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## New Roots

### *Jamaican Ontologies of Blackness from Africa to the Ghetto*

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### Abstract

This article explores contemporary ontologies of blackness in the Caribbean island of Jamaica. Approaching blackness as an ontological issue – an issue that pertains to the being, or the existence, of a category of people – we emphasize the spatial dimension of such ontologies. Drawing on Jamaican contemporary art and popular music, we propose that the site of blackness, as it is imagined in Jamaica, has shifted from Africa towards ‘the ghetto.’ Tracing changing Jamaican perspectives on race and nation, the article discusses how self-definitions of ‘being black’ and ‘being Jamaican’ involve the negotiation of historical consciousness and transnational connectivity. During much of the twentieth century, various Jamaican social and political movements looked primarily to the African continent as a referent for blackness. In the twenty-first century, the urban space of the ghetto has become more central in Jamaican social commentary and critique. By tracing the historical shifts of the spatial imaginary onto which racial belonging and authenticity are projected, we seek to foreground the mutability of the relation between blackness and Africanness.

### Keywords

Jamaica – contemporary art – dancehall – ontologies of race – spatial imaginary

## Résumé

Cet article explore les ontologies contemporaines de l'identité black dans l'île des Caraïbes de la Jamaïque. Dans notre approche ontologique de l'identité black – une approche portant sur l'être, ou l'existence, d'une catégorie de personnes –, nous mettons l'accent sur la dimension spatiale de telles ontologies. Nous inspirant de l'art contemporain et de la musique populaires jamaïcains, nous émettons l'hypothèse selon laquelle le lieu de l'identité black, telle qu'elle est conçue en Jamaïque, a quitté l'Afrique pour « le ghetto ». Retraçant l'évolution des notions jamaïcaines de race et de nation, cet article débat de la manière dont les auto-définitions « être black » et « être Jamaïcain » impliquent de devoir aborder de front la conscience historique et la connectivité transnationale. Au cours de la plus grande partie du xx<sup>ème</sup> siècle, divers mouvements sociaux et politiques jamaïcains se sont prioritairement tournés vers le continent africain pour y trouver des références à l'identité black. Au xxi<sup>ème</sup> siècle, l'espace urbain du ghetto a pris une position plus centrale dans les commentaires et la critique sociale jamaïcaine. En retraçant les évolutions historiques de l'imaginaire spatial sur lequel sont projetés l'appartenance et l'authenticité raciales, nous cherchons l'avant-plan de la mutabilité des liens qui unissent identité black et africanité.

## Mots-clés

Jamaïque – art contemporain – dancehall – ontologies de race – imaginaire spatial

In his 1977 song *African*, Jamaican reggae artist Peter Tosh asserts: “Don’t care where you come from, as long as you’re a black man, you’re an African. Don’t mind your nationality, you have got the identity of an African.” Tosh goes on to list a range of spatial locations, including Jamaican parishes, other Caribbean islands such as Trinidad and Cuba, and black neighbourhoods in London and New York such as Brixton and the Bronx. He traces a Pan-Africanist view of black identities, emphasizing the various diasporic sites that are unified by an African-descendant experience. Almost 30 years later, a remake of *African* came out, featuring additional lyrics by Jamaican roots reggae artists such as Bushman, Queen Ifrica and Buju Banton. The remake, while including Tosh’s assertion in his own voice, stressed the shared histories of enslavement that connect blacks in the African diaspora: “Well, it no really matter where the boat [i.e., the slave ship] land, could be Barbados or in Portland – everybody know Africa it a load from.” In addition, some of the new lyrics make reference to skin bleaching and to cultural whiteness: “I’m comfortable in my skin, never want

to bleach out this melanin ... Never betray my race, although prejudice we face. I will forever hail my roots, never ever become a roast breadfruit [black on the outside, white on the inside] ... As black as you are you should remain.”

In songs such as *African* and *Mama Africa*,<sup>1</sup> Peter Tosh sought to re-connect black Jamaicans to Africa, promoting a Pan-African vision of blackness as part of a Rastafari commitment to revalorizing both African origins and blackness (see, e.g. Mathes 2010). While the twenty-first century remake of *African* continues this line, it foregrounds a number of contemporary anxieties that are more about skin colour and cultural authenticity than about Africa per se. We take these more recent lyrics as a cue to think through possible shifts in contemporary understandings and experiences of blackness in Jamaica, suggesting that these shifts might point to a broader refiguring of notions of blackness within the African diaspora. Within the framework of this special issue on notions of being African, our focus is on the shifting place that Africa has held in symbolically anchoring notions of blackness in the Caribbean. The article focuses on the period of the 1960s (the main years of Caribbean decolonization) to the present. We explore the importance of Africa to the imagination of black selves in the immediate postcolonial period, tracing its persistence as well as the emergence of new imaginations of what constitutes blackness today.

We frame these discussions in terms of ontologies of blackness – when we speak of such ontologies we refer to ways of ‘being’ black, in a world that is structured around whiteness as the norm. As Michael Rabinder James notes, asking “What is black?” is an ontological question: “It addresses the *being*, the very existence, of a category of humans distinct from other humans” (2012: 107, emphasis in original). What does it mean to be black and Jamaican in the twenty-first century, and how do such self-definitions involve the negotiation of historical consciousness and transnational connectivity? In this paper, we draw on the Jamaican case to suggest an approach to ontologies of blackness in the African diaspora in the Americas that emphasizes the role of spatial imaginaries. Specifically, we suggest that where mid- and late twentieth-century conceptions of blackness were closely linked to the imagined space of Africa, this has been complemented in recent decades by a rooting of blackness in ‘the ghetto’, an imagined space in which race combines with urban poverty and violence.

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1 The lyrics to the latter song express Tosh's desire to reconnect to Africa as the motherland, as the following lines indicate: “They took me away from you Mama Africa, long before I was born ... They try their best to hide you Mama but I search and I find you ... I've been waiting, yearning, looking, searching to find you.”

The paper starts with a section outlining this spatial approach, followed by a short historical overview of racial politics in post-Emancipation Jamaica including a reflection on why cultural geographies of blackness have shifted in Jamaica. We go on to illustrate the shifts in Jamaican ontologies of blackness by offering, first, a discussion of changing spatial orientations in Jamaican contemporary art, and second, a similar move in Jamaican popular music. These discussions are based on visual and musicological analysis, interviews with visual artists and media debates. These two sections by no means present comprehensive surveys (which would be beyond the scope of this essay). Rather, we mark out the main strands of discourse within Jamaican visual artists' and musicians' engagement with Africa, in order to offer a preliminary analysis of what we believe to be the decentring of 'Africa', and the emergence of 'the ghetto' as an additional site (both a real place and a spatial metaphor) around which the meanings of being black and Jamaican are being reimagined.

### Spatializing Ontologies of Blackness

In recent decades, there has been significant critique of essentialist notions of blackness, for example in critical race studies. This scholarship has contended with the biological ontology of race created under colonialism. This essentialist racial logic sought to justify the colonization of people from Africa within a quasi-scientific logic that placed whiteness at the top of a 'natural' racial hierarchy and blacks at the bottom. Where such 'raciologies' originated in a logic based on skin colour or 'epidermalization', more recently genomics is mobilized to bolster claims of essential biological difference (Gilroy 1998; Abu El-Haj 2007). In contrast, social constructivist perspectives emphasize the non-biological nature of racial selves, understanding race as a social ontology (see, e.g. Mills 1998). Here, imaginations of blackness are understood as having been inaugurated through colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Within such a social ontology, blackness is not an essential quality but an ascribed, if unchosen identity; it is socially real. In addition to these biological and social ontologies, Michael Rabinder James suggests a political ontology of race, which "presumes that people of color are agents who can choose the political salience of their unchosen racial identities" (2012: 109). Such political ontologies, which foreground individual and collective agency, have informed both strategically essentialist Pan-African struggles in which different diasporic groups join forces and more explicitly anti-essentialist movements that emphasize the intersectionality of race with class, gender, and sexuality.

These different ontologies of race and blackness have underpinned both scientific and popular imaginations of the connections between black people in Africa and those in the African Diaspora. We suggest that the three ontologies outlined here (the biological, the social and the political) all have strong spatial dimensions that often remain implicit. Drawing on insights from cultural geography, we can approach blackness not only as a racial category that is defined somatically and culturally, but also as a spatial imaginary. For instance, geographic origin and more specifically the idea of a continental 'home' often play an important role in biological and social as well as political ontologies of race. In the case of blackness, 'Africa' has obviously long been the main spatial referent. However, as we argue in this paper, continents are not the only salient form of spatiality. While the notion of displacement has been central to discussions of the transnational roots and routes that connect diasporic subjects to the African continent, we propose the need to extend this focus by studying the role of *urban* mobilities and immobilities in constructions of African diasporic connectivity. As we set out to illustrate through the case of Jamaica, a spatial approach to such ontologies can provide new insights into how blackness is understood and experienced. Where Africana studies in the US have been primarily focused on the geographies of blackness that emerged through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, accounting for questions of space, place and mobility that go beyond slavery can allow a better understanding of the new ways in which black people are reconfiguring and reframing diaspora (cf. Clarke 2010).

Focusing on expressive cultures, this article traces changing Jamaican perspectives on race and nation by emphasizing spatial imaginaries. We are specifically interested in how such spatial imaginaries figure in political ontologies of blackness, in how they are central to the meanings attributed to blackness within consciously pursued political projects. Drawing on contemporary art and popular music, we propose that the *site* of blackness, as it is imagined in Jamaica, has begun to shift from Africa towards 'the ghetto'. For much of the twentieth century, the political ontologies of race evident in black radical movements such as Ethiopianism, Garveyism and Rastafari looked primarily to Africa as a spatial referent. More recently, Jamaican social commentary and critique of racialized inequality and exclusion have foregrounded new cultural-political spaces of black agency. By tracing the historical shifts of the spatial imaginary onto which racial belonging and authenticity are projected, we seek to foreground the mutability of the relation between blackness and African-ness.

### Jamaican Racial Politics

Jamaica has a long history of black political consciousness and Africa, both as a physical location and as a space of the political and social imagination, has played an important role in the constitution of this politics. Various Pan-Africanist movements have been prominent within this history. Different strands of Ethiopianism can be traced back over centuries of colonial domination, plantation slavery and institutionalized racism. Drawing on Biblical references to Africans as Ethiopians, African-diasporic groups in the Caribbean and the United States have sought to emphasize their cultural roots and transnational connectedness. In Jamaica, various social, religious, and political movements formulated projects of racial consciousness and an orientation towards the African continent. Such spiritual movements include Jamaica's Revival movement originating in 1860–1861 and Kumina, which emerged in the late nineteenth century with the post-emancipation immigration of African indentured labourers (see Stewart 2005). A more overtly political movement was the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was founded in 1914 by Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey but grew within a decade to hundreds of chapters throughout the Caribbean, North America, Central America and Africa. The UNIA sought to instil racial pride amongst people of African descent and promoted a return to Africa through initiatives that included the (ultimately unsuccessful) steamship company the Black Star Liner. Garveyism was also a central influence in Rastafari (Lewis 1998), perhaps the most well-known contemporary form of Ethiopianism and Pan-Africanism. Rastafari, which emerged in the Jamaican capital of Kingston in the 1930s, frames the position of New World blacks as Africans in exile, whose connection to the motherland has been severed and obscured by slavery and colonialism. It advocates a metaphorical or actual return from this exile in Babylon (the corrupted West) to their homeland in Zion, or Ethiopia.

These various popular movements had an impact on formal Jamaican politics. The period immediately following independence from Britain in 1962 was characterized by Creole multiracial nationalism, exemplified by the national motto "Out of Many, One People". In contrast to US bipolar or 'one-drop' racial imaginaries, Jamaica has historically been characterized by a popular distinction between darker-skinned 'blacks' and lighter-skinned, mixed-descent 'browns' – a colour distinction that remains associated with different class positions.<sup>2</sup> Although the majority of the population considered themselves

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2 In everyday life in Jamaica, racial identities are somewhat fluid, or at least mediated by a range

black, the creole nationalist image of mixture and creolization was a narrative that legitimated the political and economic power of lighter-skinned brown, Lebanese, Chinese, and Jewish elites. This form of nationalism was challenged by Rastafari and other black nationalist projects. In response to these popular critiques of white and brown political rule, light-skinned political leaders such as Michael Manley and Edward Seaga sought to incorporate Afro-Jamaican cultural traditions, often those associated with rural Jamaica.

In the late twentieth century, Creole multi-racial nationalism and the state-led valorization of rural black cultural traditions were largely displaced by popular forms of what Deborah Thomas (2004) calls “modern blackness”. This shift towards a politics that privileges blackness as the basis for national belonging was informed by a range of national and transnational influences. Nationally, Rastafari and other Pan-Africanist movements have been influential in this revalorization of blackness. In addition, large-scale Jamaican out-migration (primarily to cities in the US, Canada and the UK) and the accessibility of new media and digital technology amplified transnational influences, and enabled an intensified dialogue with African-American ‘urban’ blackness in particular. The formal political salience of popular shifts towards black nationalism was evident in 1992, when P.J. Patterson became Jamaica’s first black prime minister and publicly proclaimed: “Black Man Time Now”.

These shifts in the politics of blackness in the decades following independence have also involved a refocusing of the spatial locus of blackness. Where previously popular and formal political movements placed a strong emphasis on Africa, and to a lesser extent on rural Jamaica, from the late twentieth century an increased engagement with urban ‘ghetto’ spaces emerged. Even Rastafari, Jamaica’s most prominent Pan-Africanist movement, has arguably begun to place somewhat less of an accent on Africa. Where “Repatriation [to Africa] is a must” used to be a rallying cry, the emphasis on moving back to Africa appears to have decreased significantly in the twenty-first century, and contemporary solutions to injustice are sought more directly within Jamaica than in a return to the mythical motherland of Zion/Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

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of other factors including class, gender, and spatial locatedness and mobility. In Jamaican politics, claims are often presented a little more rigidly.

- 3 This may be connected to changes between Rastafari and the Jamaican state. The movement is no longer pathologized by the state, which now underlines the contribution (and commercial potential) of Rastafari, for instance in its 2003 national cultural policy document “Towards Jamaica the Cultural Superstate” (see Modest 2011). In addition, whereas the Rastafari movement formerly tended to be antagonistic to the Jamaican state, in the twenty-first



We suggest that this decentring of Africa relates to both national and transnational factors. Nationally, many Jamaicans saw decolonization as having failed to deliver on its promise of progress and equality, especially for the majority of the poor black population. As the country became increasingly urbanized, this population in particular was increasingly concentrated in urban 'ghetto' areas. Where the anti-colonial project connected Jamaican racial inequalities to imperial geopolitics, this framework arguably seemed less salient than connecting the persistence of these racial inequalities to national and urban class relations. Increasingly, the oppressor could be found at home rather than abroad – the struggle became more localized, epitomized by the plight of the 'sufferers' who lived in ghettos characterized by poverty and violence. Transnationally, as noted above, the influence of US black popular culture – with its strong emphasis on the racialized nature of urban inequality – increased, along with Jamaican migration and new media technologies. This more politicized form of ghetto consciousness was accompanied by a growing market for 'ghetto culture', in popular music and to a lesser extent within the art world. The emergence of 'the ghetto' as an important spatial referent for blackness might also be interpreted in the light of changing conceptions of Africa; it is less of an idealized mythical homeland. In the next two sections, we discuss the spatial imaginaries of Africa and the ghetto in visual art and popular music, respectively.

### Visual Imaginations of Africa and the Ghetto

Why and how has Africanness mattered to Jamaican visual art, and how has its imagination been central to ideas of race and nation? In an article titled "Desperately Seeking Africa", art historian Petrine Archer Straw (2004: 20) asserts that "Diasporic blacks share a strong artistic heritage rooted in Africa, but slavery stymied their skills in carving, mask making, ceramics and textiles inherited from West Africa". This statement – hopeful and perhaps even exaggerated in its claims to a distinctly African memory for New World artists – posits an important point for our concerns in this article. Archer Straw sees African aesthetics as re-emerging in the works of Afro-Jamaican "intuitive" (self-taught) artists, who for her embody a "reawakening of the arts" and demonstrate "that African ideas and imagery remained strong" in the New World (*ibid.*). Her emphasis

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century Rastafari collaborate in state-propagated tourism development (see Thomas 2011) and even enter electoral politics as candidates for established political parties.

on the importance of the African roots of Jamaican art echoes the concern of many visual artists themselves; in this section, we briefly trace the importance of Africa (specifically in relation to blackness) within the artistic imaginary in Jamaica. In the late twentieth century, more radical Jamaican artists practised a strategic political essentialism that drew heavily on notions of Pan-Africanism to comment on contemporary structures of domination and white supremacy and on the Eurocentric bias of current art historical practices. In the last decade or so, we see such artistic modes of critique increasingly turning to the visual culture of Jamaican 'ghetto' communities, drawing on this specific form of urban aesthetics to comment on intersectional assemblages of oppression.

Conventional histories of Jamaican art identify artists such as Edna Manley, Carl Abrahams, Albert Huie, Cecil Baugh and Alvin Marriott as pioneers (see, e.g. Boxer and Poupeye 1998). In the early to mid-twentieth century, with Jamaica still under British colonial rule but marked by a burgeoning nationalist fervor, these artists gave visual expression to a nationalist, anti-colonialist vision (Hucke 2013). The white-identified Manley – wife of Norman Manley, Jamaica's first premier – has been regarded as the mother of modern Jamaican art, and like the other 'pioneers' she was an important figure in initiating modern Jamaican artistic engagement with Africa. As part of the nationalist movement, she was interested in the development of a national aesthetic informed by national culture which she believed could be found in the island's African heritage. Her early works including *Negro Aroused* and *Pocomania* (named for one strand of the Afro-Jamaican religious tradition Revival) demonstrate this aesthetic investment. Other artists of that generation, such as Ronald Moody, were similarly interested in African aesthetic practices and Afro-Jamaican religious and folk traditions, which they also believed to be African in origin.

Leading up to and following Jamaica's independence in 1962, a different group of artists emerged that engaged with Africa, many of whom ascribed to Rastafari and other Afro-Jamaican religions such as Revival. This generation of artists was also invested in a political project that sought to re-centre Africa as an important part of a Jamaican aesthetic practice. This period coincided with the end of colonialism and the independence movement in many other Caribbean and African states, and with the US-originated black power movement. While the project of these artists was different from that of the early pioneers, it shared a common investment in strengthening black people's position in Jamaica through a folk traditionalism. In addition to a group of self-taught artists later dubbed "the Intuitives", in the 1960s and 1970s the radical black tradition of Rastafari also inspired more formally trained artists. Several

of these artists, including Osmond Watson, studied abroad in Europe and North America where they became interested in Africa. Watson, known to have been exposed to African art in European museums, drew on African masquerade traditions in his work and incorporated references to Ethiopian panel paintings. The work of other artists who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, such as David Boxer and Petrona Morrison, also shows African influences in their work; Morrison even studied in Kenya.

As this diversity indicates, there was no singular black radical project of recalling Africa.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the more recent artist movement that became known as Afrikan Vanguard has proffered the most radical imaginations of Africa and blackness in contemporary Jamaica, positioning themselves as explicitly Afrocentric compared to previous generations of Jamaican artists. Comprising eight visual artists, many of whom had taken on “African” names, this group included artists such as Omari (“African”) Ra, Khalfani Ra, Oya Tayehimba and Khepera Oluyia Hatsheptwa. The group emerged in the mid-1990s under the following statement:

We are not artists, not in the western quintessence of the word. We perform the ritual of the Akoben as did Boukman at Bwa Kayman in Haiti 210 years ago: “Throw away the image of the White man’s God, for his God inspires only crime.” We locate our beginning, the true genesis of the New World, in the triumph of Africa’s new will. In our evolutionary thrust we recognise the all-important political imperative between nation and image (imagination). As image-makers we crave not the new but the forgotten and the dead; the immortal dead, fount of eternal life – Dessalines, Shakaben Awayo, Marcus Garvey, Bobby Wright et al.

AFRIKAN VANGUARD 2000: 8–9

This craving for those ‘immortal dead’ – Haitian revolutionary Dessalines, Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey and other revolutionaries – signals these artists’ desire to rethink the history of New World blacks, moving away from what they believe to be a white (Western) narrative of Africans in the

4 The racial positioning of individual artists has also informed the relationship between their artistic and political projects. For instance, various white-identified Jamaicans, including David Boxer and Laura Facey, have been interested in a recovery of African heritage in Jamaica and in their own ancestry. While these artists can be critiqued for eliding their own historically privileged position, we want to underscore here the importance of such imaginings of black and African roots to recent negotiations of identity and belonging in Jamaica.

Americas towards a more Afrocentric or black nationalist version of history. In an interview, Khalfani Ra summarized this rethinking succinctly in reflecting on his relationship to the slavery past:

Unlike most Jamaicans and many others, when I think of Africa, the images that come to mind are not of the supposed diagram of the slave ship by Brookes (is this image authentic anyway?), but pyramids, the Nile valley images, images of the Great Zimbabwe; these are the images in my head. Even images of Haiti, images of Vodun. For the slave ship image to be so present and even revered is a cause for concern. I believe this to be part of the underdevelopment of black people. I think the role of an artist, who is black, is to challenge such impositions. My history doesn't start in slavery, it [slavery] was over ten thousand years late. Not that it wasn't important but it was just one episode in this long history. Something is definitely wrong with our culture and our people, if this is their iconic image, of their history. It indicates a victim mentality.<sup>5</sup>

This quote illustrates the Vanguard's engagement with a political ontology of blackness that explicitly imagined black Jamaicans as connected to Africa, in terms of pride and agency rather than shame and loss – an imaginative geography of race that connects black Jamaicans to both Haitians and Africans but decentres the trans-Atlantic slave trade. An ongoing aspect of Khalfani Ra's work is the use of a deep red canvas, with protruding nails coming out of the canvas, for instance in his 2005 work *1804, the protracted geography (Jamaica) – altar for (r)evolution #2* (Figure 1). This 'protracted geography' offers a visual imagination of what it means to be black in the Americas, connecting Jamaica to West and Central African spiritual and aesthetic practices. Both the red colour and the iron recall the spirits of Ogun and Shango, the Yoruba *orishas* of war, thunder and lightning, which Khalfani Ra believes are the spirits that offer power to blacks in the New World, the power that helped blacks to win the Haitian Revolution. At the same time Khalfani Ra uses the nails to recall the spirits of the Central African nailed medicine spirit, the force of healing of the N'kisi. This and similar works by other artists featured in the Vanguard's second major group show in 2004, which sought to commemorate the bicentenary of the Haitian Revolution in 1804. Similar to their first, the works in this second exhibition imagined global historical flows of radical and even militant ideas throughout the Black Atlantic that could be drawn upon to confront per-

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5 Interview with Wayne Modest, 2007. Permission to use name and quote granted.



FIGURE 1 1804, the protracted geography (Jamaica) – altar for (r)evolution #2, *Khalfani Ra*, 2005, photograph by Donnette Zacca.

sistent structures of racism. Such militant longing for Africa demonstrates, we suggest, disillusionment with the creole nationalist narrative that dominated the political agenda and arguably the cultural policies of the immediate post-independence period. This group's prominence coincided with the rise in black nationalist discourse in the early 1990s, described in the previous section.

It is such radical imaginings of Africa that we suggest are shifting today. While artistic practices in Jamaica have always been varied and multiple, informed by differing trajectories, we want to mark an apparent shift towards the incorporation of another locus of interest, of black Jamaican struggle, which we identify here as the spatial imaginary of 'the ghetto'. The ghetto is an emblematic space in which race combines with urban poverty and violence, and in the Jamaican context is occupied almost exclusively by the black population. Younger artists, we suggest, are drawing from this other location for a radical imagination, even while continuing to engage with ideas of race and nation as

an important part of their artistic inspiration. As indicated above, we see this shift as resulting from a complex interplay of national and transnational factors.

In the introductory essay to the catalogue for *Curator's Eye II*, a 2005–2006 exhibition at Jamaica's National Gallery, curator Eddie Chambers describes art in Jamaica as engaged in a “multilayered commentary on the lives and the struggles of the people and the country”. In this exhibition, while acknowledging the importance of Africa to the diasporic imagination, Chambers identifies his own curatorial interest at the time as being invested in the ways in which Jamaica's “younger generations of artists were working in ways that reflected international developments in contemporary art practice”. The artists he included in the exhibition were engaged with concerns for “a living, breathing, bloody history that simultaneously engages and interfaces with a wide range of corresponding and contemporary concerns ... traumatic episodes in Jamaica's history with modern-day resonances” (Chambers 2005: 4, 5). It is these modern-day concerns that we want to suggest have come to complement the earlier emphasis on Africa. This younger generation of artists is taking up the urban, and more specifically the urban ghetto, as a distinct location for a global black experience and struggle.

The 2013 National Gallery exhibition *New Roots: 10 Emerging Artists* addressed similar concerns as *Curators Eye II*. Comprising ten artists who were “under 40 years old and new or relatively new to the Jamaican art world”, the exhibition was, according to the curators, “designed to identify and encourage new directions in the Jamaican art world” and presented “new perspectives on art's potential to foster social transformation in a time of crisis”.<sup>6</sup> While the newness of *New Roots* seemed to have been largely drawn from new modes of artistic expression, at least new to the Jamaican art scene,<sup>7</sup> the show did appear to root artistic practice and indeed the negotiation of identity and belonging outside the anchors seen in earlier contemporary art practices in Jamaica. In her introduction to the exhibition, Veerle Poupeye, executive director of the National Gallery and one of the curators for the exhibition, references Stuart Hall's (1999)

6 <http://nationalgalleryofjamaica.wordpress.com/tag/rex-nettleford-arts-conference/>  
Accessed on September 21, 2014.

7 These new modes included “a strong focus on photographic reportage; provocative autobiographic reflections and social interventions; new interrogations of gender and the body; an at times unsparing realism but also a capacity for imaginative visual poetry; experimentation with video projection, animation and interactivity; and a growing disregard for conventional notions about the ‘art object’ and the traditional, segregated artistic disciplines” (Poupeye 2013).

call to move from an overemphasis of *roots* to questions about *routes* in identity formation. Poupeye (2013) describes the show as follows:

The works in the exhibition are provocative and certainly ask uncomfortable questions, yet there is no overwhelming sense of dystopia, and the exhibition reflects a new willingness on the part of the artists to intervene actively into their social environment ... Instead of searching for new certainties, the work in *New Roots* also illustrates the artists' willingness to embrace the new uncertainties and fragilities, at the personal and the collective level, and to find a new, more mutable and questioning sense of self in this context.

The exhibition did not go without criticism. One online commentator identifying himself as George Blackwell posted an extensive comment under a National Gallery blog post (a dialogue reposted on the website of the prominent Caribbean art magazine ARC), describing the exhibition as:

a desperate bid to get away from any serious discourse that foregrounds black as the essential constituent in local identity matters. Therefore, the exhibition is insipidly curated to avoid this discussion.<sup>8</sup>

While we disagree with this reviewer's claim that the exhibition, even the artists' project, was apolitical, in contrast to, for example, the Afrikan Vanguard artists (who were still included in the *Curator's Eye II* exhibition), these *New Roots* artists, while concerned with blackness, offered a new perspective that took that struggle as one in a repertoire of concerns. Simultaneously, they appeared to have taken up a more popular, street-based language of struggle in their work. Matthew McCarthy's work for example, while appropriating some of Rastafari iconography, is more invested in the democratic politics of graffiti art. McCarthy's work in the *New Roots* exhibition, *I Took the Liberty of Designing One* (Figure 2), was a participatory installation featuring a zinc fence plastered with posters and stickers and viewers were invited to add their own comments and interventions. The zinc fence has come to signify the 'ghetto' and urban poverty, and McCarthy draws on this as a way of thinking about notions of urban exclusion, race and class in Jamaica.

8 <http://nationalgalleryofjamaica.wordpress.com/2013/09/14/new-roots-an-invitation-to-dialogue/>; see also <http://arcthemagazine.com/arc/2013/09/the-national-gallery-of-jamaica-presents-new-roots-an-invitation-to-dialogue/>, accessed September 21, 2014.



FIGURE 2 I Took the Liberty of Designing One, Matthew McCarthy, 2013, photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Jamaica.

It was no wonder, then, that one of the exhibition's curators, Nicole Smythe-Johnson responded to Blackwell's criticism, starting with a revision of his own statement written as: "a desperate bid to get away from any serious discourse that foregrounds *any single* essential constituent in local identity matters." She explains this revision as an attempt to reframe the dialogue so that "the conversation is not about 'blackness' and what its relative weight and density is in the set of 'all (non-essential and essential) constituents of national identity'. Rather, the conversation is expanded, more nuanced, and attentive to the ways in which the concept of identity itself is re-configuring itself to make way for more inclusive, multiple and flexible articulations."<sup>9</sup>

This dialogue makes clear the curatorial desire to decentre singularly Afrocentric models of identity – one Afrikan Vanguard artist went so far as to describe this curatorial move "away from identity positively connected to Africa" as "a serious act of repression and racial assault".<sup>10</sup> In addition to such

9 All quotes from <http://arcthemagazine.com/arc/2013/09/the-national-gallery-of-jamaica-presents-new-roots-an-invitation-to-dialogue/>.

10 Personal correspondence with Wayne Modest, September 2014.



curatorial frames, the body of work by this younger generation of artists clearly demonstrates a concern with Jamaican society that is much less Africa-oriented and more interested in examining issues of race through an intersectional lens that is attentive to class, gender, sexuality and urban space. Similar to McCarthy's work, artists such as Ikem Smith, Varun Baker and Nile Saulter engage with popular modes of struggle and document the tactics of everyday life on the streets of Kingston – a city often represented as a dystopian site of extreme poverty and violence that is also a vibrant location of entrepreneurship, creativity and hope for many of its daily inhabitants, who often remain voiceless. What is striking about all of the art included in *New Roots* – a representative sample of work by the youngest generation of Jamaican visual artists – is the absence of any overt allusion to Africa. The Afrikan Vanguard, in the meantime, has lost much of its cohesive force, and many of its members have left the movement. While many of the newest generation of Jamaican artists continue to display an engagement with blackness, this is articulated with a concern for other identity markers and the precarity of life in urban Jamaica, more than with any distinct investment in thinking about Africa.

Ebony Patterson, a young artist who moves between Jamaica and the US, is arguably the artist most concerned with rethinking the social through the lens of the ghetto. In her flamboyant, carefully constructed scenes, Patterson explores the complexity of lives in the ghetto. The main protagonists in her work are Jamaica's iconic gangster figures, known as the *badman*, the *rudebwoy*, and the *don*. Patterson's work offers a more textured, layered exploration of these infamous figures, whose life is generally reduced to more simplistic ideas about violence. In her scenes these young black men from the ghetto – so rarely portrayed in previous works of art – are powerful social actors, in charge of their own futures and helping to shape a new Jamaican aesthetic. Patterson critiques the conditions of state neglect and violence through which certain Jamaicans are relegated to sub-human status (for instance in her recent series *Of72*, which portrays 72 men killed by the Jamaican security forces in the Kingston ghetto of Tivoli Gardens in 2010), and her artworks counter common portrayals of 'ghetto people' that justify this relegation.<sup>11</sup> One recurring feature in Patterson's work is the complexity of ghetto aesthetics, with young men pursuing a style that is hyper-masculine but also involves boys bleaching their faces and applying beauty standards regarded as feminine (see, e.g. Figure 3).

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11 For more on the *Of72* series and its background, see Patterson (2012); Ellis (2014: 170–171); and <http://anniepaul.net/2012/03/17/who-were-the-tivoli-73-a-preview-of-ebony-g-pattersons-of-72/>.



FIGURE 3 (Untitled) Disciple VII from *the Gangstas for Life series*, *Ebony Patterson*, 2008, photograph courtesy of the artist and of Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Patterson also participated in the first Ghetto Biennale held in the Haitian 'ghetto' of Grand Rue, Port-au-Prince in 2009, a biennale "conceived to expose social, racial, class and geographical immobility" and aspiring to "contain the seeds of a possibility to transcend different models of ghettoization".<sup>12</sup> Patterson's participation in the Biennale suggests a contrast with Khalfani Ra's engagement with Haiti: here, the Jamaican-Haitian connectivity is informed not so much by a notion of shared Africanness, as by a shared concern with ghettoization and an intersectional approach to urban inequalities. Patterson's work, which resonates that of other 'New Roots' artists, engages with questions of racial and class identity as part of a contemporary political project, but prefers no strong engagement with Africa. This is a new kind of political ontology of blackness, steeped in different questions in the present and foregrounding the ghetto as its main spatial referent.

The work of Patterson and the various artists included in the *New Roots* exhibition suggest the emergence of a rearticulated visual imaginary that was not present in earlier Jamaican art. This new art engages with ideas of race and nation shaped by the precarity, violence, creativity, and hope that emerge from Kingston's ghetto neighbourhoods. In the early years of modern Jamaican art, artists were concerned with Africa and a traditionalism that emerged around notions of the rural and the folk as the crucible of Afro-Jamaicanness; in the post-independence period artists' political project of blackness included various attempts to recover Africa. Now, the site of negotiation is in the symbol of the ghetto, an urban space of racialized precarity as well as forms of creativity that defy essentialist identities.

### Musical Movements from Africa to the Ghetto

As the previous section outlined, within Jamaican visual art, different spatial imaginaries have been central to blackness as political ontology. Similar to those prominent in visual art, we can distinguish two distinct spatial imaginaries, or conceptual places, that play a central role in Jamaican musical framings of blackness. A similar move of decentring Africa is discernable in Jamaican popular music in the post-independence period. Where the slower, more melodic roots reggae music of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated a strong engagement with Africa, the more recent genre of dancehall music (a faster, electronic form of music that is more similar to hip hop) displays a signif-

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://ghettobiennale.org/>

icantly stronger interest in ghettoized urban space.<sup>13</sup> This engagement with the ghetto as a main focus of critique can be understood, on the one hand, as an expression of disillusionment with post-independence politics, and in particular its inability to improve the lives of urban black people. On the other hand, the shift can be understood in the light of increased exchanges between Jamaican and African-American popular culture. Such exchanges not only enabled something of a globally connected counterpublic critiquing urban poverty and exclusion, they also produced a transnational market for 'ghetto music' (Jaffe 2012). In this section, we discuss the interplay between non-essentialist and strategically essentialist representations of blackness in contemporary popular music, focusing specifically on Vybz Kartel, one of Jamaica's most popular dancehall musicians.

Both reggae and dancehall have been framed locally as belonging to lower-class, black (rather than middle-class, brown) Jamaicans (Stolzoff 2000; Hope 2001). The emphasis on the black character of reggae and dancehall can be seen as a form of strategic essentialism that serves to make a political point locally, to show light-skinned elites that the island's main claim to fame should be credited to the efforts of black Jamaicans, often from Kingston's poorest neighbourhoods. In addition, the marketing of reggae and dancehall as black or Pan-Africanist may also have been a strategic factor in attempts to gain commercial success amongst a global audience. While sharing an emphasis on blackness, these two genres engage differently with issues of spatial rootedness and mobility.

As noted above, roots reggae music has looked primarily to Africa. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, these musical representations of blackness tended to draw on Rastafari and other Pan-Africanist narratives that locate Africa as the geo-emotional focus of black identity. Louis Chude-Sokei (1994: 80) speaks of this generation as one "that helped thrust a mythic 'Africa' to the forefront of black popular culture in the West Indies and, via reggae music and Rastafarianism, the world". Rastafari artists sang repeatedly of repatriation to "Zion" or Ethiopia. In addition, political solidarity with blacks in Apartheid South Africa and in national liberation struggles in colonial Rhodesia and Mozambique played an important role in these Africa-focused narratives. Like

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13 While there are various musical genres that emerged in Jamaica, the two main genres that are relevant here are the roots reggae music that is most commonly associated with the island, and dancehall, which did not emerge until the 1980s. Dancehall is currently the most popular form of Jamaican music locally, although roots reggae artists still enjoy considerable popularity and there are a number of crossover artists who record songs in both musical genres.

Peter Tosh, Bob Marley was of course a central figure in such Africa-oriented musical politics, with songs such as *Africa Unite*, *Zimbabwe* and *War*.<sup>14</sup> The album art of his generation also featured various depictions of the African continent (Morrow 1999).

In these reggae imaginaries, Africa is not only the originary space of blackness, it is also associated with mobility in terms of both exile and return, forced and voluntary, historical and future movement. Rastafari and roots reggae's concern with commemorating Jamaica's slavery past and the African origins of the Jamaican population – and in relation to this, the parameters of Jamaican ethno-national belonging – emphasized the forced displacement of the slavery past, uprootedness, involuntary mobility and migration. This engagement with displacement has been balanced by the Rastafari desire to reconnect through voluntary mobility, a desire most evident in the insistence that “repatriation is a must”, that eventually Rastafari must leave ‘Babylon’ and return to Zion, in Africa.

Some of this longing for Africa continues in the work of contemporary roots reggae artists such as Tarrus Riley and Chronixx, who have produced hit songs with titles such as “Africa Awaits”, “African Queen” and “African Heritage”. Where in visual art a decreased engagement with Africa is found mostly amongst the younger generation, in music this difference in focus is related less to generation than to genre. In contrast to roots reggae artists' engagement with Africa, dancehall musicians have placed a stronger emphasis on local, urban spaces – and in particular on the inner-city ‘ghetto’ spaces of the capital Kingston – as the spatial location of authentic blackness. This focus on urban space is perhaps explained through dancehall's musical kinship to hip hop, which shares this strong emphasis on the intersection of race and space (see Rose 1994; Forman 2002). In Jamaica, the roots of contemporary urban blackness that dancehall refers to are located primarily in Downtown Kingston and other marginalized urban areas throughout the island (Stanley-Niaah 2010). Dancehall's contemporary focus on ghettos as generative spaces of blackness foregrounds the condition of social and physical immobility. This idea of the ghetto as a space of immobility is reinforced linguistically through the term ‘no-go’ area: outsiders and even the police are scared to go in, while insiders are unable to get out (Jaffe 2012). At the same time, Jamaican ghettos, like informal settlements across the world, can also be associated with involuntary mobility, with squatters vulnerable to being forcibly removed.

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14 See Gilroy (2005) for a detailed discussion of Marley's positioning vis-à-vis the African continent and the African diaspora.

This dancehall emphasis on the space of the ghetto has gained prominence in comparison with the previous musical prioritization of the African continent. Even Rastafari and the gangsterism of the ghetto can be made compatible, with dancehall artists such as Munga claiming the moniker of ‘gangsta Ras[ta]’. However, this is not to say that Africa has been entirely displaced from Jamaican musical negotiations of race and nation. We focus here on the figure of the dancehall artist Vybz Kartel and some of his work to illustrate how the political ontology of race is negotiated within Jamaican music. His music offers an insight into the ways in which blackness is both essentialized and deconstructed, and how it is constructed through place and mobility. Vybz Kartel is one of the most successful dancehall artists of the last few decades and also one of the most controversial. At the time of writing, he was appealing his conviction for involvement in murder. However, he attracted controversy years before, following public debates surrounding his practice of skin bleaching. He promoted his own lightening with songs like *Pretty Like a Coloring Book* and *Cake Soap*, but remained adamant in claiming black pride. At a public lecture at the University of the West Indies in 2011 he proclaimed himself to be a follower of Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey.<sup>15</sup> He defended his bleaching as a form of style, of self-expression, that allowed his tattoos to come out better, arguing that: “bleaching today doesn’t mean the same as bleaching twenty-five years ago ... We are a much prouder race, who know that we can do what we want as far as style is concerned, we dictate styles and regard them as just that – styles.” His defence of the ‘feminine’ ghetto practice of bleaching as compatible with claims to black pride contrasts sharply with the lyrics to the remake of *African* with which we started this article: “never want to bleach out this melanin ... never betray my race ... as black as you are you should remain.”

Vybz Kartel’s tattoos include the word ‘Gaza’, inked onto the knuckles of his right hand, demonstrating his loyalty to and rootedness in the Jamaican ghetto community of this name. In addition to this embodied allegiance to the ghetto, Kartel’s professed Pan-Africanism is also evident visually, in the cover art of his 2006 album *J.M.T.*, in which an image of his face in profile is merged with an image of the African continent – bleaching is not only compatible with blackness but also with Africanness. Musically, Vybz Kartel’s lyrics illustrate the ways in which popular culture images of blackness connect to a politics of place, as well as to concepts of mobility and immobility. We focus here on

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15 Videos of the lecture are posted at <http://theislandvibes.com/video/vybz-kartel-uwi-lecture-very>; for a discussion of the lecture and Vybz Kartel’s skin politics, see <http://anniepaul.net/2011/03/11/i-decided-to-make-my-skin-a-living-breathing-canvas-vybz-kartel-at-uwi/>.

one song, *Poor People Land*, to concentrate our discussion on these images and concepts. However, these themes resonate much more broadly within current Jamaican discourse, within and beyond dancehall music, about ethnoracial claims to belonging.

<i>Mi cyaan believe it, government waan fi move mi</i>	I can't believe it, the government wants to move me
<i>Mi turn refugee inna mi own country</i>	I've become a refugee in my own country
<i>But a long long time mi live yah so</i>	But I've lived here for a very long time
<i>Mi cyaan go no weh</i>	I can't go anywhere
<i>Dem really tek poor people fi fool (2x)</i>	They really think poor people are stupid
<i>Oh Mr. Babylon, a weh yu get da system yah from?</i>	Oh Mr. Babylon, what kind of system is this?
<i>Bulldozer dung poor people land</i>	You bulldoze poor people's land
<i>Jah know seh mi nah vote again, no sah</i>	Jah knows I'm not going to vote again, no sir
<i>Cause di MP don't give a damn</i>	Because the MP doesn't give a damn
<i>A weh yuh get da system yah from</i>	What kind of system is this
<i>'Bout seh mi live 'pon squatter land</i>	Saying that I live on squatter land
<i>True mi don't rich like Matalon, no sah</i>	Because I'm not rich like Matalon, no sir
<i>Mi a born Jamaican</i>	I'm a born Jamaican
<i>Mi nah have no weh fi go</i>	I don't have anywhere to go
<i>Mi born and mi grow yah so inna di ghetto</i>	I was born and grew up right here in the ghetto
<i>Bigga heads, beg yu a bligh now</i>	People in charge, I'm asking for a favour
<i>Mi cyaan buy a house up a Cherry Garden</i>	I can't buy a house in Cherry Gardens
<i>Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust</i>	Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust
<i>Di tribulation inna di ghetto is a must [...]</i>	The tribulation in the ghetto is a must [...]
<i>Mi know seh mi a born Jamaican</i>	I know I'm a born Jamaican
<i>Mi deh yah from slavery as a African</i>	I've been here from slavery as an African
<i>Somebody tell mi weh Matalon come from?</i>	Somebody tell me where Matalon came from
<i>Fi own so much land inna wi island, tell mi</i>	To own so much land in our island, tell me
<i>Mr. Chin, go back a Japan</i>	Mr. Chin, go back to Japan
<i>'Cause Jah Jah mek yah fi di black man</i>	Because Jah Jah made this place for the black man

Released in 2011, *Poor People Land* connects the themes set out above, narrating the relations of poor black people to land and place, to mobility and immobility. The song starts out with a strong statement about involuntary movement within the context of urban squatter settlements: "I can't believe it, the government wants to move me / I've become a refugee in my own coun-

try.” Kartel goes on to make a political claim precisely by referencing a specific type of national and urban rootedness in place, the immobility of marginalized African-Jamaicans: “I’m a born Jamaican ... I was born and grew up right here in the ghetto.” This type of rights claim – national belonging through urban immobility – is bolstered precisely through a reference to the forced historical migration of their ancestors: “I know I’m a born Jamaican / I’ve been here from slavery as an African.” While centring urban marginality as the main claim to Jamaicanness, Kartel connects this spatiality to race and African roots. This is especially evident in his refutation of the privilege – and denial of the political claims to belonging – of non-African descendent elites. By asking “Matalon” (a well-known Jewish Jamaican family name associated with wealth) where *he* is from, and telling Mr. Chin (the metonymic moniker used to indicate a wealthy person of Asian descent) to go back to Japan, Kartel locates Africa as the originary, historical site for Jamaican belonging, even as he claims the ghetto as the contemporary site for such claims.

Various commentators have lamented the move away from the more “conscious” concerns of roots reggae, towards dancehall’s preoccupation with material goods, violence and sex. Louis Chude-Sokei (1994: 80, 81), for instance, argues that Jamaican popular music has moved:

from an aesthetics of exile and absence to an aesthetics of raw, materialistic presence. ... Where in Rasta and other forms of popular Negritude there has always been some degree of nostalgia for a precolonial/preindustrial/precapitalist Africa, [dancehall] culture is very forward looking and capitalist oriented – as are most black people, despite the fantasies of many self-appointed nationalist leaders.

Rather than condemning or dismissing dancehall’s ghetto aesthetics as crass or superficial, we suggest that it is precisely its engagement with contemporary urban realities that gives the genre its current salience, both within and beyond Jamaica. Like Ebony Patterson, but from a very different vantage point and through different media, dancehall artists such as Vybz Kartel explore the meaning of being black and Jamaican in the twenty-first century. While an affinity with Africa remains (and many dancehall artists have performed in Africa), a black identity is less immutably fixed to skin colour, and much more directly linked to urban authenticity. Claims to blackness and Jamaicanness have become more explicitly intersectional, taking up not just issues of class and gender, but also urban space and im/mobility.



## Conclusion

As Patterson and Kelley (2000: 31) argue in their seminal article on the historical construction of the African diaspora, “We need to move beyond unitary narratives of displacement, domination, and nation building that center on European expansion and the rise of ‘racial’ capitalism”. They call for the recognition that “Africa – real or imagined – is not the only source of ‘black’ internationalism, even for those movements that embrace a nationalist or pan-Africanist rhetoric” (ibid: 32). In this article, we have highlighted the spatiality of Jamaican political ontologies of blackness, noting a decentring of ‘Africa’ as the main spatial referent in visual and musical critiques of the island’s racial exclusions and inequalities. The relationship between ‘being black’ and ‘being African’ in Jamaica, as elsewhere, has always been unstable and continues to change in the twenty-first century. In contrast to what the art historian Petrine Archer-Straw (2004), quoted earlier in this article, posited, we argue that contemporary Jamaican visual artists and musicians are *not* (or at least, are no longer) “desperately seeking Africa”. This is also in contrast to some of the other cases discussed in this special issue, in which self-definitions are increasingly articulated in terms of Africanness. Instead, we suggest that blackness in the Jamaican present has turned towards a new spatial site of ethno-national belonging, developing its ‘new roots’ in the ghetto, and drawing on connections to ghettos outside Jamaica as a new potential source of black internationalism.

We have explored the ways in which both essentialist and non-essentialist notions of blackness figure in Jamaican popular music and contemporary art. Contemporary imaginations of blackness must be located within historical trajectories in which formal political rhetoric and popular culture contestations are in constant dialogue. As the island’s cultural politics moved away from multiracial Creole nationalism, claiming blackness has become increasingly critical to being Jamaican. Drawing on a perspective that is attentive to the geographical imaginaries that inform Afro-Jamaican identity politics, we see the importance of ‘being African’ changing over the past decades, with the geo-emotional site of blackness now referencing the ghetto in addition to the African continent. We see recent cultural expressions as demonstrating less essentialist negotiations of black belonging, in which skin bleaching and black pride are not necessarily seen as incompatible. Yet we also note the strategically essentialist claims to economic and political rights based on both ethno-national *and* space-based identities.

This shift in primary orientation has taken place within a changing national context, in which urban poverty and violence has eclipsed national sovereignty as a primary concern. In addition, it has taken place in the context of Jamaican

migration to North American cities, and within an increasingly globally interconnected music and art world. Within these transnational circuits, the dialogue with US 'urban' blackness has been of growing significance, and international Ghetto Biennales and the marketing of 'ghetto music' have come to suggest new commercial possibilities. The politics of place in which the ghetto becomes an important spatial referent for blackness intersect with narratives and practices of mobility and immobility. The global movement of Jamaicans has connected them with a transnational network of urban spaces that are marked by a common condition of racially marked struggles and perceived immobility. The former emphasis on exile from and return to Africa, common to the pan-African Rastafari ideology of the mid- to late twentieth century has been reconfigured by this new type of movement and re-rooting. However, attending to these new roots is by no means incompatible with attention to the continued ways in which Africa informs claims to 'being black' and 'being Jamaican'.

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