptable if we are to ‘make-it’ in a racist society. For instance, consider the comments of the Tory enlisted Patti Boulaye, a black singer and supposed spokesperson for the Black British, who seriously suggested that:

Stephen Lawrence’s killers were obviously Labour voters...
Prejudice is what makes black footballers as good as they
are...A good economy stops black people from feeling so
black. (The Mirror: 12/11/1998)

Whilst the comments of the ‘vacuous’ Miss Boulaye are astounding in their insensitivity and lack of meaningful intellectual engagement with the lived

reality of many black people, othered in a racist society, they do highlight a major problem in contemporary Britain. That is how can the notion of black as an oppressive sign in the English language be countered by those who are largely bound, whether they like it or not, by its negative signification? For it is one thing to suggest as Hall (1988, cited in Back 1996:4) does that a positive notion of black within the sphere of 'representation', can effectively 'unsettle' the 'reified images' of blacks that dominate popular culture. And quite another to see how this manifests in the concrete, when a cursory glance at any 'authoritative' source, i.e. your television set, handy dictionary, encyclopaedia, or your average textbook presents quite another story. I would suggest that far from furnishing the black/Afrikan person with a source of empowerment that would basically equip them to counter/unsettle these 'reified images'; these sources quite often compound your sense of inferiority. To make the point clearer, in an edition of the Jamaican daily newspaper 'The Gleaner' (16/3/01) it was reported that a group of West Indian cricketers were attacked by 'Aussie racists' during their Australian tour. One of the victims, the ironically named, Marlon Black, who was injured after being hit with bottles and various other projectiles, suffering multiple wounds to the body, suggested 'it was really unfortunate, it was just a little misunderstanding...I think they might have mistaken us for African people'. I am led to wonder if the outcome of this 'unfortunate...little misunderstanding' would have been more amicable had Mr Black been given the time to brandish his Trinidadian Passport, thus demonstrating to the 'Aussie racists' how un-African he was! This somewhat distorted perspective on what it is to be African, perfectly captures how the logic behind Black's, and Boulaye's, comments can be accessed through an analysis of deejay lyricism. More importantly, such an

analysis will also demonstrate how these depictions of black/African as inferior are countered in alternative black cultural spaces, for as Papa Levi suggests:

Everytime dat I clip on the TV and I see three or four black celebrity, dem always seem to hitch-up wid cokey, children what are they trying to tell we? Nuff black dem a lust, fame an status, when dem get rich dem own people dem dust, but hear mi, everytime mi clip on di damn TV, as far as mi two bullfrog eyes can see, nuff blackman wid likkle popularity, whether innah sport music or movie, as dem get a likkle success financially, dem draw fi Caucasian automatically...nuff ah fi wi people get brainwash, dem drink dutty water fi reach di top, an mi tink dat wrong an mi know dat slack, you know wot I mean arry, friggin eediot, dah one deh waan kick innah him damn neckback, karen will yuh marry me? Karen caan wash mi socks, mi nuh eat di bacon neither porkchops, blackman yuh fi duh better dan dat. (Levi, 1994).

The reasoning behind Papa Levi's sentiments is obvious in light of the above comments because in both cases to be identified as black/African in this time, is to accept that you are less than your white counterparts. Hence being successful, as in directly benefiting from a 'good economy', according to Boulaye's rationale, 'stops black people from feeling so black'. What we may ask is it to feel 'so black' that a modicum of economic 'well-being' can so successfully offset? The answer I would suggest lies in how we are socialised into accepting that 'the whiteness of whiteness is the blindness of wilful innocence' (Lazarre 1997:49). Therefore it comes as no great surprise that much that is associated with being white/European is deemed to be good/human/superior, whereas blackness is bad/inhuman/inferior. This said can we really be shocked at statements such as the above, uttered by in my opinion by very 'un-well-beings', that are the symptoms of the menticide

that was a deliberate ploy of those racist Europeans (and their cohorts) to destroy the Afrikan humanity that began in earnest during the chattel-slave era and continues to this day. With this in mind is it any wonder then that Levi would opine that as soon as the ‘blackman’ becomes financially successful, ‘dem draw fi Caucasian automatically’, because by doing so they will obviously not ‘feel so black’. Moreover, in his opinion this is a deliberate ploy of a dominant white culture which encourages black people to ‘drink dutty water fi reach di top’, in other words act the clown or buffoon like the ‘friggin eediot’ Frank Bruno; if ‘you know wot I mean arry’? Considering the overwhelming ‘popularity’ of this black ‘personality’ (and many others of his ilk), it is important for us to realise that these struggles over language, as they affect black representation in mainstream society, are far from being resolved. For this reason Levi suggests that ‘everytime’ black people ‘clip on the TV’, they need to seriously consider the types of messages that are being disseminated by a dominant culture, by continuously asking, ‘what are they trying to tell we’?

I must state at this point that my perspective on struggles over language with regard to the dissemination of a specific type of worldview, is only concerned with how deejays counter the English language as an agent for the maintenance of white supremacy. For whilst constructing lyrics and exploring various types of word/sound, the ‘conscious’⁴ deejay realises that white supremacist thinking permeates the culture of the English language; thus perpetuating black inferiority as natural. Unsurprisingly then the deejays

⁴ This notion of being a ‘conscious’ deejay means that you are attuned to the need for a more positive self to be projected to the wider black community, and therefore the cultural politics presented in your lyricism seeks to uplift by challenging your downpressor on the terrain of language by presenting alternative knowledges.

task is to demonstrate through the associative power of their particular take on the English language, how they counter the white supremacist thinking that shackles the Afrikan mind, by using language as an idiom for the transmission of an alternative blak aesthetic. This is achieved primarily through the deejay's awareness of the enmity an oppressive mother tongue represents for the Afrikan, which then becomes the focal point of their lyricism. In a nutshell British born deejays, who we can safely assume have a competent command of their mother tongue (Standard English), make a conscious decision to express themselves in another linguistic form - patwah. By doing so they challenge the assimilatory force of Standardised English which, when fully embraced, erases all traces of an autonomous blak self that seeks edification from an Afrikan centre. This occurs because the language that identifies the ultimate form of belonging for us 'others', our status as British subjects, is paradoxically determined by a rhetorical notion of citizenship that appears to be neutral; whilst in reality is ever beyond our grasp.

Wong (1986) addressed the issue of black language and education in the British context, when arguing that black youths resisted the detrimental nature of their mother tongue's 'alphabet of terror', by embracing Rastafari language and symbolism as a counter-culture, in recognition of this simple truth. Furthermore, many of the deejays whose lyrics are featured in this study have been 'highly educated and certified by the dominant white society, yet choose to express themselves in their own language' (Nehusi, personal communication, 2000). As I will demonstrate below, to use language in this way means you fully recognise that:

the language of instruction and literature is saturated with words, concepts, idioms, sayings that have strong and loaded values and nuances that suggest, directly or indirectly, notions of racial superiority, inferiority and suppression...These notions of racial dominance and superiority were formerly reinforced in schools, where the languages of Third World peoples were denigrated and marginalised. (Wong 1986:118)

As a deejay, one of the strongest ways to counter this notion is to challenge your enemy's usage of language, by demonstrating how the enemy distorts 'truth' in your own manipulations of words and sounds. For instance, the deejay can take a word like 'education', explain what it 'should' be, based on our commonsense assumptions, a meritocratic 'learning' process, and then provide what they deem to be a more accurate description of this process from a blak perspective; 'head-decay-shun'. The deejay draws on blak cultural resources that purposefully challenge the neutrality of the English language; in this case the term 'head-decay-shun' stems from a Rastafari notion of 'brainwash education'. This means that Rastafari has evaluated the notion of what it is to be 'educated' by your 'enemy' and concluded that what occurs is decadent and something to be shunned. As:

Dem give us O' level and PhD, dem nuh teach I an I about I blak history, I culture, about I self and by di time dem done wid wi, dem tun wi fool against ourselves...dat's why yuh muss learn to see behind di line, read behind di line, cau dem nah duh nut'n fi blak people. (Capleton 1997)

The comments of the Rastafari Jamaican deejay Capleton make known that many of us who are supposedly 'educated', do in fact receive a type of instruction/indoctrination that basically encourages us to be Anti-Afrikan. Or as he suggests accepting their teaching, without the type of 'qualification'

that would come from ‘reading behind di line’, will ultimately ‘tun wi fool against ourselves’. Clearly a case of Curtis Mayfield’s ‘educated fools from uneducated schools’, which is why it is prudent for us to question the ‘language’ of ‘instruction’ and that in which we are being ‘instructed’. Therefore, the recognised notion of what it is to be an ‘intellectual’; ‘educated’ according to a Eurocentric world view, is countered by an intellectuality that is organic in the sense that it is not formally developed in educational institutes. Or as Marcus Garvey posits on matters of the Afrikan mind:

Develop yours and you will become as great and full of knowledge as the other fellow [sic] without even entering the classroom. (1986:17).

Garvey’s notion of what it is to be ‘educated’ beyond the ‘classroom’ is the premise upon which this outernational culture is based, because its organic nature presupposes that there are other sites of learning that are validated from within the culture itself. In this context organic is descriptive of a natural learning process that necessarily links historical modes of blak survival, in this case the reliance on indirection through various types of orality, to counter a hegemonic mother tongue. For every language, every mother tongue, encompasses a specific notion of what it means to ‘belong’ as part and parcel of the ‘national/mind/identity’ it projects to the rest of the world. The point is that the English language, ‘our’ mother tongue, is still associated with the types of white supremacist thought that were so crucial to maintaining the ‘greatness’ of the British Empire. What this means is that the positionality of its former ‘subjects’ may have shifted physically in many cases, ‘nuff deh ah foreign’ but psychologically its racist underpinnings have remained largely intact. Therefore, many assumptions that give rise to

situations of conflict or harmony are fostered in the contested notion of what it means to 'belong' as citizen or subject to your mother tongue's 'national project'. My conception of the 'national project' is the 'racist-white-theodicy' that underscores the supposedly impartial, reasoned and highly rational, education/socialisation we receive through our exposure to a 'neutral' national curriculum via the English language. By reasoning through this concept I will shed light on why 'verbal arts' are so necessary for the survival and self-empowerment of the Afrikan diaspora, because wherever we encounter 'master' languages like Standard English, our experiences of alienation are one and the same.

In the case of Standard English, the national project, as espoused by racist ideologues, promotes a particular reading of the historical encounters between Europe and its 'others', that re-inscribes the 'other's' inherent inferiority. Because:

Power lies at the core of all social research and nowhere in contemporary British social science has this been seen more clearly than in the frequently troubled arena of research into race and racism. Too often (white) academy has chosen to represent the (black) communities in a manner that has inscribed pathological, racist caricatures in the commonsense of academic understanding of the histories of such communities. Institutionalised by university seals of approval, such knowledges impact on the life chances of people who find themselves measured, not only by the abuses of overt racism but also by the insidious cultural orthodoxies of the academic imagination. (Keith 1992:551)

Whilst agreeing wholeheartedly with Keith's contribution, I would suggest that 'cultural orthodoxies' are not restricted to those whites who articulate themselves in the language of academia alone. Therefore the fact that

universities provide the ‘seals of approval’ for the types of ‘ethnographic inscription’ that ‘others’ many non-Europeans in the popular imagination, is lost to those who cannot make these necessary links. Consider the case of the white working class or ‘poor white trash’, who may well be blamed for the continuous usage of words like wogs and niggers, especially when viewed as a sign of their ignorance to the fact that ‘races’ no longer exist. Yet I am certain that they were not responsible for inventing or providing the dictionary definitions of these terms, which still have much currency now. This ‘honour’ must go to academics or other ‘educated’ elite’s who are generally the first one’s to inform you of the ‘scientifically’ untenable nature of these terms. However, due to the fact that their dictionary definitions (cultural orthodoxies *par excellence*) remain largely unchanged, thus perpetuating the racist theodicy, these terms still play an important role in sanctioning black inferiority in the context of the lexicon of the national project. In fact ‘wogs’ and ‘niggers’ were more or less the generic terms for ‘black people’ when I was a child, growing up in South East London during the sixties, that were used by white people from all class backgrounds. It is crucial that we recognise this fact because it demonstrates how black people were homogenised and ‘othered’ in the lexicon of their ‘mother tongue’, which obviously reinforced white notions of superiority as part of a nationalist cultural project, that blurred class based distinctions within the ‘master race’. For as Patterson poignantly suggests:

Who after reading the Oxford dictionary would not want to be master? And is it any wonder that for generations the dominant school of historical scholarship on slavery in America...had thoroughly persuaded itself and its audience that the great achievement of American slavery was the civilising of the black race, its tutorship and elevation from savagery to civilisation. The saddest aspect of this bizarre

historiography is its sincerity. It was not only insensitivity to the descendants of black slaves that led to such obtuse conclusions, but insensitivity to the cognitive imperatives of language. The ease with which it is to shift from the meaning of “master” as “man having control or authority” to that of “a teacher or one qualified to teach” reflects the ease with which it is possible to shift from our conception of the slave plantation as a brutal system of exploitation and human degradation to a pastoral college for the edification of poor savages eager to learn the superior arts of the civilised “master”. (1982:334/5)

Appreciating the profundity of Patterson’s opening question provides an insight into why I undertook to write this piece, for after being bombarded from infancy with all things ‘white’ and ‘beautiful’, I often found myself asking the very same question, ‘who would not want to be master’? Consider for a moment the ‘reality’ of being written out of ‘reality’, for that is what it is like to be a person of Afrikan descent raised in a Eurocentric world, where it is far easier to invest in the notion of ‘civilising the savages’ than to think about what it means to be a ‘savage’. This is why Patterson points out that the white slave owner’s ‘insensitivity to the cognitive imperatives of language’, meant that they could disguise their shift from ‘savage master’ to ‘civilised tutor/teacher’ with no consideration of the psychological effects this would have on their ex-property. And I would add the psychological effects this shift would also have on the slave owner’s descendants has yet to be fully considered, as many deny the brutal reality of the chattel slave era by hiding behind the notion of ‘we’ should not be judged by the ‘sins of our fathers/mothers’. Yet as peoples of Afrikan descent who do not control the manner in which our story is presented in the recognised public sphere, we are encouraged to forgive and forget, that which only our counter-cultures

truly allow us to remember in the first place. Therefore, the ‘reality’ of the chattel slave’s ‘conception of the slave plantation as a brutal system of exploitation and human degradation’, was/is not included in the master’s historiography, which is why slave survival depended on the types of counter-culture that allowed them to ‘pick sense out of nonsense’. This becomes even more important for the black person born into an ‘enemy’ language due to our reliance on texts like dictionaries, encyclopaedias and ‘standard textbooks’; as I previously suggested all fundamental to our everyday ‘education’ and socialisation.

It is imperative that we appreciate black language as a counter-hegemonic force from this perspective, because it provides the tangible links between resistance, survival and transcendence as necessary to the promotion of an Afrikan aesthetic. Crucially in this context, being ‘educated’ in a language that you do not recognise to be your ‘enemy’, means that you are accepting Afrikan inferiority as expressed through your mother tongue as ‘natural’. Thus when Baldwin states that we are in fact ‘born into’ a language, he seems to suggest that being ‘born into the English language’ is in the case of the black subject, synonymous with being written out of history. For if like Baldwin you (a black person) are highly proficient in the ‘correct’ usage of Standard English, written and spoken, yet still find that you cannot measure-up to the ‘English Standard’; another set of issues are raised with regard to the links between, history, language, culture and identity. Furthermore, without this type of realisation, the more ‘education’ you receive the more alienated (tun fool against yourself) you become from yourself, because wrapped up in the English language is a heritage that projects a white, national identity. That is why Baldwin suggested that we need to be aware of

the nature of an enemy language that has tampered with the Afrikan mind for over 500 years and consequently erased/distorted/ destroyed much of our historical, cultural and spiritual memories. Therefore, redefining and reconstructing the dominant language can only become a form of self-empowerment, when the historical necessity of this type of ‘relexicalisation’ (Jones 1986) is known.

I am well aware that deejays are not the only group that ‘defame’ standard English as a tactical and practical demonstration of their ‘mastery’ of its outer ‘form’, whilst stating their alternative claims through a distinctive cultural form. Certain white groups, for instance Cockneys, who often view Standard English as an oppressive mother tongue, demonstrate a similar ‘mastery of form’ in their deliberate ‘damaging’ of ‘proper’ speech. A point that is exceptionally well captured in Barltrop and Wolveridge’s (1980) aptly titled book, ‘Muvver Tongue’, which argues for the recognition of ‘cockney’ as a ‘vehicle of working-class culture’. By spelling the word ‘mother’ nearer to the way it is pronounced by the Cockney speaker, ‘muvver’, they demonstrate how contested the notion of a ‘nation language’ (Brathwaite 1984) is with regard to identity and belonging. The cockney worldview is represented as differing from that of the Standard English speakers’ notion of a ‘nation language’, which for them smacks of non-working class cultural sensibilities. Unsurprisingly they suggest that ‘speaking well – ‘talking posh’ – does not make a great impression; it smacks of being the enemy’s language’ (1980:50).

On this point we are more or less in agreement as I too recognise that the cultural/social self, projected through an unquestioning acceptance of the

Standard English ('our' mother tongue) version of identity and belonging, does not often cater for a lived reality. However, there is one crucial difference between their notion of an 'enemy language' and mine, which is that only their speech pattern and associated lifestyle demarcates their most recognisable differences from the 'enemy'; in specified contexts. Therefore, logically, if they choose to alter certain aspects of their behaviour and speech, they could comfortably 'pass' for one of the 'enemy' as they are of the same 'race'. Whereas my argument is based on the type of exclusion that is based on phenotypical difference and reinforced through a hegemonic tool that 'passes' as a 'neutral' standardised language as depicted in the above childhood memory. Especially when we are considering how a reaction to racist exclusionary practices, led to the emergence of a British deejay culture, which confounds the usage of 'minority' language (Patwah) by 'majority' (English) language speakers.

Making connections: Looking trew di spectacles of Itiopia!

Of primary interest here is the manner in which alternative blak identities, expressed through the utilisation of Creolised languages in an urban context, demonstrates how the language of the dancehall is performed. And how these performed identities, made manifest through a particular usage of language, present more realistic accounts of what it is to be bla[c]k in Post War Britain. This is why the notion of the deejay as an 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci, 1971, Gilroy, 1987) must be understood in the context of a realisation that 'our' mother tongue, Standard English, was/is our greatest enemy. A notion which suggests that every social group recognises their own intellectuals, because intellect is defined within their own frames of reference. By expressing themselves in patwah the British deejays reject the

existing Standard English (culturally orthodox) frameworks for measuring intelligent social commentary, and therefore use different registers to appreciate their own intellectuality. Once this fundamental is appreciated we can comprehend why the deejay chose to participate in the outernational musical and cultural exchanges of the ‘black Atlantic’ (Gilroy, 1993). That is why Jah Bones’ (1986) observation has such validity, because he recognised that the deejays were extending ‘cultural strongholds that are normally well fortified’. The way this was achieved was by exposing the wider British community to the language and performance of reggae/dancehall music, which in turn increased the visibility of the ‘hidden’ musical/cultural exchanges of the Afrikan diaspora. These Africentric⁵ exchanges are reliant on the reggae Sound System⁶ as the main conduit for the dissemination of these ‘hidden voices’, as they provide the amplified platforms that allow the deejays to partake in a Diasporic system of intellectual exchange. Thereby placing their lyricism in an outernational context because the language of choice, patwah, and the worldview it represents, cannot be geographically bounded. This is due to the fact that the knowledges contained in the deejay’s accounts are disseminated across the ‘black Atlantic’ through a system of ‘taped⁷’ exchanges. Moreover, these knowledges demonstrate how ‘the aftermaths of slavery still endure in the

⁵ I am of the opinion that an Afro is a hairstyle which is symbolically linked to a powerful aesthetic statement, and prefer to use Afri- (Afri-can not Afro-can) as a prefix.

⁶ Reggae Sound Systems have an aesthetic worth that is undervalued by associating them with ‘large mobile discos’. As a former Sound System co-owner myself I know that the very name of our Sound, Ghetto-Tone, was representative of an alternative voice that sought to reflect the ‘tone’ in both ‘sound’ and ‘mood’ of blak youth in the streets of South East London.

⁷ These ‘taped’ sessions are generally recorded on cassettes and have since the late seventies been commonly known as ‘Yard (Jamaican) Tapes’. However, from the early eighties other points in the Afrikan Diaspora began to partake in these exchanges, which by this time also included Video cassettes as well, most notably from Britain, the USA and Canada. Nowadays, Sound Systems are a global phenomena and thus ‘Yard Tapes’ are being received in these shores from literally the four corners of the earth.

social forms and perceptions of New World peoples' (Mintz, 1989:62), as evidenced in the following extract where it is argued:

Some people nah go like weh me say, but me a go say it anyway, Me a go talk about slavery and the effects of it today, some people just don't want to know, about four hundred years ago, But the thing about slavery its affecting people now...what about all the lives that were lost, what about the black holocaust, what about African slavery and what its done to you and me...Oh I can see the effects of slavery still inna the community, no identity suffering from amnesia, a case of lost memory, Black man and woman can't you see your history never start on the plantation...Holocaust is a word they use for what the Nazis did to the Jews, compensation was never refused, their own land they even got to choose. So what's wrong with us, was the Black holocaust not so serious. (Macka B:2000) [lyrics as written in Album notes]

Macka B clearly states that as peoples of Afrikan descent we are still affected by chattel slavery, especially those who are suffering from a type of 'amnesia' who have no awareness that their 'history never start on the plantation'. This line of argument is the contemporary manifestation of a historical 'mode of response/resistance' (Mintz, op cit.) to, and rejection of, the imposition of European cultural values on non-European peoples. In other words, the countering of whiteness as an ethnocentric paradigm for the global maintenance of white supremacist thinking, by a blakness which is dependent on 'making connections with the entire Diaspora' (Back 1996:145). Making these connections includes a re-linking with a more positive sense of a historical Afrikan presence that did not begin 'on the plantation'. Thus the role of the deejay as educator is exemplified in Macka B's account, as he seeks to promote awareness of how the legacy of chattel slavery impacts on the way we perceive ourselves in the present. Of equal

importance by making connections between the Afrikan and the Jewish holocausts, he highlights the manner in which the Afrikan has been historically mis-educated, as many people have no idea as to the extent of the destruction meted out on the Afrikan by racist Europeans.

In the case of reggae/dancehall music, these 'connections' are maintained because it was/is 'protected' by a 'language, a colour and by a culture which had been forced to cultivate secrecy against the intrusions of the Master Class' (Hebdige, 1979:434). Therefore, overstanding what it means to be considered as an 'educated' person from within the counter culture is crucial to this discussion, as 'many don't want to know, about four hundred years ago'. Hence I now wish to cast my focus more closely on how questioning what it means to be 'educated' by your enemy, has proven to be the best way to resist the 'intrusions of the master class', especially on the terrain of language.

Recognising and commenting upon the 'intrusions' of the 'Master Class' contemporaneously depends on the deejay knowing that Standard English, 'our' mother tongue, the language of formal education which determines much of 'our' socialisation, is by its very nature racist and anti-Afrikan. Furthermore, as I suggested above, because the English language (like other European 'Master Class' languages) 'naturally' promotes white cultures as scribal, and Afrikan cultures (or their descendants) as non-scribal, many cultural critics black and white, take much for granted when commenting on 'resistance'. For this reason careful consideration must be taken when thinking through notions of resistance that invest too heavily in the 'myth (in the worse sense of that term) of African orality' (Smart 1998:45). A myth

that has been used to ‘whiten’ the Afrikan contribution to world civilisation, therefore obscuring the fact ‘it was in the heart of Black Africa that mankind first invented writing⁸ and literature’ (ibid:45/6). An awareness of this type of Afrikan contribution to world civilisation is well represented in blak counter-cultures, where ‘organic intellectuals’ seek to uplift the Afrikan oppressed by making these connections in alternative public arenas. Moreover, it is by passing on this type of information through the pedagogic force of their lyricism, that the deejay gains maximum respect and the counter-culture truly operates as such during these moments. For instance, consider the following reasoning I had with Papa Levi (1997):

Levi: Dem (Europeans) gi wi di Bibble (Bible) as a way of controlling us on di plantation.

WH: How yuh mean dem gi wi di bible, cau dem never waan wi, or even allow wi, fi read di text fi wiself, dem only.

Levi: when mi seh gi wi, I mean dem expose wi tuh fi dem restricted version of the teachings. Dat’s how dem influence wi tinkin an mek wi love dem an hate wi self trew fi dem miseducation, as Carter. G. Woodson⁹ tell wi from time.

WH: Ah true mi bredder, but yuh know seh nuff noh know dem ting deh cause dem feel seh as Afrikans wi couldn’t read from morning, therefore our supposed ignorance of letters made it easier for dem to control us wid de Bible. Tink about when Bob (Marley) seh ‘we build your schools, brainwash education, to make us your fools, hatred your reward for our love, telling us of your god above’.

Levi: Yeh but.

⁸ This fact has been proven by many eminent scholars whose detailed analyses have been ‘overlooked’ by ‘recognised’ academics. See for instance Chiek Anta Diop (1974), The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth or Reality, Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago, Illinois. Or Marimba Ani (1994), Yurugu: An African-Centred Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behaviour, Africa World Press, Inc, Trenton, New Jersey.

⁹ In the Miseducation of the Negro (op Cit.)

WH: Weh mi ah seh is that dem never literally gi wi di text fi study it fi wiself, fi relate it to our reality as the originators of the knowledge in the first place.

Levi: Yow but lez, member when mi chant di lyric bout weh dem (Europeans) duh tuh wi;

(Levi chats part of the lyric)

dem tek weh wi gold, jahman dem tek wi silver, dem heng mi puppah an rape mi mummah, dem ship wi from di wonderful land of Afrika, fi slave fi di plantation owner, dem tek weh wi name, dem call wi nigger, di only word wi know, ise-ah coming massa, dem tell wi seh wi ignorant an inferior and how dem intelligent and superior, trew de complexion of dem skin colour, but I as a yute born as a super, mi badder dan di bite from a tarantula, R fi di roots, C fi di culture. (Papa Levi)

Levi: Ah dat mi did ah tink bout cau yuh can't know yuhself if yuh cut off from yuh root.

WH: If yuh nuh know yuh roots yuh caan know yuh culture.

Levi: but dem nah show wi dat and ah dem ting deh mi tink bout when mi ah write lyrics, an ah dat mi haffi put innah mi tune dem. Dem nah goh educate we, we haffi look innah wi self fi dat.

WH: Well yuh done know me is ah man weh always challenge fi dem version ah history cau dem (Europeans) too damn lie.

Levi: den ah nuh dat mi ah show di I, cau Marcus (Garvey) seh wi must si God trew de spectacles of Itiopia, which means wi must embrace wi own words in order to reject the cokey's (Caucasian) foolishness which have wi ah style each odder as niggers, yuh get weh mi mean Lez, cau in ancient times di whole ah Afrika was known as Itiopia and ah we bring forth certain know-ledge to di rest of di world, including dem people deh (Europeans).

The fact that Levi stresses that he has to 'write' what he 'thinks' to counteract the European words that 'style' us as 'niggers', is of utmost

importance to the ethos of this discussion. As Levi suggests it is possible to draw on the knowledge contained within the Bible as a source of inspiration, whilst investing in the racist notion that the Afrikan made no meaningful contribution to said knowledge. The reasoning behind this viewpoint is obvious if we consider that during the chattel slave era, racist exclusionary practices were overt in their practice and brutal in their application, as the Afrikan slave was the 'natural' antithesis of the European master. Thus the type of 'education they received was structured around their inferiority, excellently captured in Levi's 'di only word wi know, ise-ah coming massa'. Levi demonstrates that it was a deliberate ploy to socialise the chattel slave into a normalised sense of inferiority, which hinged on placing the master, through everyday discourse, at the centre of all things. Therefore any verbal expression of disobedience such as, 'I aint coming master', was brutally suppressed and elided from the vocabulary of the chattel slave who would receive the type of mis-education that would make them 'good' slaves and little else. What this meant is that there was no need to include anything, culturally or aesthetically, to the slave's socialisation process (which was geared towards instilling linguistic incompetence) that could have bestowed an autonomous notion of a positive self. Obviously for the chattel slave to have the capacity to think autonomously through a wider exposure to the master's language, would have literally been counter productive for the 'Master Class'. Moreover, anything that could link the chattel slaves to the Afrikan Continent was brutally suppressed, especially with regard to the outlawing of the usage of Afrikan languages, as the European knew that this was the main conduit for cultural transmission across time and space. Here we have a practical reason as to why 'our' history is not found within the 'standard English textbooks' of a racist culture, because our history was

deliberately obliterated during, and since, this historical moment; a factor that cannot be redressed until it is properly addressed.

According to Papa Levi, we can seek redress by addressing certain issues ourselves by ‘writing dem innah wi tune dem’, for this is the best way to challenge the whitening of black history as we seek to remove our Eurocentric spectacles. However, realising there is a problem and finding an outlet to express your alternative perspective is in itself highly problematic, due to the ‘structural placement’ of black people in a racist society. Unequal access determines how, where and when you can challenge these types of distortions, and this is why the notion of what it means to be ‘intelligent’, organic or otherwise, needs much consideration. Part of being regarded as ‘intelligent’ from the deejays perspective is to be consciously aware of certain limitations, then use this awareness strategically in your endeavours to uplift the Afrikan oppressed. This is why I focus on ‘conscious deejays’ in this paper for the community they represent regards them as griot¹⁰ type figures whose ‘intellectuality’ is determined by their perception as skilled wordsmiths in social realism. For to be recognised as a ‘conscious deejay’ is to be regarded as a performer who can disseminate practical information, as well as ‘entertain’ as a master crafter of words and sounds. This means that in this context both the deejay and the audience realise that in order to manipulate language in a particular fashion you firstly have to master it, an aspect of cultural survival that was missed by many theorists as I will demonstrate below. Therefore, the deejay must have an awareness of the

¹⁰ Griots are social commentators who can be hired to sing about various issues or even individuals through the latest gossip. They have a large repertoire and are akin to an acid tongued minstrel. For a more detailed analysis see Finnegan. R. *Oral Literature in Africa*, 1970, Oxford University Press. Or Cooper. C. *Noises in the Blood*, 1993, Macmillan Press, London.

ramifications involved in the blind acceptance of words like ‘nigger’, that do in fact represent the removal of the Afrikan subject from world history, which is why the power to ‘name’ is so important to our sense of humanity.

With the power to name specifically through a language of your own choice, comes the power to resist the inhuman depictions and negative descriptions that are an intrinsic part of an enemy mother tongue. When Papa Levi argues ‘dem tell wi seh wi ignorant an inferior and how dem intelligent and superior, trew de complexion of dem skin colour’, he is making it known that the European could only do this if they convinced us that we were actually niggers. The way the European tried to achieve this end was by endeavouring to strip us of our humanity, by robbing us of our Afrikan mother tongues, and the worldviews and cultural perspectives contained therein. These were then replaced by the European version of what we actually were in their eyes, ‘niggers’, which according to the Africentric cultural critic Anthony Browder means a culturally, spiritually and psychologically dead person, because:

The word **negro** is Spanish for black. The Spanish language comes from Latin, which has its origins in classical Greek. The word **negro**, in Greek, is derived from the root word **necro**, meaning dead. What was once referred to as a physical condition is now regarded as an appropriate state of mind for millions of Africans. [His Emphasis] (1989:1)

Combating this negro ‘state of mind’ is a major occupation of the conscious deejay, as they have an awareness of the danger behind the unquestioning acceptance of foreign languages like English as ‘our’ mother tongue, which is why they seek to damage its status as a neutral entity. By doing so they demonstrate how they are ‘over’ (fully comprehend) the tactics the enemy

uses to suppress and oppress the Afrikan's humanity in everyday discourse. Therefore, it is 'our' (the deejays) duty to recognise the limitations of using the oppressor's language, especially when promoting an alternative account of Afrikan humanity, and more importantly make these limitations known to the wider black community. The way this is achieved, obviously in the context of the deejay, is through the narratives they present in a Creolised language that allows them to counter European cultural hegemony. The cleverness with regard to how this is actualised is evidenced in the above extract from Levi and bolstered by the reasoning he provides to justify his perspective. For instance, when Levi suggests 'dem tek weh wi name, an call wi nigger', he is commenting on how the European did their best to rob the Afrikan of all knowledge of self by denying them the power of self-definition. Once you are denied the right to define your own reality through the usage of your own languages, that naturally embody, transmit and communicate a cultural self across time and space, you no longer operate as an autonomous cultural self. Hence equating yourself with a concept/construct like the 'nigger' means that you internalise its negativity, and therefore lower your self esteem, for as Browder suggests:

The name that you respond to determines the amount of your self worth. Similarly, the way a group of people collectively respond to a name can have devastating effects on their lives, particularly if they did not choose the name.
(ibid)

The suggestion is that those black people who do not possess the 'awareness' that the language of 'education' is far from neutral, will not recognise the repressive and oppressive forms of racist practices and

procedures that operate on a psychological level. Historically, the case of Frederick Douglass best demonstrates this notion as he suggested:

I was generally introduced as a '*chattel*'-a '*thing*'- a piece of Southern '*property*'- the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak. The white abolitionists allowed this static, dehumanised slaveholder's fiction of Douglass to govern their conception of his oral testimony. (Callahan, 1989:17) [Author's emphasis]

What is intriguing about Frederick Douglass' account is that it demonstrates how he had an awareness of what was expected of him as an 'object' an 'it' a 'thing', which was totally different from how he viewed his own subjectivity, which empowered him in his quest for freedom. Therefore, the sensibilities behind Douglass' realisation of the worth of his 'own' voice mirrors the psychology behind Levi's emphasis on what we have to 'write innah wi tune dem'. This is because the deejay performance is an obvious case of the 'mastery of form' and the 'deformation of mastery', according to Spencer's (1995) reinterpretation of Baker's (1987) concept. They argue that the Afrikan competently mastered the outer form of European expressionism, be it language or other types of abstracted rhythmicity; but chose to cloak their mastery in conscious acts of deformation. That is why 'conscious' deejays choose not to express themselves in their 'mother tongue' (standard English) but choose to use another linguistic frame, 'patwah' – which becomes the performative 'deformation of mastery'. Therefore, the dominant/subordinate (oral/scribal) power relationship which is normalised under the cloak of whiteness as the 'mother tongue', must be considered in any meaningful analysis of the relevance of language as a vehicle of resistance, as it allows us to focus on why it was, and still is, necessary to these cultures of resistance. For:

To become a citizen he becomes a writer and by authoring the story of his quest for voice and self, he reshapes the identity expected of him as a speaker. Douglass considers power over the word, spoken and written, essential to his identity as an individual and a free man...Douglass experiences points up the need for African-American writers to replace others' fictions about their voices and stories with their own. (ibid)

This I suggest is a case of thinking yourself into being, because once you realise that the strength of the negative depictions of the Afrikan's lack of humanity are intrinsically linked to how we are 'educated' in an enemy language, as a primarily 'oral' people; our conscious choice of orality as a source of self-empowerment to replace 'others' fictions' with 'stories' of our 'own' becomes obscured. Consequently the fact that the historical contributions of peoples of Afrikan descent are excluded or 'whitened' within the national curriculum, is why many 'naturally' assume that we have no history of note. What this then means is that the European's depiction of the Afrikan as its antithesis remains largely unchallenged within the public arena, consequently many accept a 'truth' to be that which is found in 'our' standard textbooks. Included in this concept is the 'fact' that from an early age we are taught, and therefore 'learn' to accept as 'natural', that in order to better our future prospects, especially with regard to employment, a good and proper education is vital. Therefore, I am thinking about an aspect of the 'hidden curriculum' that is comprehensively challenged in Douglass' testimony and deejay lyricism. I am suggesting that as children our 'compulsory schooling' includes the type of 'passive consumption', that leads to 'an uncritical acceptance of the existing social order' (Illich cited in Giddens, 1989).

However, I think that as a child of Afrikan descent there is a further complication, which is that the acceptance of a 'social order' (which is based on the racist assumptions made manifest in the form of Eurocentric 'education' we receive), means that the Afrikan contribution to civilisation is totally overlooked. This fact is reinforced through the Afrikan's intimate relationship with the English language; our 'mother tongue', because the terms that 'allow' us any sense of an autonomous identity are invariably negative, such as being black or a nigger. Remember, Afrika was once known as 'Negroland', the home of the negro, which meant that the continent and its peoples became locked into the negative connotations of this particular word. Compare this to the fact that Europeans have no such terms that denote a negative relationship between them, their levels of civilisation, and the geographical region from which they hail; their 'superior' status obviously remains unchallenged in the lexicon of a white mother tongue. Moreover, many British born deejays realised that the world view expressed through a usage of standard English in everyday discourse, largely reduced them to the voiceless passive victims of a Eurocentric historical bias. A historical bias that depicts the Afrikan as naturally 'oral' and the European as naturally scribal, which leads to the assumption that Europe was responsible for introducing the Afrikan to written 'national languages'. This issue is important because I am also considering how these accounts challenge the popular view that 'the lyrics of the deejays define the furthest extreme of the scribal/oral literary continuum' (Cooper 1993:136). Although Cooper's comments were based on Jamaican deejays, the fact that deejaying is regarded as an 'oral' art form makes it easier for this type of misrepresentation to be forwarded; which is arguably premised on the historically representative non scribal Afrikan. That was the point I was

making during my reasoning with Levi when I stated that for many ‘dem feel seh as Afrikans wi couldn’t read from morning’. For this reason our exposure to ‘fi dem (the European’s) restricted teachings’ reinforced our supposed ‘ignorance of letters’, which obviously, ‘made it easier for dem to control us...on di plantation’. A perspective that is evident in the notion that dancehall music ‘is a subgenre of reggae with minimal connections to Rastafarianism...with little expression given in the song texts to either religious, social, or political themes’ (Savishinsky, 1994:276).

What is interesting about this perspective is the ‘theorist’ claims that because ‘social scientists’ leave ‘relatively uncharted areas of cultural interconnectedness’, his paper will ‘redress’ some of ‘these omissions’ in the processes relating to the diffusion and globalization of culture’ (ibid:259). His focal point is the ‘global spread’ of ‘Rastafarianism’ as a ‘transnational popular culture...and its attendant forms of expression (which he claims) are central to his study’ (ibid). Why I suggest that ‘he claims’ is that to omit ‘dancehall’ from any study of the ‘global spread’ of Rastafarianism in this time, is to fall victim to exactly that form of neglect which he supposedly critiques. The fact that he separates ‘reggae’ from ‘dancehall’ is illuminating for in essence there can be no separation, except perhaps in the minds of those who demonstrate a total lack of comprehension, or even awareness of the history behind this type of cultural expression. How else could he suggest that ‘dancehall’ has ‘minimal connections to Rastafarianism’, unless his notion of ‘interconnectedness’, which is central to his thesis is flawed? If my supposition is incorrect, then how can we explain the depth and diversity of the reasoning that occurred between Papa Levi and myself, both Rastafari and reggae/dancehall performers? Lest I am accused of being unduly harsh

let us consider some other voices from within the culture that refute his 'scholarly' claims, because as Beenie Man (1997) suggests:

Music ah di beat ah di ghetto, mi nuh matter what yuh waan
seh Beenie Man seh soh, music ah di beat ah wi heart, who
nuh know bout di music please don't bother talk.

Two of the most popular Jamaican reggae/dancehall performers during 1994 were heartical (true) Rastafari, Garnett Silk and Capleton. Firstly, Garnett Silk, a singer who until his untimely death in December of that year was being hailed as the 'new' Bob Marley. This accolade was warranted as in fact, like Marley, Silk has become a veritable 'superstar' after his death with albums that still dominate the reggae charts in places like Japan, the UK and the USA. His single, the aptly entitled 'Mama Africa' in which he makes known that 'memories of you keep flashing through my mind' (the connection is obvious I would suggest), is regarded as one of the most popular reggae tunes ever. The other performer is Capleton, a deejay whose recorded release the 'Tour' was an unmitigated attack on the pope's¹¹ visit to Jamaica and other affronts to the 'voiceless' Jamaicans who he represents. What is surprising about this tune is that it featured in the biggest pop chart in the world, the American Billboard in its unexpurgated state even though it was as I suggested lambasting the pope.

It must be noted that Reggae music since its creation is replete with examples of a unanimous condemnation bordering on utter contempt for the pope, who is regarded by Rastafari as the living embodiment of the devil. In fact in 1995 one of the most controversial records ever released by a

¹¹ I deliberately put the 'pope' in lower case as we do not 'big-up di devil', so logically 'him haffi get small-up' in lower case as a consequence of my cultural politics.

Jamaican deejay, entitled 'Fire Pon Rome' by Anthony B, was banned from airplay on Jamaican national radio. In the tune he equated the Jamaican government and other major political figures with the pope, Satan, with regard to their unfair treatment of the Afrikan and peoples of Afrikan descent. One reason for the condemnation of papal authority is that pope pius XII gave his blessing for Mussolini's troops to invade Ethiopia, and a fundamental tenet of Rastafari is 'Ethiopianism'. Barrett suggests that 'Ethiopianism' more commonly known as 'Africa for the Africans at home and abroad', 'reached its highest development' (1988:79) under the tutelage of the honourable Marcus Mosiah Garvey¹², who was its chief advocate. However, the crucial point is that these performers voiced their Africentric sentiments on reggae/dancehall rhythms, which were based upon the preachings and teachings of Rastafari. Likewise in the context of Britain one of the most prolific reggae/dancehall deejays Macka B, in 1994 released an album entitled 'Discrimination'. The album dealt with the political issues surrounding the British immigration authority's decision to send a planeload of holidaymakers¹³ back to Jamaica, as well as several other issues that affected blaks in Britain. Interestingly, along the same lines as Beenie Man's 'who nuh know bout di music please don't bother talk', the first track on Macka B's album is an open invitation to those who do not like, fail to comprehend, or misrepresent the significance of reggae/dancehall music (Savishinsky seems to fit quite comfortably here) to 'Kiss Out Me Black'! Enough said.

¹² For an insight into Garvey's prescient social, cultural, political and racial philosophy, see T. Martin, (1986), Race First, The Majority Press, USA. Or see Lewis, R. (1987), Marcus Garvey, Anti colonial Champion, Karia Press, UK.

¹³ This is not an unusual practice, the only difference was that instead of individuals of Afrikan descent being sent back from whence they came (this has happened to people I know personally

Conclusion:

Whilst writing this paper I have become even more aware of how important it was and still is for my psychological well being, to resist through my lyricism the negative depictions and descriptions of the Afrikan as Europe's antithesis. The point I am making is that more consideration is needed when 'interpreting' resistant cultures, due to the manner in which past experiences are appropriated and passed on in a 'performance' that outwardly masks a lived reality. For this reason it is not surprising that Savishinsky would mistake what is being articulated in reggae/dancehall music, by confusing his white expectancy of the black performer, with a lived black reality. Because ultimately the message contained in this particular genre is not for him as it makes 'connections', that his narrow perspective could not access. These international appropriations within the confines of the master's world, ensure that a space is created for 'interpretive communities where critical alternatives (both traditional and emergent) can be expressed' (Clifford, 1994:315). By voicing these 'critical alternatives' in patwah, the deejay becomes the 'mouthpiece' of these 'interpretive communities', within which an Afrikan humanity based upon global citizenship can be reclaimed. Of equal importance, by using orality in this fashion the deejay continues a tradition of thinking yourself into being, which is beyond the hegemonic scope of the nationally projected (English Standard), as a means of unifying peoples of Afrikan descent throughout the diaspora.

and have been to collect from the airport in vain), it was a whole planeload, somewhat unprecedented even by Britain's racist standards.

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