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# Reggae as Subaltern Knowledge: Representations of Christopher Columbus as a Construction of Alternative Historical Memory

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## BIRTH OF A MUSIC AND A NATION

A casual reggae listener might consider the music to be upbeat and carefree, preaching messages of “getting together and feeling alright” and “not worrying about a thing, cause every little thing gonna be alright.”<sup>1</sup> Such happy-go-lucky lyrics contribute to reggae’s international retail success, and they are used in ad campaigns to promote Jamaican tourism.<sup>2</sup> However, in contrast to the aforementioned lyrics, reggae artists typically fused politics, spirituality, identity, and folk music to create highly discursive lyrics. Particularly during the era of newly independent Jamaica in the 1960s and 1970s, these complex lyrics reflected and forged a new society through media outlets such as the radio, dancehall parties, and deejay battles.

The rise of reggae coincided with the construction of a new Jamaican society: reggae grew as a genre in Kingston’s urban shantytowns during the late 1960s, and the musical form responded to Jamaica’s independence from Great Britain in 1962. Reggae is influenced by other genres such as mento (a traditional Jamaican folk music that migrated with many from the country to the city), ska, rhythm and blues, and jazz. Using reggae as a platform, musicians constructed a particular self in opposition to a colonial other and fostered notions of “Jamaican-ness” as diasporic, socio-politically conscious, and above all, anti-colonial. Specifically, they call into question Eurocentric models of knowledge by according primacy to informal knowledge, imagination, and invention, thereby refusing European-derived categories of thought as absolute truth. Central to

this identity discourse were Rastas, members of a pan-African religion and way of life known as Rastafari that started in the tenements of Kingston in the 1930s. The belief system preaches Judeo-Christian scriptures centered around former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, believed to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, and the interpretation of these scriptures as the belief that the Bible was originally written by Africans and for Africans in their language, Amharic (Murrell and Williams 327). By emphasizing Amharic, Rastas look towards Ethiopia as their sacred land and often use Ethiopia and Africa interchangeably to represent an idealized, if not reductive perspective of the continent. Ethiopia carries a particular relevance: aside from Italy's occupation of the country in the 1930s, it has never been colonized by a European power and therefore, carries an image of cultural continuity and steadfast resistance. Through these scriptures, fragments of which often appear as lyrics in reggae songs, Rastafari sought a spiritual connection with Africa while discussing themes of Black empowerment in correlation with a "decisive rejection of the hegemonic and homogenizing British imperial culture that dominated Jamaica's colonial society" (Young 1) for over 300 years. Rastafari, like other Afro-Caribbean religions in Jamaica, provided experience in mass mobilization and grassroots organization that played in a role in their determination for independence (Knight 219). Though not all reggae musicians are Rastas, the genre and the belief system have long been associated with each other. Ennis Edmonds points out that Rastas were originally and wrongfully associated with criminality and uncleanness in Jamaican society, and thus, viewed as undesirable (*Rastafari* 122). At the same time, their look became very popular in the artistic community, and reggae provided them with a professional outlet in which to espouse their beliefs. Reggae's popularity continued to grow among disenfranchised urban youths of African descent, and with it, so did Rastafari teachings that reinterpreted and retold history to promote a positive acceptance of Blackness in Jamaican culture.

In this article, I examine the function of reggae music in the formation of Jamaican national identity—an identity that I argue is not "rediscovered" through reggae lyrics, but rather rearticulated through a re-telling of history that blends trauma and witness testimonials that rewrite the acts of Christopher Columbus and other conquerors in the first encounters. Since for these musicians the "truth" surrounding early colonial encounters has been one-sided and misrepresented,

creating new narratives and interventions fosters their own cultural identity, one frequently influenced by Rastafari. Albert Memmi underscores the importance of re-telling history when he rightly declares that the greatest consequence of colonialism was the exclusion of the colonized from both history and their community (151). Among other lyric devices, reggae blends trauma and eye witnessing by using the personal pronoun “I” in song lyrics. More than a mere stylistic decision, I propose that the “I” functions in reggae music for the artist to position him or herself as a victim or witness to emphasize the processing of a cultural trauma within their work. Cultural trauma is herein defined as occurring “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1). The trauma in question here refers to a legacy of colonialism that had only recently and “officially” ended in 1962. However, embedded in the cultural trauma of colonialism is also the trauma of slavery and its legacies as felt by Jamaicans of African descent as disempowerment and, in the experience of Jamaican males, emasculation.

Representations of Christopher Columbus in reggae songs, largely through a fictitious first-person testimony, illustrate the use of reggae music for the diffusion and endurance of a counter-discursive epistemology to undermine the hegemony of Western knowledge and culture through metonymy. These musicians inscribe themselves into history and forge a community by raising doubts over the problematic encounter between Columbus and indigenous peoples, an encounter still celebrated in the Western world with Columbus as a heroic protagonist: the United States holds Columbus Day as an official holiday. Reggae musicians, in an act of counter-discursive difference, reduce Columbus to a liar, thief, slaver, and pedophile. Central to the alternative epistemology in reggae is the revision of Columbus—along with other Western historical figures often credited with Western expansion—to present him as a villain of the Antilles. While the following portraits of Columbus may not be historically accurate, the musicians are not framing their work as historians, but rather as postcolonial producers of cultural identity who are willing to manipulate historical facts as necessary. I use postcolonial here not only in a temporal sense, but as a framework of strategies to dismantle

Western hegemony that continues to exert control, in this case culturally and mentally, in Jamaica.

Against the backdrop of Jamaica's independence, reggae musicians articulated their anti-colonial declarations, often referring to entities representing the Western world—which could include the whole continent of Europe, the nation United States, or any other source of institutionalized power, such as the police—as Babylon, a city known in the Old Testament for its rebelliousness against God. To complete the binary, the Biblical reference to Zion stands in for Africa, and particularly Ethiopia, due to Rastafari's connections with former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. As Edmonds notes in his study on Rastafari in Jamaica, Babylon represents various levels of oppression to the Rasta way of life:

At the sociopolitical level, Babylon is used in reference to ideological and structural components of Jamaica's social system, which metes out privileges to some and exploitation to others. . . . Babylon is the complex of economic, political, religious, and educational institutions and values that evolved from the colonial experiment. The church and the police get honorable mention. . . . Globally, Babylon is that worldly state of affairs in which the struggle for power and money takes precedence over the cultivation of human freedom and the concern for human dignity. Rastas include in this state of affairs not only the West, led by the Anglo-American alliance, but also the former Soviet bloc and the politically powerful Catholic church presided over by the pope (*From Outcasts* 45).

Though this ideology caused differences between Rastas and other Jamaicans, it greatly increased the overall awareness of pan-African diasporic nationalism amongst the inhabitants of the island, particularly those of African origin who sought new interpretations to explain their tense relationships with Great Britain and even Jamaica as a land that their ancestors were unwillingly brought to. Through this connection, Rastas continue to view Africa as their homeland, no matter how romanticized, because of the hope it has given them while dealing with the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Therefore, they hold the belief that “all Africans in the diaspora are but exiles

in 'Babylon,' destined to be delivered out of captivity by a return to 'Zion'" (Chevannes 1). In this line of thinking, Zion becomes a symbolic term for an independent Africa. This sets up a binary in which everyone else lives in Babylon, an umbrella term for Western hegemonic forces and cultures that corrupt the African diaspora. To escape that corruption, repatriation for the African Diaspora to Zion becomes a principal tenet of Rastafari.

Employing this dichotomy of Babylon and Zion, reggae musicians contribute to a Black consciousness on the island through an alternative system of knowledge to counter the formal colonial vision of history that Jamaicans received in the school system. Robert J.C. Young explains colonial knowledge production as follows: "[m]ost of the writing that has dominated what the world calls knowledge has been produced by people living in western countries in the past three or more centuries, and it is this kind of knowledge that is elaborated within and sanctioned by the academy, the institutional knowledge corporation" (18). In *Reggae Wisdom* (2001), Anand Prahlad posits that reggae musicians take on the role of teacher to "focus on specific areas of history and culture that have been distorted by the texts found in colonial school systems or in other forms of hegemonic propaganda" (33). Reggae music supplements and works against the coloniality of formal education and provides Jamaicans with another education which, while informal, serves the formation of an anti-hegemonic identity. Combining informal education with the repetitive nature of radio broadcasts gave reggae artists the vehicle to speak for an Afro-Jamaican group that historically could not speak for itself. While it plays an important role in structuring this new identity, the Babylon-Zion binary is also problematic for its reliance on Judeo-Christian texts and its failure to consider racially mixed Jamaicans. Though reggae draws on Judeo-Christian scriptures to further Black consciousness, the same system of thought has also been paradoxically used to justify Western expansion and the African slave trade. Besides the complications inherent in this binary, my point here is that musicians employ it methodically to formulate their identity in relation to European and North American cultures.

Crucially, the knowledge that reggae musicians put forth is not solely the rediscovery of identity that Frantz Fanon defines as a "passionate research . . . directed by the secret hope of discovering . . . some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us

both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others” (170). Quite the reverse, reggae musicians participate in the “production of identity by re-telling of the past” (224) as Jamaican cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall notes in his study on new forms of visual representation of the African diaspora in the West. This informal education was not lost on Jamaicans. Drawing from his own experience, Hall describes the importance of reggae in the transformation of the island’s identity within the African diaspora:

When I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s as a child in Kingston, I was surrounded by the signs, music and rhythms of this Africa of the diaspora, which only existed as a result of a long and discontinuous series of transformations. But, although almost everyone around me was some shade of brown or black, I never once heard a single person refer to themselves or to others as, in some way, or as having been at some time in the past, ‘African’ . . . This profound cultural discovery, however, was not, and could not be, made directly, without ‘mediation’. It could only be made *through* the impact on popular life of the post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae – the metaphors, the figures or signifiers of a new construction of ‘Jamaican-ness’ (231).

Hall refers here to the way Rastafari and reggae used narrative memories to instill in Jamaicans of African descent a cultural construction of identity. “Narrative memory,” mentions Anne Whitehead, “is capable of improvising on the past so that the account of an event varies from telling to telling” (87). In the case of reggae, this imaginary enters collective memory through regular transmissions via various media, principally radio. The content of reggae songs and their distribution channels played a large role in constructing a cultural identity in opposition to the discourse that was imposed by colonizers in Jamaica and postulated that Afro-Jamaicans were culturally inferior. Repetition was instrumental in this process and it occurred in three ways. Firstly, media outlets such as the radio played a song multiple times so that listeners were inundated with a particular tune. Second, many artists were singing about the same themes which also exposed

listeners to intertextual repetition. Finally, a third kind of repetition harkens back to the role of the chorus in music of the African diaspora: the use of call-and-response. In this strategy, the listener transforms into active participant as s/he responds to the singer's call, a common motif in reggae. These repetitions influenced the thought process of listeners and revealed to them the diasporic identity that Hall talks about. Repetition is also an important strategy in reliving and processing trauma. As Whitehead explains, "repetition mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression" (86). Reggae songs repeat these inventions of history, allowing Jamaican listeners to "re-experience" the trauma of their colonial history and process it. These lyrical revisions, fictional or otherwise, also put Jamaicans in control of colonial history, an important intervention of agency. Jamaicans desperately needed this agency as Jamaica became a postcolonial nation, and reggae provided them with an identity largely based on pride in their African roots, which the colonizers had attempted to denigrate.

#### CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS AND THE REGGAE IMAGINARY

Little Roy's 1974 song "Christopher Columbus" begins by questioning Columbus's title as "discoverer" of the Americas: "Men say Christopher Columbus / Discover on ya / But I know Christopher Columbus come steal dreadlocks' honor." Here the conjunction "but" serves to counter the first part of the clause. The notion that Columbus discovered anything is thus replaced with what Little Roy knows: that he came and stole Rastas' honor. In the second verse, Little Roy gives voice to Columbus, who demands that his interlocutor "give up your cup / lest I lock you up." Following this verse, another imagines Columbus abusing his power as a colonizer saying, "stop give Jah praise / lest I shoot you dead"—in short, he threatens practitioners of Rastafari with death. The lyrics emphasize that, even with this imbalance of power, "natty wouldn't give up," suggesting that Rastas resisted Columbus from the beginning, a creative multi-temporal intervention given that Rastafari did not exist as a belief system until the 1930s. Yet this rhetorical strategy proves useful: it allows the Rastas of the present to witness the conquerors of the past and ultimately resist them. Finally, in the chorus Little Roy counters this lack of religious freedom with the imposition of Western



society on the Diaspora: “So him go away and him come again, bring Babylon on ya.”

The song has served as catalyst for others to follow through its use of first-hand account, often replacing the indigenous peoples (always referred to as Arawak because of their perceived peacefulness in comparison to the Kalinago/Carib peoples) with peoples of African descent. While the appropriation and eliding of different historical traumas is also problematic, this replacement does serve to allow the numerous listeners of African descent in the present to personally relate with the lyrics. Indigenous population demographics in insular Caribbean communities are low due to genocide, disease, and migration during the early colonial period, whereas the African diaspora in the insular community is quite present, stemming from the legacies of slavery. Many of these legacies are a result of Columbus’s encounter. In fact, Little Roy’s “Christopher Columbus” was remade in 2010 by Prince Fatty, and Prince Fatty’s version uses the same lyrics with the sole addition being the repeating rhetorical question, “Why did he go?” This wailing lamentation alludes to subsequent events, particularly slavery, that followed. In doing so, Little Roy, and those after him, appropriate the conflict so that it applies to Jamaicans of African descent, and thus giving them further justification to antagonize the explorer while creating and inventing a more personal version of history.

In 1980 Burning Spear recorded the song “Columbus” in which the first verse expands on why he does not accept the Western narrative of Columbus’s “discovery.” Like Little Roy, Burning Spear posits an African presence in the West Indies prior to Columbus’s arrival. “He’s saying that, he is the first one / Who discover Jamaica / I and I say that, / What about the Arawak Indians and the few Black man / Who were around here, before him?” The acknowledgement of inhabitants already living on the island later denominated Jamaica challenges the Eurocentric view that an explorer could supposedly “discover” an inhabited land. Curiously, however, Burning Spear proposes that Black men were already on the island prior to the arrival, a theory that Ivan Van Sertima was already espousing at the time.<sup>3</sup> After this assertion, the verses that follow appear to reverse this version of history, saying “The Indians couldn’t hang on no longer / Here comes Black man and woman and children.” These lyrics reference Bartolomé de las Casas’s idea to import Africans as slaves to replace

the indigenous workers in 1503. Burning Spear's artistic decision to place Africans in Jamaica prior to Columbus invites two intriguing and inclusive interpretations: he embraces the Jamaican national motto of "out of many, one people" that merges the histories of the oppressed in an effort toward inclusion *and* he also supports the possibility of Africans as explorers in their own right.

In 1981, Little Roy revisited Christopher Columbus and released the song "Columbus Ship" which describes Columbus as a slaver, conflating his journeys to the Americas with the slave trade. He sings "You put I on Columbus ship / When I could not swim / You carried I out to sea oh yeah / Now you don't want to set I free oh no." As he repeats these lyrics over and over, he builds on them throughout the song, also adding "Look out I'm growing thin" and "You carried I out to sea / to slave on your plantation." Intriguingly, Little Roy refers to Christopher Columbus solely through the slave ship, a "Columbus Ship," rather than commenting on his person. In doing so, he proposes an image of Columbus as a slave trader thereby manipulating the imagery so that the association is unequivocal; through this cultural invention, Columbus becomes responsible for the slave trade.

In one notable difference between Little Roy's "Christopher Columbus" and Spear's "Columbus," Little Roy inserts himself as the recipient of Columbus's atrocities, creating an imagined eye-witness account. In Little Roy's earlier release, Columbus brought "Babylon on ya" but in "Columbus Ship," it is "I" who is carried out to sea, working on the plantation, and growing thin. By using "I," Little Roy inserts himself into the narrative as a victim who experienced the slave trade. His use of agency in this situation allows him to recount the past while the listener participates in this experience with him. As such, Little Roy creates not merely an individual narrative but a collective one through the shared experience of the Middle Passage. By implanting himself as a witness and participant, Little Roy experiences the trauma and invites the listener to do the same, lending themselves to the foundation of shared cultural memory and the construction of a Jamaican identity that aims to break from the Western world's glorification of Columbus. Cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann, extends beyond the range of a lifespan and is concerned with events from a more distant past (37-8). Through cultural trauma, the musicians and their listeners still experience events of the distant past, as evidenced by the lamentation cited above, "Why did he go?" sung

by Prince Fatty about Columbus's voyages to the Americas in his remade version of Little Roy's "Christopher Columbus." In Little Roy's "Columbus Ship" as well as Prince Fatty's wail, historical events are revised in conjunction with a prevailing attempt to process them, and importantly, to distinguish Afro-Jamaicans from the Western world. The participation of the audience in this song and others plays a role in the dissemination of this informal system of knowledge. As Brathwaite rightly suggests, "The oral tradition . . . makes demands not only on the [singer] but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the [singer] makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him" (1157). Together, the musicians and the audience construct a community built on a common set of beliefs, histories, and values.

Ken Boothe's 1987 release "Christopher Columbus" follows the path of Little Roy and Burning Spear by challenging the historical privilege given to Columbus as a "discoverer" of the West Indies. A unique intervention that takes place in Boothe's song builds upon Little Roy's assertion that Columbus was connected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the second verse, Boothe sings: "[Columbus] took men like John Hawkins, / To create the world's most vicious sin." He later addresses Columbus directly, saying: "on their body you put a price / and sold them as merchandise." Hawkins, a known British pirate and slaver, was born in 1532, twenty-six years after Columbus's death. Granted, Boothe does say men *like* Hawkins—however, his multi-temporal framework where multiple historical periods overlap, condemns the long-term effects of Columbus's arrival to the Americas. Columbus may not have been personally involved in the African slave trade, but his legacy lives on in men who were. This is a strategic move for reggae artists who can then move beyond Columbus to antagonize other historical figures through a similar lens so that new narratives can emerge out of a successful formula.

In another inventive trope of reggae music, vocalists pose as judges in their song lyrics. For example, sometime before his death in 1987, Peter Tosh recorded "Here Comes the Judge" in which he serves as a judge in a courtroom and accuses the likes of Columbus (who he refers to as "Christ-t'ief Come-Rob-Us"), Bartolomé de las Casas, Vasco De Gama, and others for "robbing and raping Africa, stealing black people out of Africa, brainwashing black people, holding black people in captivity for more than 300 years, killing over 50

million black people without a cause, and teaching black people to hate themselves.” He then sentences these early Iberian conquerors to be hung by their tongue, perhaps as a manner of retribution for similar acts of violence that were done to African chattels, or perhaps as a way of silencing their (mis)constructions of history that have often presented colonialism as a project of “civilizing” others. The crimes of which he accuses them include cultural conditioning, murder, slavery, and miseducation. The latter underscores a specific interest given the prior discussion on education as a tool of coloniality: by bringing these crimes to light, the “judges” in reggae music are correcting the historical record and the circulation of information.

Jamaican artist Allan Hope, known as Mutabaruka, who practices dub poetry, a style of spoken word over reggae rhythms that emanated out of the 1970s, released two scathing poems titled “People’s Court Part II” (1994) and “Columbus Ghost” (1994). Like Peter Tosh, in “People’s Court Part II,” Mutabaruka takes on the role of a judge, condemning the historical figures he holds culpable for spreading white supremacy, Christianity, and capitalism. Mutabaruka dedicates a verse of the song to Columbus in which he admonishes Columbus for going to Africa and the Americas. In comparison to his predecessors, Mutabaruka adds innovation to the motif when he repudiates Columbus for conquering subaltern groups through Christian indoctrination and physical violence. He writes:

with your doctrine of civilizin the savages  
 you taught black people to pray with their eyes closed  
 when they open them  
 you had their land and they had the bible  
 with bible and gun you robbed, raped, murdered our  
 fore- parents  
 in the name of Jesus. (Mutabaruka “People’s Court Part II”)

Since Rastas view the Bible as a sacred text, to criticize its role in the conquest seems almost paradoxical until we recall that Rastafari separates itself from orthodox Christianity: Mutabaruka is not criticizing the Bible or Jesus, but rather how Columbus uses religion to justify his atrocities. He uses the words “civilizin” and “savages” here with sarcasm; Mutabaruka plays with colonial imagery of the European as superior only to discredit the image in the next line. Indeed, its

juxtaposition next to the lyric “with bible and gun you robbed, raped, murdered our fore parents” portrays Columbus and his crew as the savages. Mutabaruka finishes the verse suggesting that Columbus divided Africans into different groups to make them distrustful of one another.

Both Mutabaruka and Peter Tosh use the court setting to draw from cultural values of right and wrong while antagonizing Columbus. At the same time, they role-play as judges, a profession characterized by honesty, power, and nobility. Playing the role of such an authoritative figure legitimizes their account of history, an empowering strategy given Jamaicans’ (particularly those of African descent) history as colonial subjects with little political clout. As judges, Mutabaruka and Peter Tosh retain the right to officially condemn the colonizer for past transgressions. In addition, the judge motif renders a physical site of binary opposition: the bench divides the judges from Columbus, the non-Western from the Western, the sentencer from the sentenced.

In “Columbus Ghost,” Mutabaruka assumes the voice of Columbus who admits responsibility for the extermination of various cultures as well as racial inequalities. By taking on Columbus’s voice, Mutabaruka parodies the events surrounding Columbus’s voyages thereby reducing them to excess violence and authority as well as racial cleansing:

I exterminated  
perpetuated  
hatred  
against redmen, yellowmen  
with blackmen I make no friend.  
(“Columbus Ghost” Mutabaruka)

Later, Mutabaruka calls into question Columbus’s journal by invalidating the truthfulness of his account of cannibalism in the Caribbean, “I attack Arawak / Cut off their head / wrote instead / that the Caribs ate them like bread.” In these lines, the lyricist negates the conventionally accepted, formal record of this historical moment, replacing that narrative with his own.

Mutabaruka not only complicates Columbus’s voice by acknowledging the long-term repercussions of his wrongdoings—“I gave Europe power over all the Earth / 500 years of your blood, sweat,

and tears”—but also accuses him of stealing from marginal groups the possibility of having their own history. Mutabaruka places Columbus at the center of the European colonial enterprise, and makes him push the victims of the conquests and subsequent trans-Atlantic slave trade to the margins of history:

nothin' in the pages of my history  
 will blot out your misery  
 you shall celebrate my victory  
 your children praise me  
 I am their only history  
 I am Christopher Columbus  
 .....  
 You celebrate my comin'  
 I will not go  
 not from your mind.  
 (“Columbus Ghost” Mutabaruka)

Herein Mutabaruka differs from musicians previously discussed: rather than inserting the subjectivity of people of African descent, he addresses Western history as being written by the victor, thus ensuring Columbus’s longevity so long as a Western epistemology serves as a hegemonic apparatus. The idea that the victims’ children will continue to celebrate Columbus is aligned with their inability to forget him (“I will not go . . . from your mind”) because the West will continue to impose its epistemology. The line “I am their only history” reinforces Western history as uniform and singular, often excluding others (Walder 1077). Indeed, according to Adwoa Ntozake Onuora in her study on using Rastafari as pedagogy, she declares that:

For Muta, the problem that inheres in the centering of Eurocentric knowledge is that in this centering, there is no room for other ways of knowing. The ethnocentric logic imperils indigenous culture, moving African youth further away from their culture and themselves and more toward a Euro-Western experience and understanding of being in the world (149).

Mutabaruka's use of parody subverts the logic of Eurocentric knowledge that does not leave room for other ways of knowing and questions the power that it holds over Jamaicans. By speaking parodically as Columbus, he draws on a creative tactic to undo and overwrite Western glorification of the historic figure. However, when he adopts the persona of Columbus, he also specifically reflects on the harrowing fact that Columbus's actions are celebrated in the Americas as evidenced by a statue commemorating him in Jamaica. Mutabaruka may be using Columbus to present the atrocities of the early encounters from a unique first-person perspective, but he does so because he views Columbus as a threat to Jamaican identity in the present.

Culture's 1997 song "Outcast" maintains the motif of Columbus as a thief and slaver, but also expands on the images of victimization of Caribbean people culminating in a new portrait of Columbus as a pedophile. The group recounts how the explorer "Came and rob us all our vote / Rape our sons and daughters at nine years old." Whether Columbus did in fact rape children is neither known nor to the point: by putting the idea into a song, the reggae group improvises on the shared Jamaican imaginary that understands their colonization as a violent, sexual conquest. Furthermore, this sexual violence at the time of the discovery contrasts with the paradise that is Zion and serves to anticipate the imposition of sexual power that would be evident throughout the colonial period.<sup>4</sup> In the imagery they use in their lyrics, as with Spear before them, the reggae group Culture replaces the indigenous people that Columbus encountered with those of African descent. In their reconstructed history, the people that Columbus first meets when he comes to the island, and later rapes, are uprooted Africans who are symbolically and metonymically related to all Jamaicans, as denoted by Culture's use of the moniker "our children" to name the victims of Columbus in the first encounter.

This variation furthers the narrative that reggae artists create that marks them as the victims of a traumatic conquest in which the most recognizable and celebrated conquistador of Western society took their rights and innocence. By singing about Columbus as a rapist of "their children," the musical group projects a nearness to the event, and in fact, provides an imagined eye-witness account. After all, they say "our children," not their forebears, or the children of their ancestors, or the children of the Arawaks. This collapse of many generations into one creates a deeper connection to their roots

while further antagonizing the European colonizers. Mutabaruka also suggests that the conquerors raped the continent of Africa: although these lines refer to economic exploitation, the use of the word “rape” creates an imagery of sexual power and violence in which the land figures as an allegory for exploited bodies. The lyrics align conquest and dominance of land with sexual conquest and sexual dominance over human bodies, a convergence that is both metaphoric and literal given the sexual violence present during the conquest of the Americas.

In 2010, as gang violence grew in Kingston, Columbus returned to the imaginary of Jamaican reggae musicians. As mentioned earlier, Prince Fatty remade Little Roy’s Christopher Columbus that year. However, Prince Fatty was not the only reggae artist to sing about Columbus. In the song “Who Start” (2010), Chezidek gives an account of violence beginning in colonialism and continuing up until the present day. His chorus repeatedly asks, “who start the war, start the war?” In the first verse, he raises the possibility that it was Columbus when he wonders, “Was it from the pirate Columbus who captured the Caribbean (we nuh know).” In the 2011 song “What Ya Gonna Do,” Pressure sings about a Biblical Judgment Day in which God returns to Earth to judge the wicked, Columbus first among them. The opening verse is directed at those who perpetuate Western history and violence: “You brainwash di youth inna di ghetto and di slum / teach di youth bout Columbus and how fi buss gun.” Here, Columbus represents the Eurocentric history that pervades the school curriculum, and yet his juxtaposition with a gun in the verse inextricably links him to persistent violence.

Both songs connect Columbus to modern-day street violence in Jamaica therefore extending his role beyond the colonial situation to having an impact in present society. To that end, these musicians perceive modern-day postcolonial violence as an extension of the colonial system that was in place for over three centuries. In other words, the violence that permeates the lives of Jamaica’s most disenfranchised youth stems from an education system on the island that glorifies conquerors like Columbus who subjugated, pillaged, raped, and enslaved others under the guise of “civilization.” Moreover, these songs draw attention to long-lasting effects of neocolonialism while calling into question the limits of independence.



### CONCLUSION: INTERTEXTUAL COLUMBUS

Since Jamaica's independence in 1962, reggae artists, often influenced by Rastafari, have been at the forefront of identity construction on the island. In their efforts to separate Jamaica from the Western powers that had dominated the island's history through genocide of indigenous groups, enslavement of African peoples, and economic and environmental exploitation throughout the colonial period, reggae musicians embarked on an intertextual revision of Columbus's historical role, a project of historical reconstruction that spans nearly four decades of reggae music. With postcolonial revisions that rely on fictional first-person witness accounts, multi-temporality, repetition, parody, invention, and play, these musicians re-write history to subvert formal Western education that has been imposed on Jamaicans and has taught them to celebrate Christopher Columbus. In its place, artists give Jamaicans of African descent an alternative historical memory, one which represents Columbus as a slaver, murderer, thief, and pedophile who ultimately must be judged and condemned for his actions, an informal historical narrative. The use of informal education present via the orality, repetition, and transmission of the music enables these musicians to reach a large audience and take on the role of educator in an alternative epistemology, thereby presenting subaltern knowledge in opposition to Western history and society. This subaltern knowledge and its imagery have helped Jamaicans cope with the cultural traumas stemming from slavery and colonialism. In the process, these reggae artists create interventions in which Jamaicans of African descent reinsert themselves into history and establish moments of witness and agency in early colonial encounters contribute to the formation of a new identity in independent Jamaica.

### Notes

1. Here I paraphrase lyrics from Bob Marley's songs "One Love" (1965) and "Three Little Birds" (1977), respectively.

2. In *An Eye for the Tropics* (2006), Krista Thompson notes how in the 1990s Jamaica's tourism board appropriated Bob Marley's "One Love" (1990) for international advertising campaigns (303). Reggae is not the only musical genre in the Americas with deeply socially conscious lyrics that are often overlooked in favor of a focus on the genre's joyful tone. Merengue and

salsa share a similar tendency to be reduced to their spirit of danceable pleasure as seen in the works of Juan Luis Guerra and Ricardo Arjona, respectively.

3. For instance, see Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (1976).

4. See Homi Bhabha's essay "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination, and the discourse of colonialism" (1994) and Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2006).

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