

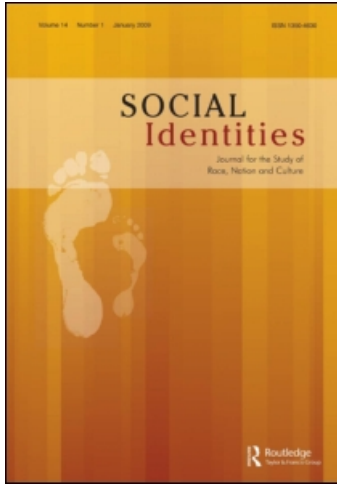
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### 'Dubbing di diaspora': gender and reggae music inna Babylon

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## ‘Dubbing di diaspora’: gender and reggae music inna Babylon

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European countries have always used gendered concepts and stereotypes to legitimize and perpetuate their colonial governance and their exercise of command and subordination. Metaphors of masculinity and femininity have often been used (by the colonizers and the colonized) to underscore relations of authority/obedience, or of strength/weakness, on the basis of the equation between racist supremacy and the loss of black masculinity. This article explores how reggae performers and audiences responded to this colonial strategy. Whether identifying black liberation with virility, and male control on women’s bodies, therefore coming to perpetuate sexist images and concepts, and homophobic attitudes; or, re-visioning their struggle for freedom in forms which do not support or perpetuate phallicism and patriarchal control.

This article analyzes gender representations in reggae music within postcolonial Europe, in the context of the process of global consumption of reggae music and the international appropriation, by white musicians, of a musical genre which was usually identified with black identity. The author considers reggae music produced in the UK as a result of the encounter between white youth subcultures and the massive black immigrant community from Jamaica and compares it with reggae music spread through sound systems in Italian social centers by white youth countercultures. In both contexts, the postcolonial encounter between black and white youths has given rise to complex reactions grounded in the diverse historical, cultural, religious, social and political backgrounds.

**Keywords:** gender; homophobia; reggae music; colonialism; migration; subculture

‘They nu want gi we credit fi we invention/Reggae music invent by the Jamaican/UB40 tek it and a make the most million’:<sup>1</sup> in these lines Macka B, a Jamaican singer living in the UK, complains about the global consumption of reggae music and the international appropriation, by white musicians, of a musical genre which was usually identified exclusively with Jamaican (i.e. black) identity. This nationalistic claim is a common reaction to the dislocation of reggae music and its consequent relocation to postcolonial Europe, since black music has often been considered a symbol of racial authenticity. According to Paul Gilroy, at a certain moment reggae ‘ceased, in Britain, to signify an exclusively ethnic, Jamaican style, and derived a different kind of cultural legitimacy both from a new global status and from its expression of what might be termed a pan-Caribbean culture’ (1993, p. 82). To be precise, in the last 30 years, reggae spread from its Caribbean origins, shifting from being the cry for peace and justice of black sufferers in the colonized countries to

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being the cry for pride and redemption of black immigrants in the overdeveloped countries. Subsequently, reggae has attracted a new generation of white European youth inspired by the critical and subversive potential of this musical genre, which, in this process, also amplifies the voice of white Italian youth countercultures. I will start from this international dissemination, and the new cultural and political possibilities produced by this global flow, to analyze how gender and national identity are represented in reggae music within postcolonial Europe.

Along with Gilroy (1993, p. 83), I will argue that 'the conflictual representation of sexuality has vied with the discourse of racial emancipation to constitute the inner core of black expressive cultures' because European countries have always used gendered concepts and stereotypes to legitimize and perpetuate their colonial governance and their exercise of command and subordination. Therefore, metaphors of masculinity and femininity have often been used, both by the colonizers and the colonized, to underscore relations of authority/obedience, or of strength/weakness, on the basis of the equation between racist supremacy and the loss of black masculinity. The scope of this research is to explore how reggae performers and audiences responded to this colonial strategy. Did the identification of black liberation with virility, and virility with male control of women's bodies, perpetuate sexist images and concepts and homophobic attitudes? Or, on the contrary, did the re-visioning of their struggle for freedom in forms which do not support or perpetuate phallogentrism and patriarchal control, open up the possibility for new social relations and new forms of empowerment which do not reproduce hierarchical subordination, but are grounded on a revolutionary vision of liberation, arising from a feminist perspective?

I will use an intersectional approach, connecting race and gender, ethnicity and sexual preferences, to see how sexual and power relations are represented in lyrics, poetics and performances by black and white, male and female singers/djs/selectors/sound operators and audiences coming from two different postcolonial contexts, namely the UK and Italy. I will focus not only on language but on dance and gesture, as a merely textual approach is not sufficient for an aesthetic form grounded in oral structures: a form which is clearly oriented towards specific dynamics of performance and the use of the body rather than verbal communication.

I will compare reggae music produced in the UK, considered a result of the postcolonial encounter between white youth subcultures and the massive black immigrant community from Jamaica, with reggae music which was spread across Italian social centers by white youth countercultures with the help of self-built sound systems. In Italy as well as in the UK, this encounter between black and white youths has given rise to complex reactions, especially in the case of increasing machismo and homophobia, which are grounded in the diverse historical, cultural, religious, social and political backgrounds. What is at stake here is the process of black and white subcultures identifying with a 'rebel music', which could either contribute to their struggle for liberation or continue to oppress them. How do these subcultures re-articulate the same expressive forms in their own specific local context? What changes take place if the performer or the audience is black or white? Colonizer or colonized? Migrant or native? How does gender fit in this picture? I will answer these questions using feminist scholarship and postcolonial discourses, starting from my personal position as a white feminist woman who grew up being directly involved in Rome's reggae scene.

The way gender roles are performed in the dancehall 'yard' can be read in the light of the legacy of slavery, colonialism and diaspora. Therefore, to analyze how sexual conflicts are represented nowadays, and how they are still shaped by this imperial and colonial past, it is useful to go back to the flows of people, goods and records that have transported reggae music from the Caribbean to Europe, and thus to identify the gendered *topoi* and stereotypes played by reggae musicians and their followers. These gendered stereotypes induce powerful, recurring, and conventional models of behavior, usually experienced as rigidly fixed gendered roles. In order to be accepted and valued, people are expected to conform to such models of behavior, which cannot be questioned because they assure a collective sense of belonging to a common national identity.

### **It dread inna Ingran: reggae music from Jamaica to Babylon system**

After the Second World War, a massive emigration began from the British Caribbean to the UK. Jamaican poet Louise Bennett comments on this exodus by stating that Jamaican people are 'colonizin/Englan in Reverse'; since every poor Jamaican's future plan is to 'get a big-time job/An settle in de mother lan', thus 'Man an woman, old an young/just pack dem bag an baggage/An turn history upside dung!' (1982, p. 106). The early immigration to the UK included mainly young men without job prospects and money, who were rejected and looked down upon by the British society because of their skin color. Furthermore, to make matters worse, these men, in order to survive, were not over-particular in their choices. As the Black Uhuru state, there is 'A very thin line to start the crime', thus 'The youth of Eglington/Won't put down their Remington', as well as 'the youth of Kingston', because 'They are responsible for a lot of children/And they need food/And they want to go to school'.<sup>2</sup> This song is the forerunner of the *topos* of the 'bad man', whose violence is justified because he is a 'victim' of the system. This is also the case in Buju Banton's *Circumstances* ('Was I born a violent man/Circumstances made me what I am') and in Beenie Man's *Bad Man* ('Bad man and dat is who I am/Bad man I hope you'll overstand/That circumstances made me who I am').

One of the most significant items packed in the suitcases of the Jamaicans who ventured into the 'Babylon system', i.e. the corruption of the white consumerist society, was their music. They took reggae to the US, Canada and Britain, opening the way for its incorporation into the global economy of the multinational entertainment industry. Jamaican emigration had ensured a major market to the island's music: the musical tastes of immigrants provided an impetus for the development of its recording industry, insofar as by the 1950s records were produced with export principally in mind. Soon British Jamaicans turned to recording music themselves and playing for multiracial audiences. The sound systems were their main means of maintaining a link with the motherland, though their music came out filtered through its exposure to a new culture. Actually, sound systems are the easiest way to make music, whenever a few friends get together in a yard: all you need is a box of records to scratch and big and powerful speakers to spread your off-beat sound.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the reasons why sound systems became so popular in Italy, several years later.

The emergence of new subcultures in Britain, at the end of the 1960s, has been interpreted as the response given by the white youth to the presence of a black community.<sup>4</sup> In this scene Dandy Livingston, a Jamaican singer who emigrated to

England in 1959, recorded a popular song that will become a skinhead favorite, *Rudy, A Message To You*,<sup>5</sup> where the figure of the 'rude boy' made its first appearance. This archetype of rebellion will pave the way for the role model of the 'bad man' with a gun, who will 'shoot the batty boy'<sup>6</sup> during the 1990s, provoking an international debate between the advocates of singers' freedom of speech and Jamaicans' cultural sovereignty on one hand, and the defenders of human rights on the other (Oumano, 2005). This archetype, which embodies the antagonist of the sheriff (that Bob Marley wanted to shoot), also is one of the elements which contributes to the involvement of white European youth with reggae music. Reggae music is thus perceived as asking for equal rights and justice, assuring that it is possible not to conform to the Babylon system, and pushes for one's emancipation from mental slavery. Reggae voices the global ghetto youth's claim for redemption and amplifies their local practices of resistance against the system. It possesses the unique ability to cross the color line and to connect all the oppressed people on the two sides of the Atlantic, whether black or white.

Moreover, the explosion of sound system culture in Italy was marked by a strong militant and political stance, since it arose simultaneously with the Posse movement<sup>7</sup> in occupied and self-organized social centers (at the end of the 1980s), on the one hand, and the student protest against the privatization of the university, which took place in 1990 and carried the name of 'Pantera', on the other. To build one's own sound system meant to create a space, the dancehall yard, that operated purposefully outside of the rules set up by the entertainment industry and outside of the 'slavery' of paid work in a capitalist society. The dancehall yard was thus a space where one could be free and express oneself without a stage separating the performer from the audience. There was no need to invent a similitude between Jamaican reggae and the Italian popular tradition, because this similitude already existed. Especially in Southern Italy, perceived as part of the global South, as is Jamaica, there was a similar musical attitude, the same ability to face social problems (such as internal migration, exploitation, unemployment and political corruption), and it was common to use the regional dialects.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, in Jamaica, Rastafarianism<sup>9</sup> and homophobia re-emerged as a consequence of what was perceived as a misappropriation of an exclusively ethnic Jamaican style, by white people who, unlike British youth, had not yet faced an immigrant community, nor a black subculture in their own country.

During the 1960s, much of the UK's reggae output was less accomplished than the Jamaican 'originals'. Only by the 1970s, talented musicians and singers emerged from the expatriate communities in all UK cities with sizeable migrant presence. These diasporic subjects formed strong and self-contained bands, more in line with the established conventions of youth music in Britain, whose records were quite different from those recorded in Kingston, Jamaica. These UK reggae bands found it easier, compared with singers recording with session musicians, to earn money playing live, boosted by the crossover success of Marley. This meant a move from community halls in migrant areas to student union venues and support slots at large capacity halls. These bands were equipped with their own instruments and were used to playing in front of a variety of audiences, ranging from dreadlocks to white university students. One of the results of working as a band was the development of sounds different from the Jamaican model. Moreover, these musicians had a different generation of black youth as their audience, namely largely second generation

immigrants, as well as a real ideology, Rastafarianism, that gave them and their followers a new self-affirming identity.

Conversely, Rastafarianism prevented women's participation in social and political life and their achievements in the musical scene. Notably, the traditional Rastafarian beliefs impose many restrictions on women's behavior: during the menstrual cycle they are segregated, forbidden to cook and not allowed to participate in public meetings because they are considered impure; women's bodies need to be covered, as well as their heads, as they are not supposed to seduce men; they are supposed to serve their brothers, husbands and children, and to engage in sex only for the purpose of reproduction. Any other sexual practice, such as oral or anal sex, is forbidden, and homosexual relations are considered unnatural. Undoubtedly, the Rastafarian movement does not allow the empowerment of women, lesbians and gays. The reason behind this may be the following:

The Rastafari beliefs regarding the female are clearly based on the Bible and fall in line with the premise that Rastafari is a patriarchal movement. The Rastafarian 'Reasonings', the traditional way of sharing information, cementing views or interpreting the Bible, take place primarily among the males. (Barrett, 1997, pp. 241–242)

Given these premises, the lack or marginalization of women's voices in reggae music both in Jamaica and in the diaspora should not come as a surprise, nor should the homophobic attitude of the scene, even though it is expressed, or hidden, in different ways, according to the context of its production. A few exceptions to this rule exist which will be mentioned later, in order to better understand the contradictions at stake in the contemporary scene.

The imagery of Rastafarianism meant something different to the second generation of black British. The sense of belonging to an African diaspora expressed in lyrics inspired by Marcus Garvey's words, like 'It's repatriation/black liberation', was felt as a sense of belonging to a Jamaican diaspora.<sup>10</sup> While some British-born youth shared the ideal of Africa as their spiritual homeland, many others dreamed of returning to a Jamaica known only through their parents' memories, or through reggae records. Around this time, increasing numbers of UK black youth were beginning to style their hair in dreadlocks, and the image of the dreadlocked Rastaman entered decisively into popular iconography. Just as the afro was a declaration of Africa-ness to African Americans, dreadlocks were a strategy of resistance for those who have always been taught by the colonizers to deny their African roots and the legacy of slavery. Only in recent years, dreadlocks have become so fashionable that in 1999 the reggae band Morgan Heritage claimed that 'You don't haffi dread to be Rasta', in order to show that one does not need dreadlocks or other superficial trappings to demonstrate one's spiritual commitment.

At the end of the 1970s the 'dread youth' became the icon of the black British who 'stan firm inna Ingran', the black British who 'are here to stay', as in Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ)'s poem *It Dread Inna Ingran* (Johnson, 1975).<sup>11</sup> But 'dread' is also the adjective chosen by LKJ to describe their music, namely as 'a dread beat pulsing fire, burning' and white people's fear of bloody rebellions resulting in the consciousness rising of an entire generation. While the UK was still struggling with its postcolonial role in the world and while its society was fighting to accept that those who were considered cheap colonial labor had now become members of the

UK society, the Notting Hill riots of 1976 reflected the inability of the government to realize that society had changed. This historical moment is portrayed in LKJ's first album, *Dread Beat and Blood* (1977), which reveals the reality of everyday-life of young black Jamaicans in Britain during the 1970s, anticipating the bloody rebellions of the 1980s. In the poem *Yout rebels*, LKJ describe them as 'a brand *new breed* of blacks', who say 'to capital neva/moving forwud hevva' (Johnson, 1975, emphasis added). They are 'new in age/but not in rage'. They do not need the counseling of 'sage in chain', because they are 'new shapes/shapin/new patterns/creatin new links'. They are carving 'a new path./moving forwud to freedom'. With these lines LKJ anticipates what Hanif Kureishi will write in *The Buddha of Suburbia* about Karim Amir, describing him as 'a funny kind of Englishman, a *new breed* as it were, having emerged from two old histories' (p. 3), and what Zadie Smith will write in *White Teeth* about the 'Raggastani': 'It was a *new breed*, just recently joining the ranks of the other street crews' (p. 192). After the failure of many attempts by expatriate communities to create an original sound, LKJ was probably the first Jamaican artist to take existing traditions and successfully transplant them to another country, creating new expressive forms and inventing a new genre called dub poetry, which according to LKJ 'is a deconstructive art' (Ludes, 1998).

I suggest that dub poetry was created by LKJ in order to represent, both through music and language, the emergence of a new notion of subjectivity as a result of immigration: it is a means to deconstruct English national identity through the representation of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Now, for the first time, colonizer and colonized have to face one another not in the colony but in the space of the metropolis, belying the colonial assumption that postcolonialism is concerned only with the margin and not with the centre of the empire. One meaningful novelty is the use of the language spoken by black Caribbean immigrants in London, which, for the first time, was put in print. It has been defined by others as 'London-Jamaican patois' but LKJ refuses this definition: 'Patois is a term which really refers to broken French . . . The language I'm writing is mostly Jamaican'. The term 'patois' suggests that Jamaican is a broken and subaltern version of the Standard English, while LKJ's claim for a 'national language' is a strategy of cultural resistance against colonial mentality (such as the use of black English by African American rappers, and the use of regional dialects in Italian raggamuffin), in order to deprive the language spoken by the master of its supremacy.

A few years later, in 1982, a second-generation singer called Ranking Ann clearly asserts her identity as the result of the mixture of her multiplex roots (Jamaican, British and African) through the legacy of slavery and diaspora. She claims 'Mi seh don't call me no English gal/Just call me by name', because 'Mi seh mi mama an mi papa seh dem born in Jamaica/Gimme roots'n'culture seh dem gone inna Africa', and thus 'Mi seh mi born inna Englan/But mi feel like a true born Jamaican'.<sup>12</sup> In spite of her demand not to be defined as an 'English gal', Ranking Ann titles this song (and the entire LP) *A Slice of English Toast*, assuring a continuity between the Jamaican tradition of 'toasting', the act of chatting on the microphone over the records' instrumental versions, and the English habit to eat toasted bread, which are both everyday gestures in the two different cultures. It is significant that 'toasting', the art of Jamaican 'deejaying', is similar to the 'MCing' in US rap, and that in reggae music the one who chooses which record to play next is not called 'deejay', but 'selector'. The record-sleeve of *A Slice of English Toast* portrays a black woman slicing a loaf of

bread which is in fact a vinyl cylinder, so that the bread slices are revealed to be several records that her son is putting inside the ‘toaster’, which is also the Jamaican definition for deejay, while the act of slicing bread coincides with the act of ‘cutting’ records (to view this record sleeve, please visit <http://www.strictly-vibes.com/ranking-ann-a-slice-of-english-toast-1982-vt1049.html>). Thus, once again, Ranking Ann is a ‘new breed’. She is neither British, nor Jamaican, but a new combination of both: she is the ‘English toaster’ that will dominate UK reggae during the 1980s. If the lyrics seem to recall an essentialist conception of ethnic identity, the meta-textual discourse introduced by the record-sleeve suggests the attempt to give a ‘more pluralistic, post-colonial sense of British culture and national identity’, connecting blackness and Englishness which usually appeared to be ‘mutually exclusive attributes’ and asserting the ‘internality’ of black people to postcolonial Europe (Gilroy, 1993, pp. 10–11).

During the 1980s, Birmingham’s lively multiracial culture produced an explosion of talents which demonstrated vitality and invention similar to their counterparts in Kingston, such as deejays Pato Banton and Macka B. The latter was also highly popular in Italy, due to his conscious lyrics against racism and apartheid, his sharp criticism of the Thatcher government, and his ironical claim for black pride. In the early 1990s, a Birmingham-born singer of Asian origins, Apache Indian, started to combine raggamuffin style with *bhangra*<sup>13</sup> music, climbing the UK pop charts. Carolyn Cooper’s article (2004, pp. 251–277) about the coming of ‘Rajamuffin Sounds’ is an interesting analysis of Apache Indian’s ability of mixing ‘the Indian [language] with all the Patwa’, that clearly prefigures how the musical forms originated by black people are no longer their ‘exclusive property’, as in the case of the appropriation of sound system’s culture by white Italian youth (Gilroy, 1993, p. 3).

During the second half of the 1980s, UK reggae also started a new roots and dub revival scene, which is still alive today, with small following in Jamaica. Both black and white followers of roots reggae will start to form their own sound systems and to produce their own rhythms. It is not accidental that these new roots sounds have focused more on instrumental excursions than on vocal acrobatics, ‘because of the understandable reluctance of these musicians, far removed from the Kingston ghettos, to sing about *slavery days*’ (Barrow & Dalton, 1997, p. 356).<sup>14</sup>

### ‘Mothers of the nation’, ‘bitches’, or neither of the two?

Although women are the main topic in reggae music, at least in dancehall songs, the perspective is usually predominantly male (and sexist) even if the one who speaks is a woman. Dawn Penn (a Jamaican singer now living in London) states that ‘It’s a male dominated business!’, complaining that in reggae music there are only a few female artists (Women in Reggae, 2005). In fact, at least until the explosion of the ‘dancehall queens’ in the early 1990s, the role of women has always been misrepresented and undervalued in the history of reggae music, with female voices consigned to the status of one-offs, or relegated in the position of backing vocals for their male counterparts. Even though gender relationships have always been the core of reggae music, usually the lyrics provide a male-oriented point of view, reflecting the inequalities that affect the everyday lives of Jamaican women, and never questioning the universal norms of patriarchal authority and compulsory heterosexuality. Did women have a role in the building of the national identity of an island dominated by



four hundred years of slavery and colonization? Have they ever gained access, as subjects, to the place of enunciation? Or will they always remain objects in a male representation of gender relations? How does homosexuality fit in this picture? And how do gender relations change when reggae music moves from this little Caribbean island to the dancehall yards in Europe? Would we find any difference in dealing with gender roles when reggae music shifts from Jamaica to the Babylon system?

In order to answer these questions, I will go back to the days of slavery in Jamaica, and to the rise of Rastafarianism as a strategy of resistance against racism and colonialism as this history still permeates beliefs and attitudes both of reggae performers and audiences today, both in Jamaica and Europe.

The only woman who has been awarded the Jamaican 'Order of National Hero' for having challenged the institutions of colonialism, thereby changing the course of Jamaica's history from slavery to emancipation is Nanny of the Maroons.<sup>15</sup> Immortalized in several popular songs, she was a political organizer and military leader of the Maroons at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Defeating the British colonizers in numerous battles, she possessed that fierce fighting spirit generally associated with the courage of men. Paradoxically enough, she was known as the 'mother of the people', but she has also been referred to as one of the 'founding fathers' of the nation (both in Stone, n.d., and in Meyler, n.d.). Even though a disagreement exists about the gendering of the Jamaican homeland, Nanny's legend inaugurates an absolute sense of ethnic difference, maximized through other female figures in order to distinguish people from one another, and to construct the nation as an ethnically homogeneous object.

Another woman who had a strong impact on Jamaican culture is Haile Selassie's wife; Empress Menem, also known as Queen Omega, is still considered a role model to many Rastafarian women. The name 'Queen Omega' means 'mother of creation' and suggests that Rasta women deserve respect from Rasta men, since they are told to treat women as they would treat Queen Omega. The traditional formula 'I and I' is often referred to 'the Alpha and the Omega' as well, meaning that god is 'in all men' (sic) and implying that no one is better than anyone else, because both persons are united under the love of Jah (God). Nevertheless, this is still a controversial issue because, in traditional Rastafarian belief, women are always equal *but* subaltern to men. Moreover, the figuration of the 'mother of creation' is crucial and widespread in a large number of songs, both in Jamaica and in the diaspora, where female subjectivity is always identified with motherhood (or with the act of giving birth to a gender neutral, that is to say, male subject) and the motherland: whether it is identified with the African land which has given birth to all humanity (as in Garnett Silk's *Mama Africa*), or with the Jamaican land in search for its national identity after the independence (as in Anthony B's *Woman Of The Nation*), or with one woman in flesh and blood (as in Macka B's *Respect Our Mothers*).

One of the first women within Jamaican reggae who wrote and produced her own songs was Judy Mowatt, who worked with Marcia Griffith and Rita Marley to form the I-Threes. They sang backing vocals for Marley's Wailers on their tours, but were able to step out of Marley's shadow, getting a solo career after his death. In 1978 Judy Mowatt produced *Black Woman*, and in 1982 she asked 'Why treat us inhuman/Just because we're only woman?', stating that 'We're not weak/We are strong'. She complained that 'We've been held back/For too long', claiming 'Open the door and let us through', because 'We've got our God-given talents just like you'.<sup>16</sup> Afterwards,

other talented women asserted themselves on the reggae scene. Sister Nancy's, *Bam Bam* is an answer to all the men who have questioned her place in the dancehall: 'One thing Nancy cyaan understan/wha' dem a ask me 'bout mi ambishan? . . . I'm a lady, I'm not a man/MC is my ambishan'.<sup>17</sup> Lady G's warning in *Nuff Respect* – 'Nuh carry mi name/Nuh spread no rumours/Show me nuff respect' – was known word-for-word by all the female dancehall fans.<sup>18</sup>

Sister Carol was another woman who found a way to escape from Kingston ghetto, establishing her place in the dancehall. She is also known as 'Mother Nature' because of the homonymous song in which she introduces herself as 'Mother Culture pon the mic', saying they call her the 'DeeJay Mammie', not only because 'she is dynamite', but also because she 'graduated as a school teacher/to teach the Africans about their culture'. According to Sister Carol, the role of the Rasta Girl is 'to emphasize the reality of our feministic side and how important it is in terms of the whole *creation of civilization and motherhood* and all that comes with it', because '*all men came through the womb*' and 'if you disrespect me, and you keep on disrespecting *Mother Africa, Mother Nature, the mother of the universe*'.<sup>19</sup>

Sister Carol's statements about women into Rastafarian beliefs still resonate several years later in Anthony B's *Woman of the Nation* as 'Oh dis the woman of di nation/mother of civilization' where the Jamaican singer ascribes women the role of building the national identity and preserving its culture and traditions. And they still resound over the ocean, when we move to reggae music in the diaspora. As a matter of fact, one of the songs usually played by the sound systems in Rome during the Pantera movement, particularly appreciated by the female audience, was Macka B's invitation to 'Respect to the mothers/Respect to all the mothers in every country and town', with its powerful and incessantly repeated refrain: 'Ma-ma ma-ma ma/A so we love you/Ma-ma ma-ma ma/A so we love you'. Here he states that 'We must remember Africa/ Because she is the mother of civilization/She is the mother of nature'.<sup>20</sup> Even when he addresses male violence against women, he asserts 'Don't bother beat, don't bother beat/Don't bother beat *your* woman', as if woman was only a male's property.<sup>21</sup>

The only exception to this rule seems to be Ranking Ann who probably offers the strongest assertion of womanliness in the history of reggae music, namely in *Liberated Woman* ('I am a liberated woman/You can no control mi life/I'm free like a bird inna di air') and in *Feminine Gender* ('Remember all them always try fi keep we under/And treat we like we are stupid and inferior/But no! me come fi tell ya we are superior') even though she explicitly refuses to be called 'feminist':

Let me tell you something, when happened to me/Seh one friday night, me inna party/  
Seh here come a dread/Him a walk up to me/Hear Ranking Ann, tell me dis: is it true  
what them say, that you are feminist?/Me seh no Rasta/Me are individualist/Seh open  
your eyes and you must realize/You can't come and try fe categorize/When you call me  
'feminist', me know where you mean/The thing that you want do is a different kind of  
sin/Seh god create woman/And god create man/And inna this time they have their  
function/So I don't put them down/So don't get me wrong/It's just feminine, a feminine,  
seh feminine gender-genda/Mi seh we no go surrender-renda.<sup>22</sup>

This song is an interesting response to the male chauvinism widespread in the dancehall yards, where a woman acting independently is considered synonymous to a 'male-basher', while the term 'feminist' is a simple way to dismiss a woman who

refuses to make herself available to male advances. Even if it cannot be considered an explicit feminist claim, it is still certainly an unprecedented statement of women pride.

Back in Jamaica in 1996, Marcia Griffiths and Lady G recorded the single *Woman*, which was dedicated to all the women 'who are fighting' for freedom, women 'who are struggling' in a 'world of discrimination', women 'who are lawyers ... doctors ... teachers' or women 'who are ignorant', and women who are 'stronger then a roaring lion'. But, beginning from the intro, Lady G tells us that 'with a woman's help/a man can move mountains', and once again, when Marcia Griffiths starts singing the refrain, women are represented as 'mothers of the greatest nation/teachers of the young generation'.<sup>23</sup> Also in this case, women represent themselves as subaltern to a male subject. Subsequently, women continue to embody the same old stereotypes: both as mothers, in charge of passing down the national language and traditions, and as symbols of the nation, in charge of defining the borders of Jamaican national culture after the independence from the British Empire.

Apart from a few exceptions, gender relationships represented in reggae music are always grounded on a 'colonial mentality' which reflects the master/slave paradigm, whether in Jamaica or in Europe, whether the singer is male or female. Masculinity is overemphasized through the stereotype of the 'bad man' who wants to shoot the 'batty boy' and functions as a response to the colonial strategy of feminizing the colonized men in order to dominate them. Alternately, women are confined to the role of mothers and wives in charge of embodying the national language and traditions in opposition to the colonizing country. If they transgress this role they are considered 'bitches'. Furthermore, continuing to confine women to roles which always position them in a hierarchical relation to men, without putting into question compulsory heterosexuality, the stereotype of the 'mother of creation' is to the sex-gender system as the 'house nigger' is to the economy of the plantation: it does not reverse the power relationships inscribed in this system but rather contributes to its nourishment and preservation.

According to bell hooks, contemporary cinema continues to divide black women into two categories: 'mammies' or 'hot bitches' and, from time to time, a combination of both (hooks, 1992, chap. 4). And what about popular music? Can we recognize the same stereotypes? After having focused on the 'mammies' it is time to look for the 'bitches'. According to LKJ, 'Inglan is a bitch/dere's no escapin it'.<sup>24</sup> In his classic about the difficulties incurred by the first generation of Jamaican immigrants entering the British labor market, the poet uses a sexist derogatory term to define the colonizing nation. In doing so he reverses the gendered and parental rhetoric of colonial rule, consisting of a 'maternal model of caring for the welfare of indigenous people' and a 'paternalistic model of the rigorous disciplining of native children', both used as a strategy to infantilize and feminize the colonized in order to dominate them (Gouda, 2001, p. 11). To justify and perpetuate their imperialism, Europeans had always 'emasculated' the colonized men, who consequently responded by mimicking and enhancing the manly prerogatives generally associated with the masters. Just as 'the liberation of Indian men from European imperialism demanded a process of mimicking, even enhancing, those aspects of the "self" they could share with their masters' (Gouda, 2001, p. 10), the Jamaican tradition of toasting has always focused on the glorification of the 'big bamboo', overemphasizing the virility of the male performer on the stage. This representation of hyper-masculinity is completely in line with the representation of women as sexual objects, so that Macka B simply had to state that 'Woman is not a sex machine/Woman is a

human being'.<sup>25</sup> When male singers celebrate femininity, they are expected to identify gender and ethnicity, as well as their own control of women's bodies with the possession of the land, so that women's role is to assure the preservation of racial/national identity. This is the reason for the controversy raised in 1992 by Buju Banton's *Love Me Browning*, in which the Jamaican singer expressed his preference for light-skinned women. After the audience accused him of denigrating the beauty of black women and promoting a colonialist attitude, he answered by releasing *Love Black Woman*, where he sings: 'Mi nuh Stop cry/Fi all black women/Respect all the girls dem with dark complexion'.<sup>26</sup>

What happens when the woman is the one who consciously acts and performs as a 'bitch'? Jamaican singer Lady Saw usually sings sexually explicit lyrics with her hand touching her vagina, or straddling one of her male fans. She has always been criticized for the 'slackness' of her language and gestures, but I would suggest that we should interpret her use of the body on the stage as a way to ironically mime the hyper-masculinity of her male counterparts, reversing it in a celebration of hyper-femininity, or in a 'female fertility ritual' (Cooper, 2004, chap. 3). Lady Saw's performance of the erotic has no equivalent in European reggae music where the performers are predominantly male, and the audience seems to accept uncritically everything that comes from the island, except for its open eroticism. Usually her performances make white European audiences uneasy. Nonetheless, it is a strong assertion of the life-force of women 'in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society', where women have always been taught to suppress the erotic because it is a profoundly creative source (Lorde, 1984, p. 59). Furthermore, the way male singers perform their masculinity on the stage, that is through their own use of the erotic, usually assumes women only as objects of male desire and 'use without consent of the used is abuse' while Lady Saw's performances seem to 'share the power of each other's feelings', that 'is different from using another's feelings as we would use a Kleenex' (Lorde, 1984, p. 58).

### The 'bad man' and the 'batty boy' in the debate on homophobia

The nationalist ideology expressed in reggae attributes to women specific functions: mothers, reproducing the nation's population; keepers of traditional culture; and symbols of the nation to be protected (Hill Collins, 2006, p. 17). Additionally, this ideology also provides a role model for masculinity: men are supposed to defend the nation as well as their own families, consisting of heterosexual couples who produce their own biological children. In this scene, the existence of homosexuality challenges the entire system of race, gender, nationality and heterosexism, which popular music is supposed to reproduce and support.

An apparent distinction between Jamaican reggae and its diasporic expressive forms emerged only recently, owing to the explosion of the controversy over homophobia, starting with Buju Banton's release of *Boom Bye Bye* in 1993, and renewing with his charge of beating a gay man in 2004. In this song the Jamaican singer incited to kill homosexuals with a gun shot ('boom bye bye on a batty boy head'), voicing the homophobic attitude widespread in Jamaican society, where homosexuality is considered a legal crime. According to the Jamaican 'Offences Against the Person Act', male homosexuality can be punished with 10 years of hard labor. In fact, this law, which had given rise to protests, petitions and campaigns by

several international organizations for human and LGBTIQ rights, is the inheritance of Victorian domination of its church, Bible and sodomy laws. Now that these Western organizations are pushing the Jamaican government to change the law, their pressure is perceived as a the umpteenth imperialist intervention against the island's cultural sovereignty, as if they are pretending once again, to take on 'the white man's burden', to civilize a Third World country incapable of self-determination.

To understand how sexual relations are represented in reggae music today, it is necessary to recognize the 'two cultures' that 'were boiling in the Caribbean' during the days of slavery. One culture was carried out by imposing Christian religion on black slaves, evoking the fire of Sodom and Gomorra, and it was 'one of domination and subjugation'. Another culture, Rastafarianism, was 'a culture of resistance', developing from African roots and from the refusal of Western values, paradoxically identified with another biblical image, the Babylonian inhabitants as the representation of absolute evil and immorality (Campbell, 1985, p. 19). Even if Jamaican culture and music cannot be entirely identified with Rastafarianism, reggae lyrics have always been informed by biblical language and Rastafarian faith. Since contemporary stars of Jamaican reggae, such as Sizzla and Capleton, are mostly Rastafarians who invoke the biblical fire to 'burn' all homosexuals, I would argue that Rastafarianism, initially arising as a strategy of resistance against colonialism, revealed itself to be a fundamentalist religion, which continues to oppress through enslavement rather than freeing minds. Using the Bible, i.e. that which has often been used as one of the many tools of colonial power, could allow the Rastaman to temporarily beat the master at his own game, but could not enable him to bring about a genuine change, 'for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 1984, p. 112).<sup>27</sup> However, some reggae singers do support secularism and do not want to be identified with Rastafarianism. For instance, LKJ states that he is not a Rasta, even if he considers Rastafarianism as 'an important antidote to four hundred years of colonial brainwashing which made a lot of black people feel inferior about their blackness', as when 'wi can't face reality', 'some get vision/start preach relijan' and 'shout 'bout sin/instead a fite fi win'.<sup>28</sup>

Reggae musicians used the stereotype of the 'bad man' from the ghetto to nourish the cult of virility and affirm the superiority of the black male. According to Public Enemy's leader Chuck D, 'black men cannot afford themselves to be queer', for 'by now there are already many things pushing us back', and children need a paternal figure, since if they 'don't learn to respect the male, they will never respect anyone' (cited in Adinolfi, 1989, p. 120). Black men regaining virility was interpreted by Malcolm X (1983, p. 300) as the first step to revenge the historical castration they suffered during slavery, while Angela Davis (1983, pp. 7–8) points out that black men felt unable to defend black women from the rapist master, having serious doubts about their own oppositional capacity. These beliefs, rooted in the experience of the plantation system, where sexuality was subordinated to the reproduction of the slave population, have converged in reggae music, making way for its increasing machismo and homophobia. Only one Jamaican singer was able to challenge the colonial assumption that black sexuality must be based solely on 'power relationships which mirror master/slave paradigms' (as wished by bell hooks, 1992, p. 74), releasing a song that unequivocally takes the side against homophobia.<sup>29</sup> Actually, Tanya Stephens compares the bushings undergone by gays in Jamaica with the KKK's

hangings of black people, demonstrating that racism and compulsory heterosexuality are two systems of power which reinforce and support each other.

When European reggae followers realized how much brutality came from their icons' mouths, supposed to spread positive vibes, it was too late. Scotland Yard already held an inquiry about homophobic singers, Outrage had launched the 'Stop Murder Music' campaign, and international protests provoked the cancellations of several concerts (in Europe and in the US), the denial of visas to some Jamaican artists supposed to perform in Europe, their exclusion from the Mobo Awards and their censorship from the iTunes catalogue.

Even if anti-gay lyrics are the easiest way to ensure an enthusiastic approval from a Jamaican audience, one could argue that inciting to kill gays in white postcolonial Europe is not acceptable. But this would only reproduce a racial and cultural binary: the fiction of Europe as the cradle of civilization and human rights still perpetuates old and new power relations. Even if European reggae followers state they are not homophobic, they are content with very little: if the singer adapts his repertory to the European audience, cutting the controversial lyrics for one night only, they will continue to buy his records. Moreover, reggae followers continue to justify their heroes because of colonial exploitation (that is to say, they cannot overcome their prejudices, because they are not 'civilized' enough), or they refuse to face the issue directly because Jamaican language is so difficult to understand. As Oumano commented: 'why pay mind to the words when the riddim and the vibe sweet yuh so?' (2005).

In 2007 I was involved in organizing a concert to celebrate Radio OndaRossa 30th anniversary, where Top Cat was expected to perform. After discovering that in 1994 he released a song titled *Shot A Batty Boy*, we asked him to clarify his stance on this matter. He answered:

In some countries to kill a cow is normal in some it is sacrilegious. I am from a West Indian family and have been brought up predominantly with a West Indian philosophy. I have also grown up in the UK which has different philosophies. As a straight individual and one of West Indian heritage, homosexuality isn't accepted and is personally offensive, but as someone who also believes in Equal Opportunities and tolerance I don't condone violence to any group. That song was recorded in my youthful days and was in defence of my friend Buju Banton who was being attacked by the Gay Rights Movement ... Don't force your beliefs on me and I won't force my beliefs on you. (Top Cat, personal communication, 16 May 2007)

After this statement of 'cultural relativism', the concert was cancelled, since the same Radio had just promoted a national campaign to boycott homophobic reggae, together with several social centers and activists from the LGBTIQ movement, and wanted to be consistent with its position.<sup>30</sup> But this decision drew criticism from many reggae followers, who perceived this political choice as a form of censorship. Only one Italian reggae band, Radici nel Cemento, supported the campaign, afterwards releasing a song titled *Siamo tutti omosessuali* (We are all homosexuals), where they condemn homophobic prejudice, reminding us that the celebration of 'Italian virility' was a legacy of the Fascist Empire.

But my point is that homophobia is not only confined to right-wing mentality: it also affects Italian left-wing activists, which usually accept uncritically the macho and aggressive attitude of rappers and reggae singers. This is because the 'bad man' from the ghetto has become a role model for social movement activists, who has

never questioned his own machismo and homophobia (Marcasciano, 2007, p. 102). Since the 'bad man' belongs to the working class, he is a revolutionary, so we are all supposed to feel solidarity with him and we must accept him as he is, without any critical reflection, even when he preaches to 'shoot a batty boy'.

Despite the fact that European reggae followers cannot hide behind the shadows of colonialism (since they have been colonizers, rather than colonized, even though they easily identify with Kingston's ghetto youth), and the fact that social centers are supposed to be spaces where people are free to express themselves regardless of their gender or sexual preferences, there is still no consciousness about the power of words. Bob Marley used to say that one good thing about reggae music is that when it hits you, you feel no pain. But what happens if a gay man or a lesbian enters a dancehall yard? Most likely, they will not feel comfortable in that space. Moreover, no activist of the radical left promoting reggae in occupied social centers, nor any reggae follower in Italy, could easily assert to be exempt from sexism and homophobia, since both permeate Italian popular culture. This culture is still informed by the Catholic Church, which like Rastafarianism, considers homosexuality unnatural and gays or lesbians as sinners. Contemporary reggae music in Italy, which for years has been the soundtrack of political demonstrations, now shows all its limits: neither promoters nor consumers mind the message it sends out, they are not interested in experimenting, transforming and desiring; they limit themselves to aping Jamaican attitudes and behaviors, thus reducing this musical form to another product to market for Western consumption. 'Jamaican style is so exotic, and so cool...'

When reggae music emerged in Italy, it was perceived as a form of 'exodus' from capitalism, from the careerism and the competition typical of the musical market, as a way to create new aesthetic forms and to build a new sense of collective belonging. In this sense the Italian reggae scene possessed all the features of a real 'counter-culture': an explicit political and ideological opposition to the dominant culture, an attempt at building alternative 'institutions' (occupied and self-organized social spaces, underground reviews, record labels, distributions and cooperatives), and an ability to blur the distinction between work and spare time (Hebdige, 1979, p. 148). Now that this countercultural phase is over, and reggae has gone mainstream by becoming a potential business opportunity for a few people, it is apparent that the Italian reggae audience has always identified with a musical genre and a particular lifestyle, without confronting the material and historical conditions of its production. Essentially, this is how 'commodity fetishism' works (Huggan, 2001, p. 19). In this process of identification and mimesis, of appropriation, exchange and consumption, reggae audiences and promoters can sing antiracist lyrics, without addressing their own racism; they can sing antifascist songs, without defining themselves as antifascists; they can say they are not sexist, while playing sexist and homophobic records. While Jamaican labels release records aimed at them, available and palatable for their target, because the homophobic lyrics (that won't be 'acceptable') have been censored, the majority of white European followers can freely consume this 'exotic product' with a superficial attitude, rather than a critical comprehension thereof. Through adapting a particular aesthetic form to their own specific experience, they would have been able to transform themselves from consumers into producers of their own subjectivity. On the contrary, instead of gaining access to another culture, they only reify people and cultures into exchangeable aesthetic objects. But this 'exotic product' still has much to reveal about its own consumers. At least, it tells us

that the recurrent statements of being antiracist, antifascist, and antisexist are nothing more than an empty *formula*. This *formula* doesn't make any sense, unless it leads those who pronounce it to practices which address and dismantle the power relations inscribed in the forms of oppression they are supposed to contrast.

## Notes

1. Macka B. (1990). Blackman. On *Natural Suntan* [LP]. London: Ariwa.
2. Black Uhuru. (1981). Youth of Eglinton. On *Red* [LP]. London: Mango.
3. See Franco Rosso (Director). (1980). *Babylon* [Fiction]. UK: Diversity Music, National Film Finance Corporation, Chrysalis Group and Lee Electric (Lighting).
4. The shift from rocksteady to reggae, at the end of the 1960s, coincided with changes in the British youth culture, such as the emergence of mods, punks and skinheads. According to Hebdige, these subcultures represent the responses given by the white youth to the presence of a sizeable black community in England. It was mods and skinheads who embraced the sounds emerging from Kingston studios, with their appendix of ganja smoking, dreadlocks and calls for 'peace and love'. In the second half of the 1970s, some punk DJs played reggae records during their dj-sets, while *The Clash* incorporated reggae influences into their music (Hebdige, 1979, p. 74).
5. Dandy Livingston. (1967). *Rudy, A Message To You [7"]*. London: JB.
6. 'Batty boy' is the derogatory term for gay men (it is the Jamaican abbreviation of the word 'bottom' into 'batty').
7. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s (when students and workers squatted abandoned buildings to create sites that were autonomous from the influence of the state and the market place) the Italian Posse were the soundtrack of the social centers, addressing social problems and blending rap, reggae, and dub with the Italian traditional musical forms.
8. Sud Sound System. (1996). *Tradizione* [CD]. Lecce: Ritmo vitale. See the booklet.
9. Rastafarianism is both a religion and a movement of resistance, which developed in Jamaica in the 1930s, following the coronation of Haile Selassie as King of Ethiopia. Rastafarians believe that Haile Selassie is god, and that he will return to Africa members of the black community who are living in exile as the result of colonization and the slave trade. To explore the history and beliefs of the Rastafarians, see Barrett (1997). To investigate the way Rastafarianism comes to terms with the history of slavery and colonialism, the reality of white racism and the thrust for self-respect by black people, see Campbell (1985).
10. Fred Locks. (1975). Black Star Liners. On *Black Star Liner* [LP]. Kingston: Vulcan. Marcus Garvey, considered one of Jamaican National Heroes, promoted the idea that black people should migrate voluntarily to the promised land, Africa, to connect with their roots. Repatriation may be experienced as literal or physical, symbolic or cultural.
11. L.K.J. (1977). It Dread Inna Innglan. On *Dread Beat and Blood* [LP]. London: Island.
12. Ranking Ann. (1982). *A Slice of English Toast* [LP]. London: Ariwa.
13. *Bhangra* is a form of music and dance that originated in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan.
14. Burning Spear. (1975). Slavery Days. On *Marcus Garvey* [LP]. Kingston: Island.
15. The Maroons were runaway slaves left behind by the Spanish colonizers when the English captured Jamaica in 1655. They formed the independent communities in the hills which gave refuge to the runaway slaves during the uprisings in 1673 and 1685. These slaves carried out a system of guerrilla warfare, attacking the plantations at night, which 'undermined the whole system of slavery' (Campbell, 1985, chap. 1). To this day, the Jamaican Maroons are to a significant extent autonomous and separate from Jamaican society (Zips, 1999).
16. Judy Mowatt. (1982). Only a Woman. On *Only a Woman* [LP]. Newton, NJ: Shanachie.
17. Sister Nancy. (1982). Bam Bam. On *One Two* [LP]. Kingston: Techniques.
18. Lady G. (1989). *Nuff Respect* [12"]. New York, NY: Pow Wow Records.
19. *Ireggae.com interviews Sister Carol*, 1999 (Italics mine).



20. Macka B. (1989). Respect Our Mothers. On *Buppie Culture* [LP]. London: Ariwa.
21. Macka B. (1990). Don't Beat Her. On *Natural Suntan* [LP]. London: Ariwa.
22. Ranking Ann. (1982). Liberated Woman. On *A Slice of English Toast* [LP]. London: Ariwa. (1985). Feminine Gender. On *Feminine Gender* [LP] London: Ariwa.
23. Marcia Griffiths & Lady G. (1996). *Woman [7"]*. Kingston: Penthouse.
24. L.K.J. (1980). Inqlan is a Bitch. On *Bass Culture*. London: Island.
25. Macka B. (1999). Sex Machine. On *Roots & Culture*. London: Ariwa.
26. Buju Banton. (1992). *Love Me Browning [7"]*. Kingston: Penthouse. (1992). *Love Black Woman [7"]*. Kingston: Penthouse.
27. See also Gopaul, Lina [Producer] & Julien, Isaac [Director]. (1993). *The Darker Side of Black* [Documentary]. UK: Concord Media.
28. Classical reggae interviews *LKJ*, 1998. LKJ (1979). Reality Poem. On *Forces of Victory* [LP], London: Island.
29. Tanya Stephens. (2006). Do you still care. On *Rebelution* [CD]. New York, NY: VP.
30. See [http:// nonsoloreggae.noblogs.org](http://nonsoloreggae.noblogs.org)

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