

push to the margins of critical consciousness.... [These artworks] share an interest in thematically decentering images of fixity while at the same time foregrounding the gaps and absences those fixed and monumental structures produce.”³³ It was based on this particular interplay of factors that St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott could claim magical realism as “the authoritative aesthetic response to the Caribbean cultural context.”³⁴

What does dub share with magical realism? Its decentering of textual and musical syntax, its surreal treatment of song form, and its fragmented and/or stacked narrative voices can be thought of as a musical corollary of what Theo D’Haen describes, in magical realist literature, as the “utopian, if evanescent, promise of transfigured perception, the hypnotic reviewing of everyday existence.”³⁵ Its reliance on practices rooted in the oral tradition—blended with the newly available technology of an emergent recording industry—strongly echoes Frederic Jameson’s interpretation of magical realism (in film) as dependent on a fusion of precapitalist with nascent capitalist (especially technological) elements.³⁶ And, as I shall discuss toward the end of this chapter, the “gaps and absences” that populate the dub mix ultimately had a similarly political utility in Jamaica.

The Politics and Poetics of Erasure: Historical Trauma and the Jamaican Sound Collage

What better medium than collage to express the accumulation of memories? And isn’t collage the emblematic medium of the century? Collagists ... take bits of chaos to ... investigate, organize and present evidence of the activity of a culture. —Carrie Rickey³⁷

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments.... This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles.—Derek Walcott

One of the historical events that continues to reverberate in cultural forms throughout the African diaspora is the transatlantic

slave trade, a historical trauma characterized by forced erasures of cultural memory, and disruptions in linear conceptions of history and human progress. Much of the literature on trauma has addressed various forms of individual suffering (generally addressed through the lens of psychoanalytic theory), as well as large-scale collective traumas such as the mass tragedies suffered in the Holocaust, the nuclear attacks at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or other recent horrors (generally addressed through the lens of medical anthropology). As Sandra Bloom (1998) has discussed, the effects of trauma seem relatively consistent between the individual and collective spheres,³⁸ and integral to the trauma literature is the concept of *testimony*—the various ways in which individuals or groups recount traumatic experiences that have remained suppressed.³⁹ There have been a number of studies tracing a connection between trauma and the formal characteristics of such narrative “testimony,” including those found in artistic production. In terms of historical experience, James Clifford feels that “experiences of unsettlement, loss, and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities—broken histories that trouble the linear, progressivist narratives.”⁴⁰ Clifford is speaking in abstract terms, in relation to the construction of broadly shared historical narratives, but Shoshana Felman, in her study of the poetry of Holocaust survivors, concretizes this idea in terms of form and individual artistic creation, referring to “an [historical] accident which is materially embodied in an accidenting of the verse.”⁴¹ Might the experience of historical trauma have echoes in dub’s shattering of narrative continuity?

In general, the literature on trauma has avoided the African diaspora, and the narratives produced within the cultural aftermath of the slave trade. One exception is Paul Gilroy’s “Living Memory and the Slave Sublime,” which directly engages the issue of historical trauma as it concerns people of African descent.⁴² Another is the work of visual artist Arthur Jafa, who has sought to understand the structural and aesthetic implications of historical trauma on African American art making. Both Gilroy and Jafa perceive the legacy of the slavery experience as structurally coded

within the expressive forms of the African diaspora. Gilroy finds such historical experience reflected within what he terms “radically unfinished” expressive forms that are “mark[ed] indelibly as the products of slavery.”⁴³ In his interpretation, a legacy of unresolved psychic terror gives coded voice to the “unspeakable terrors” of black history via the narrative ruptures found in a variety of diasporic expressive forms.⁴⁴ Jafa has referenced dub music more directly in his idea of “primal sites”:

those group experiences that reconfigure who we [African Americans] are as a community. One of the critical primal sites would be the Middle Passage. If you understand the level of horror directed towards a group of people, then you start getting some sense of the magnitude, impact, and level of trauma that that had on the African American community, and how it was particularly one of the earliest group experiences that reshaped an “African psyche” into the beginning of an African American psyche.... Now, for example, you look at Black music and see certain structural things that really are about reclaiming this whole sense of absence, loss, not knowing. One of the things I’m thinking about is dub music ... it ends up really speaking about common experiences because the structure of the music is about things dropping out and coming back in, really reclaiming this whole sense of loss, rupture, and repair that is very common across the experience of black people in the diaspora.⁴⁵

In this reading, an art form such as dub comes to represent a form of the “testimony” discussed by trauma theorists such as Felman. Its deconstructed song forms recalls Gilroy’s “unfinished forms,” while its reduction of textual meaning to nonsensical phonemes articulates his idea of “*unspeakable* (historical) terrors.” In this line of reasoning, the privileging of rupture in dub music comes to symbolize the disruptions in cultural memory and the historical shattering of existential peace, encoded into the cultural nervous system and sublimated into musical sound.

Placed in the context of Kingston in the 1970s, these observations also come to symbolize the shattering of the *contemporary* peace, enabling an interpretation of dub as a language of musical “shock,” bound closely with aesthetic values of dissonance, destruction, and decay.⁴⁶ After all, violence and (later) the overt symbols of warfare were crucial to the highly competitive sound system dances from its earliest days, and this dissonance was eventually sublimated into the very structure of the dub music created for the sound systems.⁴⁷ The overdubbed sounds of screeching tires, machinegun fire, and police sirens in some of King Tubby’s dub mixes, the rough clientele that reportedly patronized his sound system,⁴⁸ and the ultimate destruction of his system itself at the hands of Kingston police—all attest to these musicians’ movement within a vortex of social “counterforces” reflecting political and cultural warfare. And this warfare was both outward (against agents of foreign neocolonialism and local class domination) and inward (in the politically driven “tribal” warfare of Kingston’s ghettos). It was this last dynamic that ultimately detached itself from political ideals and became self-sustaining, a type of random violence born of social frustration that eventually claimed the life of King Tubby (and many others) and drove Lee Perry, Scientist, and Philip Smart into exile. In this interpretation, dub is the sound of a society tearing itself apart at the seams, an effect given broader context by erasures, tears, and disruptions in the seam of history itself.

In light of dub music’s fragmented song structures, the tortured formal fragmentation of the sound system “macroset,” the violently martial ethos of the sound clash, and even the violence sometimes inherent in the music’s procedures of realization, the preceding ideas provide insight into what might have caused Jamaica to evolve a style unique in the constellation of world popular musics for such an interruptive manipulation of musical pleasure. It can be argued that in most Western musical forms, pleasure is generally constructed through a dynamic of tension and release within the system of functional harmony. Dub partially subverts this dynamic, reducing harmonic activity to an episodic coloration in which

moments of harmony and melody are contrasted with segments of stark low-register relief (drum & bass). On the other hand, aesthetic pleasure in African-derived systems is often constructed around repetition of interlocking rhythmic patterns. Dub partially subverts this also, with its periodic disruption of rhythmic patterns. As such, the music essentially subverts the pleasure principles of two musical systems: aesthetic pleasure here is fundamentally predicated upon the fragmented narratives of the *sound collage*, which in this case seems to conform to the emotional pendulum of post-traumatic experience that allows pleasure to be experienced only fleetingly as it swings between sensations of harmonic fullness and starkness, and between sensations of rhythmic continuity and disruption.⁴⁹

As a form predicated upon the de- and reconstruction of aesthetic logics, collage has often been called a quintessential form of the turbulent twentieth century, a form inviting potentially endless possibilities of invention and interpretation.⁵⁰ Cubists found in its flattening of pictorial perspective a means of portraying the simultaneity of time and space. Italian Futurists used its mechanically produced print and photographic source materials to proclaim their ideals of a machine age. Russian Constructivists used its fragmented syntax as a way to portray the class struggles of their society. Dadaists and Surrealists built collage through a variety of chance procedures and asserted the form as simultaneously the most organically poetic and potentially revolutionary.⁵¹ But several understandings of collage seem particularly relevant in the context of the danced (and soundengineered) cultural shifts and social turbulence of Jamaica's roots era. The Dada/Surrealist artist Jean Arp used collage to evoke processes of decay in both nature and art, while historians have also read in his collages "an attempt to express in new formats regenerative powers." A similar interpretation was offered by art historian Katherine Hoffman, who saw in collage "a sense of the possibility of connectedness but at the same time ... a sense of alienation of individuals afloat in a world turned upside down."⁵² A third interpretation can be found in the writing of jazz historian Krin Gabbard who has speculated (in relation to the deconstructive aspects of modern jazz vis-à-vis the

American pop song tradition) that the aestheticization of error and chance in some forms of black music arguably “shows contempt for Western art music with its smooth, “organic” surfaces, its technical precision, and its highly-stylized set of emotional codes.”⁵³

In his 1996 essay “The Aesthetics of the Global Imagination,” ethnomusicologist Veit Erlmann speculated that the juxtaposition of radically dissimilar or decontextualized genres in certain forms of world popular music may reflect the violent historical encounter between industrial capitalist and preindustrial societies (note how closely this echoes Jameson’s aforementioned observation concerning magical realism).⁵⁴ Jamaica has been a part of the global economic order at least since the period of European colonization, but Erlmann’s words are nevertheless relevant to the turbulent late-cold war dynamics of the Manley-Seaga years. Like Gilroy’s “unfinished forms,” dub may be one of a number of diasporic musics on which a traumatic history and turbulent present has left its structural imprint, “converting the outrage of the years into a music”⁵⁵ through an aesthetic of broken, discontinuous pleasures that may represent a synaptic adaptation to long-term historical trauma,⁵⁶ but that also fit into a broader global pattern in which collage forms join the search for new realities to define the twentieth century.

Science and Space: Dub and Afro-futurism

*We need images of tomorrow and our people need them more than most.... The historical reason we’ve been so impoverished in terms of future images is because until fairly recently, as a people we’ve been systematically forbidden any images of our past.*⁵⁷—Samuel Delany to Mark Dery

*The machines gleam magnificently. Their newness and sophistication seems to balance the space on the edge of the sonic future. Is this a mirror image of Apollo and Sputnik with their cramped and awesome technical interiors?*⁵⁸—Louise Meintjes

To the extent that Jamaican engineers relied upon the most modern sound technology to craft sonic evocations of archaic Africana, dub music has become an important musical reference

point in the thematic trope often referred to as “Afro-futurism.”⁵⁹ The Afro-futurist theme runs through black music, film, literature, and visual arts, often using the imagery of space travel and other advanced technology to recast the turbulent black past in terms of a liberated, technological utopia.⁶⁰ Afro-futurist ideas can be traced throughout the twentieth century, but arguably consolidated during the 1960s, when the new reality of outer space travel and the related proliferation of science fiction imagery in mass culture—in combination with the politically and culturally motivated embrace of African culture throughout the African diaspora—suggested a liberatory cultural potential for technology.

From the 1960s to the present, these ideas have seemed particularly evident in selected works by African American jazz and popular artists, the more prominent of whom would include Herbie Hancock, Jimi Hendrix, Earth Wind, and Fire, Parliament, Sun Ra, Miles Davis, Jeff Mills, and Derrick May. In the work of Hancock’s electro-acoustic Mwandishi band (1969–73), for example, futuristic-sounding electronic synthesizers are used to replicate African percussion patterns, which in turn are used as the basis for jazz improvisation.⁶¹ On Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland*, a variety of archaic, rural blues forms are electrically revamped, graced with otherworldly lyrical themes, and subjected to extensive sound processing and studio manipulation.⁶² Earth, Wind and Fire fuse imagery drawn from archaic black cultural sources (Egyptian pyramids, African mysticism) with the iconography of outer space travel, while using the percussive sound of 1970s funk as a medium for the rearticulation of traditional African musical values.⁶³ A similar fusion is strongly evident in selected works of Sun Ra such as *Space Is the Place*, *Astro-Black*, and *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy*, in which juxtaposed themes of ancient Egypt, archaic Africana, exile, and interstellar travel are dramatized through Sun Ra’s fusion of free jazz, improvised electronic textures, and African-inspired drumming.⁶⁴ Parliament’s theme-driven albums such as *Mothership Connection* and *Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, laid the foundation for their concert “funk operas,” based around tropes of interstellar travel and genetic manipulation, transgressively recast through the

ethos of the postindustrial urban ghetto.⁶⁵ Trumpeter Miles Davis traversed similar conceptual territory in the mid-1970s on jazzfusion works such as *Dark Magus*, *Get Up With It*, *Agharta*, and *Pangaea*, which fused post-Coltrane free and modal jazz improvisation, abstracted rhythm and blues, psychedelic rock, African-derived percussion, pure electronic music, and extensive post-performance studio manipulation.⁶⁶ More recently, Detroit-based techno musicians such as Derrick May and Jeff Mills, working within one of the planet's most notorious postindustrial settings (and one dominated by the symbol of transport vehicles), would find resonance in the metaphor of space vessels and outer space travel on recordings such as May's *Innovator*, or Mills's *Waveform Transmissions*.⁶⁷

Besides being a fad derived from the technological advances of the times, these images may have proliferated because they offered a novel inflection to traditional forms of African-derived mysticism, naturalism, and magic, while inspiring a rearticulation of the historical experiences of colonization, slavery, immigration, frontier, and exile. In light of the artists listed above, however, we might ask whether Afro-futurism is fundamentally an *African American* trope, reflecting a particular proximity to the apparatus of the cold war. Much of the emphasis on technology seems a likely reflection of the space race as a component of the arms race between two cold war superpowers; it is clear that many of the sonic developments during the 1960s and 1970s were by-products of military technology.⁶⁸ But to what extent is the Afro-futurist trope, or something similar to it, evident in other regions of the black world? And what is its relevance to Jamaican dub music?

It is undeniable that the sci-fi undertones of dub have garnered the music a substantial audience outside of Jamaica, among listeners from the experimental and electronic strains of Western popular music. This accounts, for example, for the cover art that was used to sell the music outside of Jamaica—a decision largely made by the English recording companies independently of the Jamaican artists.⁶⁹ Overall, however, the placement of dub within the canon of both Afro-futurist and sci-fi-influenced music has been fairly slow.

Philip Hayward, for example, devotes an entire chapter to the sonic influence of science fiction on popular and experimental musics that mentions all of the above-cited examples, but fails to mention dub.⁷⁰ The likely explanation for omissions of this sort is that while the full-length album is considered the quintessential medium for post-1960s rock, dub mixes exist mainly on B-sides of singles. Dub albums tend to be mere compilations of these mixes that lack the clear thematic continuity that listeners expect of album-length works (exceptions might be thematic dub LPs such as Lee Perry's *Super Ape* and *Blackboard Jungle Dub*).

More significant, however, is the observation that in Jamaican dub, the sci-fi component has typically been more implicit than explicit. The music tends to be less concerned with images of flying saucers and interplanetary travel, and is more reflective of prominently interwoven dichotomies of nature/technology and past/future. Fundamental here is the idea of Kingston as an electronically wired urban concrete jungle set within a tropical Caribbean island. Because of an economy in which recorded music has traditionally proved more viable than performing ensembles, Jamaica has been a site of particularly interesting adaptations of successive forms of sound reproduction technology. The country's recording engineers and sound system operators have consistently pushed the envelope of what is expected of sound technology in terms of both aesthetics and performance capability, and some of their most imaginative ideas are said to have prefigured later developments in sound technology. Scientist, for example, claims: "It's been documented that me and King Tubby's joked about those things for years before they were made.... Even moving faders that you see come out with [the] Neve [console], it's been documented way before where me and King Tubby's been sitting around talking, joking about moving faders ... we were talking about 64 track and all these new devices that were not invented at that time."⁷¹ The engineer went on to claim that the manufacturers of this equipment "were listening to reggae and the problems we were finding, they run into the same problems too.... When you design [sound equipment] on the bench, everything work normal, you get the

perfect readout you're trying to get. But when you get into the real world, that same amplifier becomes a piece of crap, especially when you playing reggae through it. So if it wasn't for reggae, they couldn't fine tune a lot of those audio equipment."⁷²

So during the same period that Rasta-influenced reggae musicians were placing such emphasis on tropes of nature and the African past, foreign manufacturers of sound technology were using Jamaican music to test the durability and capabilities of their equipment, and to set a course for the future. Such dichotomies reflect a characteristic juxtaposition of "roots" and technology that has provided Jamaican popular music with its particular dynamism since the late 1960s. While conducting research on Jamaica's language and culture in 2001, Hannah Appel witnessed this juxtaposition at a party on the rural outskirts of Kingston: "I found myself at a country birthday party. We're talking *country*; no running water, as many goats and chickens at the party as people—and a man in charge of more computer equipment than I could ever hope to understand. The sound system was not a set of speakers and turntables, but two new PC computers complete with CD drives and digital amplification and sound modification equipment. And all this up in middle of the Blue Mountains!"⁷³

These dichotomies also raise the issue of how cultures on the margins of the world's technological centers relate to technology as it "trickles down" to their regions, especially given the complicity of technology with Western racial/cultural/technological domination.⁷⁴ In the music culture of Jamaica it seems that technology was embraced along with its militarist baggage—hence the technomartial ethos of the sound clash.⁷⁵ Yet Jamaicans recognized its destructive and pollutive potentials: this is when it clashed against the affirming ideologies of "roots," black pride, and/or national pride, and demanded grounding via local cultural symbols and practices. Within Jamaica, this ongoing tension has shaped the local adaptation of sound technology.

In light of these juxtapositions at the heart of the music, it is not surprising that the Jamaican recording studio has often been conceptualized by its pioneers as some bizarre hybrid of laboratory,

spaceship, temple, jungle, or shaman's hut. Lee Perry described his Black Ark studio to David Toop as "like a space craft. You could hear space in the tracks. Something there was like a holy vibration and a godly sensation.... I was getting help from God, through space, through the sky, through the firmament, through the earth, through the wind, through the fire. I got support through the weather to make space music."⁷⁶ Perry's technological ruminations were always grounded in his experience of nature; on another occasion he claimed dub was "the sound of the rain, the wind, and the water—that's the way it's mixed, that's what's in the dub. 'Cause it come from rain, thunder and lightning, breeze, and all the invisible forces."⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Scientist observed: "A lot of people don't know this, but there's a connection between music and what goes on out there in the solar system and all the universe. There is that deep, unexplained mystery that music have on the world ... to be honest, sometime when you in the studio and you doing those mixes there, you actually feel like you're communicating with something else out there, you don't know how to explain it."⁷⁸

Louise Meintjes has waxed insightfully about this sensation to which Scientist refers, asserting that "through the art of illusion and the capacity of the imagination, [the recording studio] seems to house a natural force that when tapped produces compelling art.... It is from here that musicmaker's poetics travel through conversation to God, to the moon, to Mars, and back into their sound. And it is from this tape reel that the lives of music makers might spin off into new places."⁷⁹ The peculiar manner in which sound technology was adapted in Jamaica should not, at last, be surprising; as James Lastra has demonstrated, the evolution of technology has been driven as much by public and private imagination as it has by technological necessity.⁸⁰ And it is this act of public imagination that allows us to understand even the most far-flung visions in terms of postcolonial culture, predicated as it is on an intensive interrogation of future cultural possibilities.⁸¹

Some call it science
Some call it necromancy
Some call it plain obeah ...

The science fiction metaphor also has relevance in the irreverent way Jamaican recording engineers utilized their sound equipment (as discussed in [chapter 2](#)), which at the very least seemed to problematize the issue of Western technoscience and its network of cultural associations. The genre of dub music is populated with the trope of the “crazy” sound mixer, as well as the theme of science interwoven with madness. Lee Perry is the best-known example of this tendency, but it is also reflected in the work and imagery of engineers such as Scientist and Mad Professor.⁸² Of course, it must be mentioned that the term *science* has a double resonance in Jamaica, often used colloquially to refer to the island’s tradition of neo-African black magic, Obeah.⁸³ Derived from the Akan term *obia* (ghost), the symbol of Obeah has sometimes provided a symbolic medium for the local grounding of global sound technology. Kevin Martin has even observed that the terms *dub* (noun) and *dubby* (adjective) resonate etymologically with “duppy,” the Jamaican patwa term for ghosts or malevolent spirits.⁸⁴ The diasporic project of reclaiming an African heritage was necessarily marked by an ethos of mystery that by turns reflected the exploration of a heretofore unknowable past, and an engagement with the African “other” that had historically functioned as the shadow symbol to Western modernity.⁸⁵ In the words of literary scholar Nana Wilson-Tagoe, “the [African] experience itself ha[d] been shrouded in obscurity and was the source of embarrassment and shame in a society whose unifying factor throughout its beginnings as a plantation society was the consensual acceptance of African inferiority.”⁸⁶ Stated differently, dub reinserted the mystery and spookiness into reggae.

In traditional musical terms, this sense of mystery was often evoked through the use of minor keys, slow tempi, African percussion, and bottom-heavy rhythm arrangements—all key elements of 1970s roots reggae that were intensified by the sound processing of the dub mix. So it follows that when producer Coxsone Dodd remixed saxophonist Karl Bryan’s minor-key “Money

Generator” instrumental into a dub version, he slowed the tape speed, applied the sound processors, and retitled it “Musical Science,” a moody version dominated by neo-African Nyabinghi hand drumming and a hazy, atmospheric mix.⁸⁷ Clearly, the doubly resonant image of the Jamaican engineer as a “scientist” was necessary in adapting sound technology to local priorities: it was precisely the idiosyncratic use of that technology that helped rupture stylistic norms and project diasporic Africans across space and time in order to reclaim and reinhabit a cultural heritage lost during centuries of slavery and colonization.

As such, the music actually implies several re-visionings of the concept of *space*. Dub’s sonic effects, somewhat similar to what could be heard contemporaneously in the soundtracks of science fiction films, evoke the dark expanse of *outer* space. The oft-mentioned meditative quality of the music, on the other hand, resonates with a listener’s *internal* space. The Africa-inspired rhythm structures evoke a mood of *historical* space, providing a soundtrack for a time when an African god-king was believed to be incarnate on Earth and the music had an ethos of grandeur that was conducive to the expansive and idealistic thinking of the era. Even the *physical* concept of space is relevant here: dub’s spatialized songscapes, heard at the extreme volumes of the Jamaican sound system, simulated an actual physical space within which the “roots” African past and the utopian sci-fi future could be fleetingly experienced as one. Thus, it is not surprising that both the creators of dub music and their audiences frequently speak of the music in terms of “dimensions” and “other dimensions.”

As a genre, science fiction is often considered the futurist imaginings of the technological centers of modern, industrialized nations, rather than the nostalgic, Africa-centered imaginings of a small, technologically marginal Caribbean island culture.⁸⁸ This irony in itself mirrors a broader technological-cultural-racial stereotype in which, as Alondra Nelson notes, “blackness” is typically positioned in opposition to narratives of “technology” and “progress.”⁸⁹ Positioned culturally, historically, and geographically between Africa and America, Jamaican studio engineers utilized the

available technology to imply a potent form of sonic Afro-futurism. And while the Africa-centered narratives of Rastafari, detached from the popular song mediums, fantasize of an uncomplicated return to ancient culture,⁹⁰ dub demonstrates that Jamaican attitudes toward technology actually contradict these oppositional distinctions between a past understood as nature-based, primitive, and stereotypically African, and a future understood as technological and stereotypically de-Africanized.

Dave Marsh characterized reggae of the 1970s as reflecting “the potential of human lives in a way peculiar to Jamaicans, living in a trap between the squalid beauties of a pre-industrial culture and the disintegrating splendors of an imperial one.”⁹¹ Dub as reggae’s visionary impulse straddled a similar position between preindustrial, industrial, and information age aesthetics, reflected in the use of “roots” rhetoric in the abuse/deconstruction of the modernist/analog machine, as a precursor to a digital pop aesthetic. As a body of black science fiction gradually consolidates itself throughout the African diaspora among the poles of archaic Africana, contemporary culture, and futuristic technoimagery, the ruminative soundscapes of dub will likely continue to provide a soundtrack to the Afro-inflected transmutation of technology at the turn of the twenty-first century.⁹²

Conclusion

John Cage’s idea of creating a purely “ambient” music by allowing environmental sounds their rightful place within the listener’s aestheticized attention was partially predicated on Eastern-influenced ideas of individual contemplation. The idea finds its Afro-inflected parallel in communally driven musics of African descent, where the formal structure of music is often partially predicated on the sounds of the surrounding society and its processes of communal composition. Dub in this sense is not so different from the mutable and modular song forms that accompany

oral arts throughout West Africa, for example. This is one reason why the recorded pop song has assumed a uniquely ephemeral form in Jamaica: its structure fundamentally reflects a deep fusion of Jamaica's African-derived oral heritage (a communal process of composition) with the latent potentials of new technologies, in the context of a very raw form of profit-driven competition in the local music industry. In popular music, this ephemerality was apparent at least since the days of the early sound systems, when selectors scratched the titles off imported records to avoid detection by the spies of competing sound systems. Songs were essentially separated from their song title signifiers, leading to a multiplicity of titles for the same material, and ultimately feeding directly into (and off) the Jamaican masses' reliance on oral as opposed to written dissemination of information.

As such, the social element holds particular significance in this Afrocentric definition of the "ambient." In Jamaica, concepts such as "the individual composer" and the "integrity of the work" do not prevail to the extent that they do within American and Western European notions of authorship. As we have seen, a "song" in Jamaica must sometimes be understood as a composite of its multiple versions. One important motivation for breaking songs apart into dub mixes was to adapt them to what was essentially a communal mode of composition, with clear African roots, in which different members of the community have a voice. Many different musicians get a chance over the latest rhythm tracks; in Jamaica, as this book has chronicled, this process grew to include recording engineers. In Scientist's words, "Reggae's a very unique music on the planet. It has all these different elements where everybody gets a chance to be in the spotlight. *People even give the engineer a chance to be in the spotlight.*"⁹³

We can expand the scope of this "spotlight" to encompass another class of musicians. Caribbean literary theorist Theo D'Haen once referred to language as a dominant issue in the history of colonization,⁹⁴ because of the direct relationship between the historical destruction of African culture and the forced acceptance of the colonizer's language. Simon Gikandi claims that (postcolonial)

Caribbean literature as a whole is marked by the enterprise of deconstructing the colonizer's language.⁹⁵ Thus, language becomes a primary battleground during a postcolonial moment in which the formerly colonized revitalize the historical imagination while asserting an emergent national culture. In this light, another significant class of musicians to share the "spotlight" Scientist speaks of were the sound system deejays of the 1970s. The literary readings offered earlier become concrete when we consider that the musical language of dub developed side by side with the emergent virtuosity of the sound system deejays; in fact, the primary use of dub mixes was as a background for deejaying. Thus, dub's fracturing of song form did not only lead to a music that emphasized soundscape, groove, and texture. It also fractured narrative conventions in a way that broke open the logic of the colonial language, enabling the DJs to gradually move Jamaican patwa to the forefront of the country's popular music and culture. In the end, ironically, it was technological developments imported from the Euro-American context that enabled the prominence of what Kamau Brathwaite might term Jamaica's "nation language"—a localized creole tongue emerging on the deconstruction of the colonial tongue. Ultimately this allowed the Jamaican subaltern to "speak."⁹⁶

This "speaking" was crucial in the rise of postcolonial Jamaican consciousness, and the process shares much with what Roger Fowler calls "anti-languages," described as "the special argot of subcultures which exist in an antagonistic relationship with the norm society." J. Martin Yinger describes the anti-language as an "effort to create a counter-reality, freed from the inevitable entanglement of the dominant reality—within which [certain groups] suffer—with dominant language usages."⁹⁷ Considering the cultural battle that had to be fought within Jamaica to propel roots reggae to the forefront of the country's cultural revolution, such observations are relevant internally, to Jamaica's complexion-coded class struggle, and externally, in the entire nation's relationship to its history of colonization. This idea of "anti-language" can also be applied to the very structural syntax of dub music itself: the cultural battle was not only waged on the field of language, but was also waged

structurally, within the formal language of the post–World War II popular song as inherited from European and, ironically (African) American sources.

My main point here, however, is that if the sonic space opened by the dub mix liberated the musicality of “nonmusicians” such as recording engineers, it also liberated the officially marginalized, class-based social and political discourse offered by the sound system DJs. As David Katz characterizes the sound system as the “ghetto’s newspaper,”⁹⁸ so does Bobby Vicious opine:

those flip sides or dubs turned out to be a platform for people who *weren’t* singers, to voice social issues in the dancehall or on their local sound systems. Many times it was a young U-Brown talking on the sound system, it was a young Big Youth, a young Dillinger, a young Brigadier Jerry, a young Charlie Chaplin, a young Josey Wales. I’m sure Tubby’s didn’t intend it to be a backdrop for deejays. Because at the time there weren’t a lot of deejays. But that’s what it evolved to be—dub music blended itself into the culture of Jamaica. Because there was a lot that needed to be said. It brought to the forefront the issues that were happening that people wouldn’t address. And if you go through the history of the music you’ll find that every issue that the politicians, or the social environment at the time, would fail to address, you could pick up a record and you could hear in detail what it was all about. So all the social issues were addressed in the dancehall, thanks to the fact that there was a platform created by Tubbys, or Joe Gibbs, or Studio One—dub music—that allowed that type of thing to happen.⁹⁹

Herein lies the link between style and context, and an indication of the broader implications of dub’s disruptive strategies. For the most part, the sonic fragments one hears floating throughout a dub mix are not samples drawn from external sources, but fragments of a preexisting song with which the Jamaican listening public was already familiar. The original dub engineers had to literally “break” songs apart in order to achieve their fragmentary musical language and it was this act of musical “violence,” with all of its political and

cultural overtones, that revolutionized Jamaican culture by creating a space for the deejays. In terms of its place *within* Jamaican culture, this is where dub acquires its deepest political significance.

From the global perspective (as we shall see in the coda), Jamaica's emphasis on versioning facilitated the transformation of formerly fixed pop songs into the more fluid, remix-based conceptions of composing typified by today's digital technology. This peculiarly Jamaican take on sound technology also had profound local implications, in terms of the nation's relationship to its own history. Michael Chanan takes the position that during the course of the twentieth century, sound media gradually replaced writing as the premier historical storage technology.¹⁰⁰ This shift had particularly profound implications for a (largely) African-derived Jamaican culture in which, for several reasons, aurality (and orality) had historically taken precedence over written forms.¹⁰¹ The technology allowed the simultaneous consolidation and expression of an alternative Jamaican cultural history that had heretofore existed beyond the margins of official histories. Eventually, as these song histories became influential in both the local and global spheres, they forced a renegotiation of the nation's conception of itself, its history, and its relationship to the rest of the world.

Yet even this radically revised history became mere source material for the endlessly mutating remix. Like some aspects of free jazz in America, dub is a style that, by virtue of its historical moment, reified but also simultaneously subverted "blackness" as a stable signifier of cultural identity. While vocalists of the 1970s such as Bob Marley, Johnny Clarke, and Yabby U composed passionate political and religious songs rooted in their Rastafarian faith and a linear, eschatological conception of black history, the work of recording engineers such as King Tubby and Lee Perry (despite their own intentions) often disfigured these concepts into distorted catchphrases alternately rendered profoundly evocative and/or absurdly meaningless. These dub mixes at least partially foreshadow a sense of "post": "postsong," "postblackness," and especially,

“posthistory.” Even in Ethiopia, where Haile Selassie is remembered as a despot, it is possible to find Ethiopians who have become adherents of Rastafari at the same time that they despise the historical Selassie. As the artist Fikre Gebreyesus put it: “Their [Jamaican Rastafarians’] Selassie is not the same Selassie that we experienced. But the two can co-exist.”¹⁰² It is doubtful whether this type of historical anomaly would have occurred within such a brief historical window, without the powerful medium of Jamaican reggae music. Jamaica, then, has not only been a crucial source of unique sound concepts; it has implicitly provided in its music a template for cultural reconfiguration. With the global spread of both reggae and Rastafari, it has also offered the world one of the most potent reinterpretations of Africa, one that has in turn influenced cultural trends in Africa itself.¹⁰³ In the view of Guyanese poet David Dabydeen, such a tendency toward the cultural “remix” is central to the Caribbean cultural experience:

if you live in England where the English have a very concrete (or stone/marble) sense of their histories, and you as a Caribbean person come to a sense that your history is nebulous and shifting, it means that you have a tremendous capacity for a new kind of freedom ... you can dream, you can surmise, you can invent. The nebulousness of one’s background gives one a kind of epistemological freedom, an existential freedom ... we were freed of certain traditions, knowledges and so on, and while we have sorrow about the loss of those, nevertheless, we are always on the threshold of originality.¹⁰⁴

This dichotomy of loss and invention is at the heart of the dub mix. In cultural terms these mixes can be heard as reflecting the ruination of an idealized African past, or as the harbingers of an as-yet-unarticulated cultural formation. In existential terms, the spaces of the dub mix may be similarly perceived as either barren, monotonous craters devoid of warmth, meaning, optimism, and human presence, or as fertile, tropical wellsprings taut with anticipatory tension in which the pleasurable sensation of free-

floating is periodically interpolated with glimpses of the divine. Like doomed prophet/historians who managed to leave their scriptural fragments behind, the creators of dub offered an Afro-psychedelic vision of the turbulent cultural past as well as the digital/cybernetic future—until the violence around them either consumed them, forced them to adapt to a new creative paradigm, or forced them into exile. As reggae pioneer Yabby U asserted to Steve Barrow:

Reggae music now, it suppose to teach our people. It's supposed to be the scroll, like in those days the prophets used to have scroll, wax upon stone. The words was unto them, the chief musicians. Them record history and leave it in caves, and the indivisible hand of the almighty make men discover it, and translate it to Bible. The Bible was until Revelation. When it reach Revelation, it need a new Bible. Them never know about atomic energy, them never know about digital system, computer and all them things... Our Bible is music. It is wax upon record, like how theirs was wax upon stone. Everything that happened to them happened to we.¹⁰⁵

A final thought about the place of technology in all this. Virtual technologies such as sound recording and film were often misunderstood in their early years as serving purely documentary functions; their creations were often dismissed as inferior simulations of reality. A more expansive take is that creative manipulations of these technologies in fact create new forms of reality (that is, new ways of “hearing” the world) within which they function as “prosthetic” devices, ultimately extending human sensory perceptions into new areas.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, these technologies essentially function as fantasy projection devices, containing, in their deceptively accurate simulation of “reality,” the potential to disrupt human understandings of the “real.” In the context of their times, this is one way to understand the creators of dub in Jamaica. As Kwame Dawes implies in his 1999 essay on Lee Perry, the difficulty these visionary musicians experienced in the turbulence of Jamaica had a flip side. By fashioning (like Perry) idiosyncratic spaces within which they could exist as freely creative

beings, they expanded the parameters of imagination within reggae music; in so doing, they provided a new cultural template as well as a fertile space for Jamaica's interaction with the wider world.¹⁰⁷ The terms of this interaction, which is the subject of the coda, sometimes reflected the issues raised in this chapter. Equally often, however (and in tandem with the multilayered and indeterminate nature of the music), dub fused unpredictably with other popular music traditions and their own various extramusical resonances. It was in this way that the style was gradually reimagined as both a potent musical influence and as a sonic metaphor for transatlantic culture at the end of the twentieth century.