"Babylon boys don't dance: music, meaning, and young men in Accra"

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November, 2006

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Master's degree in Anthropology.

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32531-5
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32531-5

Abstract

This thesis explores the landscape of popular music culture in Accra as it is experienced by a loosely interactive group of young self-identified rastafarians. The global pop-culture idiom born of the Jamaican socio-religious movement of rastafari allows these young Accrans to articulate self-concepts vis-à-vis very current trends in local and foreign youth cultures (such as hiphop), with reference to an ostensibly ageless collective identity. Questions of authenticity are made complex by the movement's weighty historical and political roots, its nuanced symbolic bonds with "local African culture", and the semiotic plasticity of its identifying practices. Ethnographic portions of this thesis are based on three months of fieldwork in Accra, during the summer of 2004. Key theoretical points are gleaned from a critical examination of early British Cultural Studies and its theoretical progeny, including the body of recent work tentatively dubbed "post-subcultural studies".

Cette étude décrit l'univers culturel de la musique populaire dans la capitale du Ghana, telle que vécue par un groupe aux interactions diffuses composé de jeunes s'identifiant comme rastafariens. L'idiome global né du mouvement socio-religieux rastafari en Jamaïque et entré depuis dans la culture populaire fournit un cadre à l'aide duquel ces jeunes d'Accra peuvent se situer en regard des tendances contemporaines locales et étrangère (comme le hip-hop) avec les references d'une identité collective ostensiblement sans âge. Les questions d'authenticité sont rendues complexes par les raciness historiques et politiques du mouvement rastafari, par ses liens symboliques nuancés avec l'Afrique et par la plasticité sémiotique de ses pratiques identitaires. Les parties ethnographiques de l'étude sont basées sur un terrain de trois mois effectué à Accra, au Ghana, pendant l'été 2004. Les appuis théoriques proviennent d'un examen critique des etudes culturelles britanniques et de leur progéniture théorique, incluant les travaux récents regroupés sous le vocable provisoire d'études "post-subculturelles".

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All photographs by Janice Kerfoot.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to my supervisor, Professor John Galaty, for his sound criticism and patience. I would also like to thank Professors Vin-Kim Nguyen and Kristin Norget for engaging me with important worlds of literature and providing valuable advice at key junctions.

Financial support was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, McGill University Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and the Centre for Society, Technology and Development.

To Allan Dawson, for his involvement in my first trip to Ghana, which led to the second. To Joseph Naabu for his immense generosity and assistance with practical matters upon my arrival in Accra. To my Ghana Mummy Julia, for making her home so comfortable, and for furrowing her brow when I was sick. To Jayne and all at Teaching Projects Abroad for advice and social support.

Meda ase and colossal respect to my informants, friends and brothers at the drum shops, the beaches, and anywhere that two or more were gathered in the name of big ideas and Star Beer. Special thanks to the friend who told me "everything is beautiful and nice". *Yes.*

To my parents for Christmases in Calgary, and to Steve for calling more than I do. To Justin Evans for meeting me at The Miami that one night. To Christine Lapierre for abstract translation and Hannah Askew for eleventh-hour proofreading. To Dorothy Geller for providing relationship counsel to my academic and civilian selves. To Colin Snowsell for assorted acts of heroism, both real and imaginary. To all band-mates, colleagues, scenesters and friends for wrestling with the quandaries of music and meaning, in my earshot and in my sightline, almost every day. Thank you.

Introduction

Relating Seriously to Style: a Study and its Setting

In the late spring of 2001, I took part in a six week undergraduate travel-study program with the University of Calgary. That was the first of my two excursions to Ghana, and it was then that I started mulling over the basis of this project. I like to imagine that the whole thing started with a tooled-leather goatskin handbag that I found at a shop in Bolgatanga, which is a small city in the Northern part of Ghana. The edges of the handbag were ornamented with zigzag designs like most of the goods in the shop, but stamped in the centre of the front panel was a familiar logo: a fat stylized checkmark – I've heard it called the "swoosh" – of the Nike corporation. The cock-eyed letters beneath the logo verified it, well, nearly: they spelled NiKER [sic]. I laughed impolitely at the misspelling, earning me the raised eyebrows of the artisan tending his shop. I asked if he'd made the bag. He had. So, why then, I asked, had he made it with that design? He looked at me impatiently; he thought he'd made his handbag self-explanatory: "It is Niker. This *says* Niker, here." In his accent, the word was *neek-eh*. I bought a little pocket-knife with a non-Niker leather sheath and left, but the handbag had made a post-modern joke that stuck with me; what better emblem of the plasticity of a sign's link to its "signified" could be found than a manufacturer's trademark stamped in earnest upon an object that was not only *not* made by that manufacturer, but was rather unlike anything that *would* be made by that manufacturer? This was no counterfeit gym bag or basketball sneaker, it was a handmade goatskin ladies' purse, fashioned in a style that I'd dare say would endorse any Western stereotype of "rustic third-world handicraft", thereby putting it in stark contrast to the sleek urban sport aesthetic that tends to be associated with Nike goods.

The swoosh had arrived in Bolgatanga with only half of its semiotic luggage. The ostensible purpose of a brand-name logo as a company's claim of responsibility for its own product was negated once by the nature of the object and again by the muddling of the company name. In American cities, Nike goods

(complete with swoosh), garnered significance within sports cultures and later hiphop culture (Judy 1999:9, Negus 2004: 535-7), resulting in a general popularity of those products in youth fashion, but only if they met the requirement of authenticity, which was based on an intact (legally mediated) union of product and corporate logo. On the goatskin purse, however, the swoosh was left to stand mostly for itself, implying stockpiles of cultural capital simply by its presence in lieu of innumerable possible alternatives, but betraying a selective amnesia of the history of that accumulation. After that, I noticed that the disembodied swoosh was really quite popular; I found it scrawled on the backs of minibuses, on the sides of kiosks, and, indeed, on t-shirts and items of athletic gear, sometimes backwards, once upside down.

Speaking with people I met in passing as I moved around Ghana in 2001, especially teenagers and twenty-somethings, fed my interest in the mobility of popular culture items across geographical distances, and the flexibility of their meanings. Conversation flowed easily and freely around celebrity performing artists, style objects, and genres of music. Here are some questions that were put to me by different people in different moments, paraphrased: would I let so-and-so's sister make my hair into rasta locks before I went home? Did I like the hiplife music on the radio? Could I see that so-and-so was into American hiphop – that he was a *yoyo* – from his clothes? Would I take a *kpanlogo* drum lesson? Did I know Celine Dion? Young men teased each other about looking like rap stars. Groups of teens burst out singing hit songs from the radio and laughed at one another's imitations.

These make marvellous vignettes: the NiKER purse and the episodes of pop culture small talk; incidental snapshots of the culture industry doing conspicuously convoluted things in the lives of some people I met on an initial trip around Ghana. Before returning in 2004, I formulated some more tangible questions from of the ideas alluded to in these vignettes, and, thanks to that return, those questions can now be handled with regard to somewhat less cursory experiences.

This thesis is, on one hand, about genres of popular music in Ghana which serve as idioms around which youth cultural formations[1] are organized. My interest is in how some young men in Accra construct and communicate worldviews and self-concepts by using music and the cultural forms that are tied to music as sites for the articulation of issues of ethnicity, local and international politics, spirituality, and generational consciousness.

This thesis is also, on the other hand, and partly by accident, an ethnography of a scene of young rastas in Accra[2]. Neil J. Savishinsky has researched the spread of the rastafarian movement in West Africa, drawing from fieldwork he conducted in Ghana and Senegambia in the late 1980s. He directed his attention to men who identified with an institutionalized rastafarianism that entailed communal living, churches of rastafarian-based syncretic religions, and maintaining affiliations with some overseeing rastafari federation based in Ethiopia or Jamaica. For these men, Savishinsky argues, the modes of appearance, dress, and speech that are particular to and characteristic of rastafarianism mainly served as

> ...external symbols of their inner commitment to the fundamental precepts of the [Rastafarian] faith, the 'higher consciousness' they have achieved as a result of their adherence to Rastafari, their alienation and self-imposed estrangement from the wider society and their solidarity with other Blacks throughout the globe who, driven by deep religious convictions and/or anticolonial fervour, have donned the mantle of Rastafari (1994:30).

A crude synopsis of the development of the "rastafarian faith" might be usefully started in the late 19th century, when a popular inclination towards 'Ethiopianism' was developing among the working classes of Jamaica; an inclination that was manifested in a number of influential publications professing

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[1] *Cultural formations* acts roughly as a looser replacement for terms like *community* to indicate some entity of individuals who are consciously associated with one another in possibly vague, non-localized ways (Bury 2003:270).

[2] Against the more common convention, I am electing to not capitalize rastafarianism and it's many derivatives. For present-day rastas, the religiosity and formality of the identity are optional; I feel it is therefore warranted to use a more versatile and casual grammar, taking academic mentions of "straightedge" (Williams 2006) and "skinhead" (Weinzierl & Muggleton 2003: 6) cultures as further proofs that capitalization of even relatively politically-charged movements is unnecessary (see Hebdige 1988:34 for an example of rastafari in the lower-case, which interestingly differs from both his earlier and later works).

the Biblical significance of Ethiopia (Simpson 1985: 286), which is mentioned in scripture as being the future origin of important rulers. One of Ethiopianism's most emphasized Biblical passages[3] was eventually taken as the slogan for the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which was founded by radical journalist and Jamaican nationalist Marcus Garvey in the early 1900s (Kebede & Knottnerus 1998: 502). Garvey further propagated the idea that an important leader would emerge from Ethiopia, and that this event would mark the beginning of the black diaspora's triumph over white oppression. When Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned the new Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, taking the name Haille Selassie upon his ascent (Chavannes 1994: 42), news and impressive photographs of his coronation spread around the world. Garvey-ite Jamaicans saw prophesy coming true, and out of this belief, the politically-charged religious sect that came to be known as Rastafarianism emerged, being influenced greatly by members spilling over from declining revivalist churches (King 2002:xv-xvii). The death of Haille Selassie has allowed less literal interpretations of certain beliefs to flourish, namely those to do with the repatriation of Africa, along with the predicted subjugation of blacks over whites. Since the 1950s, the movement has spread and fractured, being further complicated by the central position music, and accordingly, music industries, have come to occupy in the dissemination of rastafarian beliefs and styles.

Organized rastafarianisms roughly fitting what Savishinsky described continue to be practiced in Ghana, but the young men I knew live out their rastafari differently. See how Savishinsky contrasts his "serious-minded" rastas with another type:

> In a great many instances the appropriation of reggae/Rastafarian fashions represent the total extent to which young people in West Africa personally relate to Rastafari, especially those who are not connected to any of the local Rasta communities and as a result have no role models, overarching precepts and/or standards of behaviour to guide their actions and education in the faith. Throughout the region dreadlocks, Rasta colors and Dread Talk are frequently adopted by young men wishing to identify with this global, pan-African movement or subculture, many of whom possess little or no insight

[3] Psalms 68:31 "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." (quoted in Simpson 1985:286).

> into the deeper historical, religious, and socio-political aspects of Rastafarianism. Among these individuals, the stylistic elements and forms of expression associated with the Rastafari represent little more than another Western or transnational pop culture idiom that can be manipulated and employed to serve specific material ends like joining a reggae band, meeting women, interacting with young tourists and gaining the respect of one's peers that comes with the appearance of being trendy (Ibid.: 29-30).

Well, that does sound rather more like the scene I am familiar with, though Savishinsky's terse evaluation begs some refinement. Firstly, there is neither a clear boundary nor a distancing rift between those who live a version of rastafari which emphasizes the communal living and the official practice of a socio-religious movement, and those whose version stems from – and thrives in locally and idiosyncratically contingent directions from within – a transnational pop culture idiom. The "rastas who live in the mountains", the "rastas who have their own church east of Accra", the "old rastas with the longest dreadlocks of all", and the "rastas who live in a compound hedged with marijuana plants 'taller than you or I!'", are just some of the fabulous "serious rasta" archetypes that figured recurrently in the narratives of the relatively youthful, stylish, girl-chasing, international pop-culture conscious, urbanite rastas I involved in this research. Those archetypal characters actually make excellent role models for young subculture debutantes, who need only to be aware of differentiation amongst themselves and their senior, widely respected counterparts to bring the concern of authenticity to bear on their own self-presentations (Williams 177: 2006).

Of course, very real representatives of those fabulous old rasta types do indeed exist in the flesh; many of my informants spoke proudly of personal acquaintances with, or even just occasional interactions with particular men who embodied the qualities of "serious rasta", several of whom were introduced to me or pointed out to me from a shy distance at a beach party or in an arts market.[4] Nevertheless, the actual "rastas who live on the compound with the giant

[4] For example, there are rastas who come in to Accra from communal farms to sell produce and prepared vegetarian foods, targeting places where other rastas can be found, some of whom will inevitably share their commitment to vegetarianism. Also, groups of older, abundantly dreadlocked rastas made occasional appearances at certain social events, apparently coming from some distance outside of Accra.

marijuana hedge", for example, need only to make occasional appearances to renew the exaggerated, folkloric personae born of them, and those personae function very well in the imaginations of their junior cosmopolitan brethren as reminders of the weight of their identifying practices.

My contention is that, while the 'hip factor' of some of the more external, stylistic elements of rasta culture is apparent in Accra, meaning that those things do indeed deliver certain spoils of status, this situation does not preclude an individual's engagement with the deeper ideological aspects of rastafarianism, and may actually demand it. The charge of vapid usage of serious styles can be easily be manipulated by individuals to validate their own performance of an identity at the expense of others who participate in very similar practices, on the assumption that the underlying motives of style will vary between individuals (Williams 2006:177, Ferguson 1999:221), and that, implicitly, some people's motives are more readily deemed authentic within available systems of meaning than others. In chapter four, I will take up this idea in a discussion of how the meanings of youth cultural styles[5] are shaped and reshaped in response to various forms of discrediting rebuke, many of which are vocalized as external "parent culture" disapprovals. However, there are also forms of negation directed within and between youth culture scenes.

Rastafarianism is rare (Savishinsky proposes "unique") among socioreligious movements in that a popular culture medium, reggae, is responsible for much of its diffusion worldwide (Manuel 1995:228, Savishinsky 1994:21). Items of popular culture, like reggae music as well as the Nike swoosh, represent texts of extraordinary semiotic plasticity. In new contexts, those items become available material for new cultural forms, but ones that are situated in the (foggy)

[5] Adopting James Ferguson's usage of *cultural styles* to refer to "practices that signify differences between social categories" (Ferguson 1999:95).

Plate 1: Killing time at Akwaaba Restaurant.

memory of what those items signified in their past lives "elsewhere". The Nike swoosh, having elsewhere accumulated cultural capital through its dutiful service to actual sporting goods, later winning a role as a marker of preferred items in the style practice of an American elsewhere's youth culture, eventually shed its product and became available to Ghanaians as a sign of preference, or maybe just a preferred sign, in its own right. Youths in Accra who want to make a rasta of themselves can do so in a multitude of ways, with things like reggae, dreadlocked hair and marijuana (more often called *ganja*, *wee*, or *herb*), representing parts of the fund of "available contemporary material" (Barber 1997:2) with which identities can be formulated and translated into individual self-representations (Brake 1985:9). These signs demand, at the least, the acknowledgment of rastafarianisms played out on faraway terrains, while remaining very much permeable to localized meaning, and flexible in terms of ideological gravity.

Background and Methodology

As mentioned, my second visit to Ghana was in 2004, that time to spend three months living in the capital city of Accra. I rented a room in the home of a grandmotherly Ghanaian woman who had recently decided to make the spaces left by her adult children available to lodgers. The remaining rooms were occupied by three other young women: one an intern of the U.S. government, one a volunteer coordinator from England, and the third a Ghanaian woman (from the Fanti region, west of Accra) who was employed as the landlady's domestic assistant.

I reconnected with a few friends I'd kept in touch with since my first visit, and through them, came to be a familiar and tolerated tag-along among a collection of young men (I will remark on this gender imbalance shortly), most of whom, at least at that time, were earning their money as craftsmen and peddlers at a large arts market and workshop district on the seaside near downtown Accra. Most of the fellows who figure most prominently in the ethnographic portions of this thesis have some connection to that art centre. In addition to being tradesmen, they were musicians, lovers of music and dancing, and self-appointed pundits of all issues relating to music in their city.

Surely it's considered par for the course, when working towards a Master's degree in Anthropology, to have to contend with having certain features of one's prototypic research plan evaporate at the moment real people become involved, as opposed to the hypothetical ones dreamt up while writing a fieldwork proposal. I devoted my energy to a relatively interconnected group. Since the study of youth culture leads to worlds where people associate on the grounds of common interests, it's not surprising that by going about things they way I did, I found myself working with sources who shared important points of identification. The accumulation of an almost unanimously rastafarian, exclusively male, collection of key sources was an unexpected development, but one that began to transpire early on and quickly became the model for the remainder of my fieldwork.

Of the approximately twenty people I interviewed formally (as in, by appointment and with the clear intention to ask direct questions), fifteen identified

as rastas, while others stationed themselves at various distances from rastafarianism. All were men between the ages of 19 and 30, with the exception of two middle-aged men whose exact ages are unknown. I also interviewed about a dozen students (boys and girls aged 11-19) from the mixed-level school for financially disadvantaged children that shares property with the Accra Art Centre. Although these interviews were few, my conversations with the children and teenagers from the school contributed to my understanding of how parental and institutional controls factor in to young adults' attitudes towards certain things associated with subcultural scenes, especially the dreadlocks and marijuana use of rastas, and the American-influenced styles of dress in hiphop culture.

Without a doubt, it was not in those interviews but rather in the copious casual discussions that went on at concerts, parties, and in clubs and restaurants that people spoke most candidly to the matters discussed in this paper. Possibly the greatest moments in my education took place at one particular open-air restaurant called Akwaaba, which served meals to visitors to the art centre, and welcomed the loitering of the centre's under-employed artisans, including a strong contingent of young rastas. The hours I spent there are innumerable. As unscheduled, informal conversations matched my interviews in terms of importance, I can only estimate that the cast of participants who made notable, verbal contributions to my research material number in the range of fifty.

A point which I will stress, for its epistemological as well as methodological implications, is that the identity politics of music and style were pivotal in casual dialogue. In interviews, the leading role was often usurped by my volunteer once I had made a few initial remarks as to my interests. To put it plainly, what I wanted to talk about seemed to be on the table for discussion already. Of course, my own position affected the tone of statements made to me and around me. As a scene outsider[6] (let alone a foreigner in most every way possible), I served well as a non-resistant repository for often highly idiosyncratic views. My informants

[6] When referring to myself as scene outsider, I am claiming neither a detached, objective vantage point, nor a neutral role in any social situation for which I was present, but only that I certainly, and very obviously to all who knew me, lack the record of involvement necessary to be taken as someone who is "part of" those scenes.

tended to express their ideas in essentialist, pedagogical terms, laced with warnings about misguided fools – sometimes hypothetical fools, but more often thinly-camouflaged mutual acquaintances – who might try to convince me of conflicting (mis)truths. The dialectical nature of identification, where discursive ideas are often presented as rebuttals to the assumed views of absent parties, will remain relevant throughout this paper.

English is the official language of Ghana, but according to highly contested estimates, somewhere between thirty and sixty Ghanaian languages remain active[7]. All of the people who lent their thoughts to this research spoke English confidently if not always fluently, with the exception of a few of the younger teenagers from the school who sometimes struggled with their answers and looked to friends for help with translation. Everyone involved spoke one if not several tribal languages: typically the local tongue of their family's region of origin, as well as at least some Twi, a term which covers at least three members of a cluster of mutually intelligible dialects sometimes lumped under the name Akan (Obeng 1997:64). Twi functions as an important lingua franca throughout much of Ghana[8].

Accra is located in the Ga region of Ghana, and while the capital city has a palpable cosmopolitan atmosphere that seems to dilute the importance of its political/geographical roots, Ga is doubtless the first language of the majority of Accra residents. Accordingly, residents of the city who have a familial heritage outside of the Ga region are likely to have some command over Ga, possibly in addition to another regional dialect or language, and very likely in addition to Twi and English. The result this language situation had on my research was that, in my

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[7] The wide variation in anthropologists' and linguists' inventories of active Ghanaian languages can be attributed to differences in how scholars have divided and subdivided related languages as being distinct entities or dialects of one another. Speakers of these languages have also been influential by judging the divisions between languages according to different criteria than many foreign academics (Obeng 1997: 63-64).

[8] The Asante kingdom of central Ghana, from where Twi originates, was an important imperial power prior to the expansion of the British Empire to that region in the late nineteenth century (Stahl 1991:260). The use of the Akan language spread during the era of Asante rule, and has continued to do so as a result of the persisting hegemony of Akan "ethnic style" (Ibid.:263). According to Obeng, approximately 40% of Ghanaians speak Akan as a first language and 60% speak it as a second language (1997:64).

presence, conversation would drift in and out of English, depending on how involved I was in a given moment. The rest of the time, my companions would speak to each other in Ga or Twi, and very often, as it was explained to me, a rapid oscillation between both languages. In a group situation, somebody sitting next to me would often translate certain points to keep me abreast of what was going on, but also, I felt, to strategically emphasize certain points by way of repetition.

This project attends to the social world of loose but interconnected group of young adults, where women were conspicuously missing. If I asked why this was the case, I received answers that were both dismissive and conflicting. I was told time and again that there were plenty of rasta women, and that I could seek proof at some music shop in the market across town, at an art centre in another city, or at the rastafarian commune (the same one with the legendary marijuana hedge); at each of those places I could find a certain rasta woman. This didn't go far in explaining why they weren't around in the same environments as their male counterparts. An even more common dismissal to my query was the complaint that too many Ghanaian women were more interested in being like American girls than following the eminently more natural and rooted path of rastafari.

The relative absence or exclusion of females from rastafarian scenes has been noted by, among others, Savishinsky (1999: 29) and Kebede & Knottenerus (1998:504). Patriarchalism, based in an ideal of a passive, subordinate, domesticated female who is often excluded from significant social and ritual gatherings has a long history in the rastafarian movement (Chavannes 1995: 256-259, Hebdige 1987:124,162). In chapter four I will discuss the certain forms of institutional and parental control that limit the expression of more ostentatious youth cultural styles in Accra. McRobbie and Garber, criticizing the Birmingham school's studies of (mostly British) youth subcultures, argued that the leisure time of young females is often more strictly controlled than that of boys, and that this accounts for their absences in subcultural social environments (Bennett 1999:

602)[9]. Nevertheless, I am limited to my own dubiously informed speculations when I propose that some of these generalized explanations could be appropriately transplanted here: to suggest, that is, that the absence of girls and women from the Accran rasta scene can be attributed to a combination of certain forms of control of young women's social activities that appeared to be typical in Ghana and reinforced by a (sub)cultural tendency towards mostly-male social activities in rastafarianism. A project of a much larger scale would have been necessary if I were to attempt to account for the voluntary or enforced absence of so many, with as much care as I hope to shed light on the enthusiastic presence of some.

I will, however, take one more tip from McRobbie, who drew subculture theorists' attention to the fact that girls had alternative ways of involving themselves with important forms of subcultural identification that were simply not grounded in the dance clubs and other kinds of night life with which most scholars had been preoccupied (McRobbie 1976:219). I did, after all, find that rasta woman who sold CDs at the market, as well as another one: a sturdy women in her thirties with a glorious mane of dreadlocks, who ran a sort of curio shop with her husband. I was only able to speak with the second woman, and what she told me about the lack of female rastas was not much different from what the younger men had been saying. She granted that there were fewer rasta women than men, but had little to say on this imbalance or the apparent invisibility of the "plenty" who did apparently exist in and around Accra. It is worth noting that the social scenes and the identifying practices I discuss with regard to the set of young men who inform this thesis do not by any means represent the only way that a person could forge a very important personal connection to the collective identity of rastafarianism. In other words, I do not know the extent to which there are women being rasta in places more out-of-the-way, and in ways less obvious, than what is typical of the men. As a final note on this matter, let me mention that I quickly gave up on my attempts to get my friends to open up about their

[9] For general discussions about gender imbalance youth (sub)cultures, see Thornton (1996:13), Brake (1985:163), Frith (1981:7), and McRobbie (1991).

romantic involvements; a line of questioning that would have lead to a somewhat better understanding of how women fit into their social world. I had reason to suspect that some of their hushed mobile phone calls, under-the-table text messaging, and sudden, unexplained disappearances had something to do with girlfriends, but this they would neither admit nor deny, and they didn't much like being asked.

CHAPTER I

(Sub)cultural Scenes

Youth culture studies, and the closely related subculture studies, are among the most fully realised areas of inquiry of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies[10] and its academic progeny. As such, elements of this thesis are fashioned in its image. Academics have struggled to write a workable language with which to make sense of the empirically evasive subject of global youth cultural formations: "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) *par excellence*, whose binding ties may implicate the experience of class, ethnicity, localism and gender, but ultimately organize themselves around a taste for certain cultural forms in which those experiences resonate.

Hebdige's conception of style as "signifying practice" (1979:117), based in the semiology of de Saussure and Barthes, has provided the impetus for and remained enormously useful to three decades of research on youth culture. Its potential value to wider anthropological fields is brought to light by Ferguson, who uses style as an analogy for the relationship between cultural difference and social organization. He shows how subculture styles, when taken "neither as total ways of life, nor mere deviance, but as specific semiotically complex forms of social action that must be interpreted in the context of material life and social relations", call for a reconsideration of cultural difference as something that is produced within a certain logic of society rather than something which exists between "analytically distinct cultures of social systems" (Ferguson 1999:94).

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[10] The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (shortened variously as the CCCS, the BCCCS, or in truly in-crowd fashion, the Birmingham Centre) was founded in 1964 by a handful of intellectuals who shared backgrounds in the adult education system, including Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall. Literary criticism, particularly in the form of Leavisism, provided a starting point for methodology, while semiotics (drawn from de Saussure and Barthes), turned culture into a collection of readable practices. Equally important was the use of Marxist ideas to describe the social playing field on which these practices were produced and consumed under the governance of a hegemonic system of ideology to which subordinate classes constantly resisted. The overtly political agenda of the BCCCS, particularly in its early years, was to expose the workings of power blocs and to elevate the status of 'everyday' forms of culture (for fairly complete accounts of this history, see Turner 2003 and During 1993).

Subcultural studies has, by its own (though often parallel) routes, arrived at many of the same points of questioning as anthropologists dealing with displaced peoples, complex diasporas, and various other ethnoscapes[11] that call established ways of thinking about identity, place and community into question. The significance of these points of questioning is made very clear by emergent forms of cultural "flow" that represent the potential for boundless possibilities to be imagined on a de-localized terrain (Appadurai 1996:33). These issues will be given thought in the next chapter, when I discuss the relevance of communication technology and the transnational industries of popular culture to music-centred youth culture scenes in Accra.

Researchers in cultural studies have tabled numerous experimental terminologies in an effort to better conceive of what have been otherwise called "youth subcultures". Most of these have been tailor-made to emphasize particularly salient aspects of specific social worlds. For example, Sarah Thornton's use of "club cultures" in her ethnography of the London rave scene is appropriate to her emphasis of gathering spaces as organizational axes of some youth culture formations. Other examples include the use of "fan cultures" in reference to communities formed on the basis of shared enthusiasm for an entertainment commodity like a television program (see, as examples, Bury 2003 or Hills 2002), or, the use of "cyber cultures" (as in Bell 2001) to speak of collective identities formed around some shared interest using the world wide web as a terrain of interaction. There is variation in the degree to which scholars use any of these prefixed "culture" terms to refer to an aggregation of actual humans who share a form of identification, as in opposed to speaking strictly of the systems of meaning with which those people identify (Bury 2003:27).

Andy Bennett, drawing from Maffesoli's *tribus* concept[12] argues that neo-tribalism is a better framework with which to describe relationships between

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[11] Appadurai offers the neologism "ethnoscape" as a way to represent the continuously reinventing, self-conscious, interactive, and deterritorialized "landscapes of group identity" which are becoming ever more difficult to conceptualize as ethnographic objects (Appadurai 1996: 33-34, 48).

[12] Maffesoli (1996) argues that tribe is "without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it refers more to certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferable to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form" (quoted in Bennett 1999:605).

youth, music, and style, as it allows for more fluidity of identities in light of "the shifting nature of youth's musical and stylistic preferences" (Bennett 1999:614). Neo-tribe, as it has been used lately in literature, operates on an analogy conceived at quite a distance, and with many liberties, from actual tribal polities. Interestingly, a few of my friends did muse on the parallels between their connections with rastafari and the attachments they felt towards "their people", be they (as in the case of the speakers) Fanti or Ga. Their comments speak to ability of individuals to experience strong, simultaneous, complementary identifications with multiple categories. If we were to transfer an idea like the neo-tribe to formations of people who identify with a tribe (theirs by birth, not style practice) in very real and present ways, we would be quite obliged to rethink the nature of that analogy to reflect a reality where tribes are not, in any way I can fathom, the unruly freeform entities that Bennett's usage suggests.

The problem with 'subculture' that Bennett and others have tried to evade with their terminological experiments, is that it hails from restricting, class-oriented metaphors of high and low (or above and below), and furthermore, seems to indicate a situation of deviance from an otherwise homogenous larger cultural body. The former charge is similarly applicable to the broader concept of 'popular culture'. In attempting to define popular culture against the idea of 'culture' as a selection of forms marked out by elite schemes of quality and value, notions emerge about mass culture or the culture of the general public, thereby reinforcing the assumption of a distinct powerful upper-class and less powerful middle and lower classes. The idea of popular culture was forged by theorists with Western, especially British, society in mind. Karin Barber points out that assuming that a culture of "the people" exists, versus the high culture of the upper class, hails from basic models of class structure that translate especially poorly to most of Africa:

> ...when the term 'popular culture' is transferred to Africa, it brings with it a history of conflicts, assumptions, and problems. If it fits uneasily and inadequately with European historical reality, how much more slippery and elusive it becomes in Africa. Here, the 'high', if it exists at all, is not the prerogative of an ancient ruling class but of a fragmented, precarious,

> conflictual new elite…The 'people' are neither the rural, idyllically remembered 'folk' nor the urban industrial proletariat (Barber 1997:3).

The Birmingham Centre's tradition of subculture studies tended to assert that subcultures, almost by definition, were based on ideologies that rejected both high/elite cultural forms as well as mass, popular, or "mainstream" forms, and, by extension, mainstream patterns of consumption. An oft-heard criticism is that this creates a conceptual rift between the consumer markets of youth subcultures and those of popular culture, which is contradictory in light of the demonstrable attachment youth subcultures can have to the conspicuous consumption (Hebdige 1979:103) of signifying items that may indeed be produced and marketed on a mass scale (Brake 1985:184, Weinzierl & Muggleton 2003:8). It has also been argued that markets driven by the tastes of youth have become so diverse and rapidly changing due to the globalization of media and the movement of goods (Huq 2003:195, Weinzierl & Muggleton 2003:8), that it is now even less possible to distinguish supposedly subversive consumer tactics from disinterested "mainstream" or "free flow" (Hannerz 1996:137) consumer lifestyles.

If it can be divorced from its rigid affiliation with a certain bracket of people, and used rather to explain a certain pattern of consumption, 'pop(ular) culture' remains a useful way of describing forms that are part of what is experienced as the everyday (Adjaye 2004: 3), or similarly, that "set of generally available artefacts: films records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc." (Hebdige 1988:47). This concept creates a link between the "elite set of forms" idea of culture, and the anthropological idea where culture is understood to encompass human activity in the broadest sense; "popular culture" alerts us to the emphasis on certain realms of cultural activity, namely, the expressive, aesthetic, and things relating to leisure, but in so doing implies that a sort of unpretentious "anything goes" protocol is in effect.

The second of subculture's troubles is its reification of a coherent, larger parent culture, mainstream, or some comparable entity representing hegemonic norms. Using 'subcultures' this way can be criticized as a way for scholars to neatly account for what they see as deviations from a society's cultural profile

without having to question inherent assumption of internal homogeneity to account for conspicuous instances of incongruence. For example, we could consider whether describing hiphop music and hiphop style in terms of subculture activity is akin to claiming that those forms are aberrations of some authentic Ghanaian culture.

The 'sub' of subculture emphasizes segregation, and moreover, conceptually positions incongruent forms "below" a construct of the unified bulk of society, connoting ideas about class structure in a way that might have been welcome in the modernist, political economy-driven British Cultural Studies of the 1970s, but is troublesome in more recent work, where theorists with post-modern sensibilities are demanding an approach which encompasses more complex, plural, and fluid factors of distinction than just class structure. Indeed, the political bravado that made earlier work in the area of youth subculture studies remarkable in its own time would later prove damning as postmodernism began to attune theorists to the sins of simplification, romanticism, and misleading reifications committed by Hebdige and his ilk. Presently, the field of youth (sub)culture studies is caught in the uncomfortable position of being tied ancestrally, thematically and, on several counts, theoretically, to the CCCS model of subculture studies which operated in a modernist trope that does not stand up to task of documenting contemporary phenomena of youth cultural formations[13]. This situation has inspired a multitude of rethinkings of the CCCS model, in an effort to retain what is necessary to make meaningful objects of study out of nebulous, difficult to circumscribe youth culture formations, while satisfying the post-modernist desire to capture the "experience of fragmentation, flux and fluidity of contemporary youth culture" (Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003:3).

These criticisms of subculture as an academic concept need to be received carefully, for there is this to be considered: the academy cannot claim a monopoly on how communities (etc.) are imagined (Appadurai 1996: 51, 54), therefore,

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[13] For an impressionistic meditation on postmodernism and the pursuant crises which alternately inspired and stunned practitioners of popular culture studies and youth cultural studies in the 1980s, see the postscripts of Dick Hebdige's *Hiding in the Light: on the Meaning of Things*, which stands partly as a rejoinder to his own earlier work.

however we decide to think about social formations of youth culture needs to be a function of how those formations are imagined by their participants. To a remarkable degree, ontological matters are here shared among the studied subject, the writing scholar, and moreover, critical analysts from the "parental" public. All these parties take part in the definition and redefinition, and the explanation and explication, of youth cultural forms by manipulating certain salient problematics: authenticity, originality, quality, and social value, to give a few examples, are all conspicuous in news media, internet discussion forums and in face-to-face chatter among scene participants and opinionated 'outsiders'.

Of the myriad terminological strategies generated by cultural studies discourse, *scene* deserves special attention. Having long been available to culture review columnists and scene participants themselves as an offhanded means of delineating sites and webs of social interaction that range enormously in scope, the notion of scene has lately come to figure importantly in academic literature (Williams 2006:186). Will Straw put this idea to work in his analyses of the culture(s) of heavy metal fans (1993), and has in more recent work written *about* this approach:

> "'Scene' is usefully flexible and anti-essentializing, requiring of those who use it no more than that they observe a hazy coherence between sets of practices or affinities. For those who study popular music, "scene" has the capacity to disengage phenomena from the more fixed and theoretically troubled unities of class or subculture (even when it holds out the promise of their eventual re-articulation.) At the same time, 'scene' seems able to evoke both the cozy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life. To the former, it adds a sense of dynamism; to the latter, a recognition of the inner circles and weighty histories which give each seemingly fluid surface a secret order." (Straw 2002:248).

'Scene' does boast a serviceable ambiguity that manages to suspend certain obstacles of definition in a way that 'subculture' cannot, though I think that this strength has more to do with its relative newness as an academic term than any meaning, or uncommon lack of strict meaning, inherent in the word itself. Scene calls to mind settings, actions, players, and landscapes; its recognized denotations for everyday use, in any case, are all configurations of those elements. Is it really

scene's ambiguity that sick-of-subculture theorists are celebrating, or is it more a matter of the word having a comfortable feel amidst a set of theoretical paradigms which are at present thoroughly habitual in many streams of social science, wherein an identity is treated as one of many possible performances acted out on landscape of (possibly highly delocalized) places and environments (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:37)? Such frameworks have people wandering on and off of stages, in and out of roles, with much more fluidity and indeed agency – if we take the achievements of imagination as both serious and consequential (Appadurai 1996:5-10) – than do stern class-based theories. In this theoretical climate, a word like scene can be quite powerful.

Still, that 'subculture' has not been extinguished completely in recent cultural studies and anthropology, but has rather been outfitted with various apparatuses of post-structuralist life support to keep it available: *post-subculture* (claiming that theory has outgrown subculture as a concept, or eulogising subculture as a possible social form); *(sub)culture* (admitting to a heap of theoretical conundrums while waiving the liability of final decisions); *subcultural formations* (reassigning the adjectival attributes of subculture to an ambiguous, unsullied noun), speaks to the one feature that 'scene' on its own fails to offer, which is the ability to give a name to the sense of mutual involvement experienced by subculturalists, while simultaneously evoking the self-conscious distinctions from, rejections of, or "optings-out" of imagined mainstreams which are so often crucial in community (or group, or movement, or indeed, subculture) identification[14].

In this thesis, then, I make use of 'scene' for many purposes of definition, but argue that 'subculture' and 'subcultural' might be productively retained in youth culture studies for use at certain times and different ends than 'scene'. Generally, my usage of 'scene' will be disciplined by the criteria of a regular interaction (taken loosely) of a network of individuals (Williams 2006:186),

[14] My use of identity and identification borrows from the work of Giddens (1991), in which "identification is a discursive process, implicating, shaping expressing and transforming identity structures" (Kuhn & Nelson 2002:7). Identity is here both the medium and the outcome of identification.

avoiding the temptation to let the same word stand as a "a lazy synonym for globalized communities of taste"(Straw 2002: 247). 'Subculture' and more often the adjectival 'subcultural' form, will appear when there is value in the self-segregating work of the 'sub' in reference to some discursive activities used to mark out and make sense of social worlds organized around counter-hegemonic beliefs.

Electronic Mediation and Cultural Production

Youth (sub)cultures, along with "cyber communities", and cultural/ethnic diasporas are frequently handled in popular and academic discussions as ultimate indices of the dissolution of place that characterizes the present-day globalized world (Escobar 2001: 143). It is easy to get caught up in the idea of the free, ungoverned swap of raw materials for the imagination of "possible lives" (Appadurai 1996:54) facilitated by global media, but the element of "freedom" should be employed carefully as an intellectual tool to expand thinking about identity and place beyond the confines of the here and now. While virtual networks are able to maintain some degree of immunity from the interference of state legal apparatuses (Niezen 2004:75), we cannot overlook the commercial media activity that drives the "dispersal of consumer products, ideas, and cultural idioms" (Stahl 2003: 40). In a response to the preoccupation with the detached "meaning of things" that became symptomatic of cultural studies' teenage rebellion from its Marxist Birmingham parentage, Nicholas Garnham urges that academics should avoid trying to intercept cultural practices at the moment an item – be it material or symbol – is consumed or interpreted, without considering "how the resources of cultural practice…are made available in structurally determined ways through the institutions and circuits of commodified cultural production, distribution, and consumption"(Garnham 1993:503).

As a partial response to Garnham's suggestion, I feel it is important to acknowledge the importance of digital technology in certain sectors of Accra's popular culture industry. While the use of digital technology in the production of

recorded music is as important as, and at all time closely interactive with, the consumption of popular music by fans, my greater interest is in the vitality of computer networking technology as a medium of interaction between individuals and cultural ideas and commodities. The world wide web's capacity as an interface between individual users and endless possible cultural items[15] is only the most direct way it is involved in the production of popular culture in Ghana. Many other forms of entertainment, especially anything to do with movies and music, function around private businesses that invest in computer technology and electronic equipment, then offering the "fruits" of that technology to the public for a fee. Some examples include the innumerable shops that sell reproductions of downloaded music, the studios that provide patrons with the means to download songs and burn CDs on their own, the movie houses that rent out private rooms furnished with a home entertainment system and a selection of illegally copied, downloaded DVD movies, and the bars and night clubs that play hit singles, show music video-clips on wall-mounted television screens, and might even host a weekly movie night, very often using downloaded material. My intention is not to be dismissive of the socio-economic constraints that mediate access to "the resources of cultural practice", but only to emphasize that the reach of certain "circuits of commodified cultural production" (Ibid.) can be quite long:

> The internet has become for many the leading source of borderless thinking, a medium in which ideas, sounds, and images can be made instantly available to a global audience, a communicative space in which there are few frontiers and little interference by the legal apparatuses of states. In this medium, the only limits to the construction and presentation of collective identities – even identities that embody the primal values of technological simplicity and self-sufficiency – are access (directly or through intermediaries) to computer hardware, a telephone infrastructure, and a modicum of sophistication in their use (Niezen 2004:74).

Not one among my core group of informants owned a computer, but nearly all used web-based email at internet café terminals, where some would also habitually browse the internet for sports coverage, news, dating services or other

[15]"Cultural items" is an expedient solution to the want of a noun that might refer to practices and/or material objects.

special-interest cultural sites. To be sure, the best known and most popular internet cafes, movie houses, cd studios and music shops are generally slick and expensive, but young locals would brag about the lesser known, out-of-the-way "ghetto" spots that provided equivalent services for a fraction of the price. In any case, the indirect sale of computer networking technology, especially in the form of cd burning studios and nightclubs, definitely claimed a significant portion of my informants' small disposable incomes. As yet another extension of the reach of communications technology, the open-air and very public nature of human interaction while at work or play in Accra means that the music one man finds to put in his stereo, for example, immediately has a presence in the lives of his friends, passers-by and plenty of neighbourhood children.

The spread of global capitalism can be (and has been, by many academics and political activist writers), moulded into a loathsome monster that is expected to consume all forms of smaller-scale localized economy in its path. There is a pursuant tendency to award the much celebrated merit of primal authenticity to the "traditional", in turn surrounding anything newly emergent with apology and mistrust. The idea underlying such dyadic traditional/modern schemes is that "cultures" once existed in a state of primordial autonomy that was ruptured upon the introduction of capitalism (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:36)[16]. Such a framework is unworkable, as it would result in erroneously identifying many of the cultural forms I am drawing attention to as either failed mimicries of West Indian or American forms, or novel instances of traditional/Western fusion which are exceptional, and thence little more than anecdotal happenings.

Of course, critics have been particularly anxious to insist, and repeatedly, that recent decades have by no means marked the beginning of exchange and movement of goods and ideas amongst geographically distant, culturally-different

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[16] See Gupta and Ferguson's critical assessment of the "articulation model" in postcolonial studies discourse. The authors point out that this model is helpful in illuminating the impacts of colonial capitalism, which have shown themselves to be complex and frequently surprising, but misleading in its overemphasis of the rupture of stable pre-industrial societies beginning at the moment of their colonization (Gupta, A., and J. Ferguson. 1997 Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference. *In* Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology. A. Gupta, and J. Ferguson, eds. Pp 33-51. Durham & London: Duke University Press.)

communities. The idea of "globalization" as a historically novel set of processes has partly to do with a number of "theoretical shifts [which] have arranged themselves into new conjectures" to make the complicated situations that arise from "globalization" more visible and accessible for questioning (Malkki 1997:53). Recent ethnographic works, however, seem to indicate that this endlessly problematic, yet defiantly evident "global social fact" (Malkki 1997:52) of globalization has in reality, and somewhat ironically, precipitated the emergences of multiple new forms of economy and culture, as people find unique ways to practice the local in the global" (Escobar 2001:147).

Beyond the analytical conditions demanded by researchers now working in a distinctly "post" milieu (Stahl 2003: 29), it can be argued that the currently young are actually presented with more complex options in terms of identities and social networks. There is validity to the idea that peoples' individual experiences are becoming more "global" as communication technology permits the spinning of more complex webs of interpersonal association, and attachment to places, than ever before. This process, however it is termed, has "enabled the creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space" (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:37). In a similar light, Ronald Niezen writes that "cultural boundaries are blurred in the unrepressed web literature by the absence of limits on representation. Uncensored cultural representation makes possible the presentation of community ideals that originate in no recognizable community. More than ever before, it has become possible to express nostalgia for time that one has never experienced and pride towards peoples to whom one has never belonged" (2004:78).

Communications technology has also presented new ways that goings-on can be watched from a distance, accelerating the rate at which ideas can become catching trends, and expanding the distance across which this occurs. Another layer of displacement has thereby developed on top of the rastafarianism that was already rooted in the experience of displacement: what was first a movement of

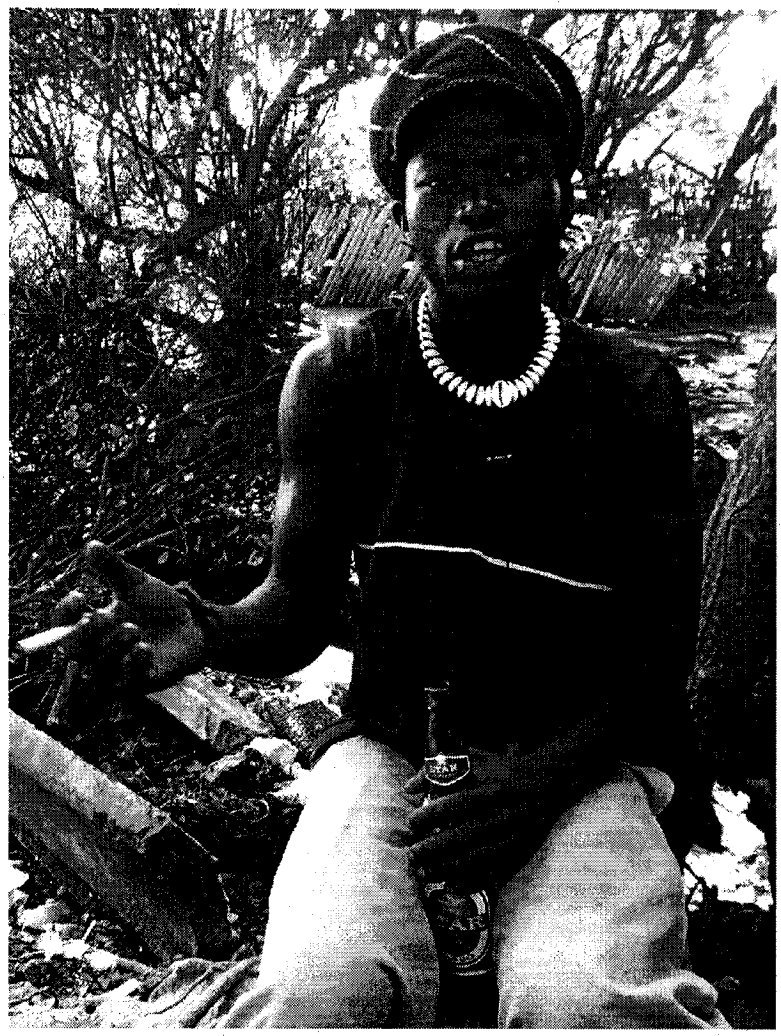

Plate 2: A scripture lesson.

Jamaican blacks with their gaze set on Africa, is now a movement that includes Africans with their gaze set on memorialized Jamaicans gazing back at a bygone Africa.

My approach contains this discord: rastafarianism carries a history that contests its association with any particular generation, yet I frequently handle it as a phenomena of youth culture. What, if anything, is "youthful" – in the sense of being something newly emergent or otherwise owned and operated by the currently young – about rastafarianism, when participants feel that they are part of

something almost timeless?[17] I believe a youth (sub)culture studies style approach allows rastafari to be discussed in the context of a landscape shaped by significantly new flows of ideas, permitting a plethora of very youth-oriented phenomena to become relevant to the rastafarian identity.

Expanded and accelerated "global flows" have provided the presently-young with a supply of cultural items that is greater in volume and variety than what was available to their parents. It follows, in my reasoning, that this supply presents new fodder for bricolage in taste cultures, making global ideas present in localized ways. To encounter rastafari first by way of its popularized commodities seems inevitable, given the immense and highly sensitive industry of commodities that has developed around the movement. My impression is that, even if someone in Accra were to first observe the stylistic accoutrements of rastafari on the body of an old locksman[18], any attempt to make sense of those things would lead first to the image of Bob Marley, and only later to Biblical re-interpretation and ideological concepts. However, as I hope this ethnography will elucidate, those who are impelled, with any sort of commitment, to identify legibly with rastafari must set to work deepening their engagement with those signifiers if their performance is to look and feel authentic. Once somewhat congealed, that identification can work as a paradigm through which the broader spread of available and emergent youth culture commodities can be browsed, criticizing and approved using quality scales written *ad hoc* for different situations from a stock of rastafarian, localist, and pan-Africanist ideals.

The "youthfulness" of relatively unmediated, accessible forms of communications technology has generated a terrain populated by different important Others than that of my informants elder counterparts. The resulting situation is one where a very cosmopolitan rastafari is put to work to help make sense of Celine Dion, *bling bling*, George W. Bush's "war on terror", ethno-

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[17] Keep in mind that viewing rastafarianism as a political/pop-cultural movement born of a religious cult that congealed in early to mid 19th-century Jamaica (King 2002:xvi-xviii) is only the encyclopaedic history; to a rasta who entertains even a fairly interpretive, watered-down version of the movement's core Biblical tenets – and nearly all my informants did – this is a story that begins in the Book of Exodus and will end with the future repatriation of Zion.

[18] Borrowing a term Hebdige uses to refer to a dreadlock-haired rasta, as in *Cut n' Mix*, 1990.

tourism in Ghana, iPods, Christianity, and Puff Daddy's new line of clothing. The chapters to come offer an ethnographic depiction of the social world of some young men living in Accra, written on the basic assertion that that the global communities they envision, the subcultural styles they adopt, and the endless sport they make of hashing out the meanings of objects in popular culture, are all parts of a process of identity-craft wherein popular music operates as a central idiom; and that, finally, the gravity of this kind of identity-craft lies in the possibility of symbolic vindication - if "resistance" is too strong a word – from certain hegemonic ideals attributed to one of several imaginable Others.

Chapter II

Between an Ocean, a Soundsystem, and a Fire: Typical Crowds and Temporary Borders

My friend and I had been standing apart from the group, talking over the remaining points of a mild argument we'd had two days earlier. He was satisfied:

"So I think it's really over. And tonight is The Beach."

I took his comment as impressively executive; in the first part he called a close to the matter of our discussion, in the second, he pronounced a return to an order of sorts. That night was a Wednesday, The Beach to which he was referring was a certain unpretentious seaside leisure zone used by locals and tourists from the adjacent hotels. The obviousness of which beach he meant, and also the clarity of The Beach's tie to the night had to do with a long-running series of late night reggae dance parties held on the seaside, hosted by one of the open-air club venues.

To say the parties were regular Wednesday night affairs is not to say that they actually went off *successfully* each and every week; the sound system and floodlights at the club were finicky, and were themselves at the mercy of The Beach's ramshackle electrical system built of tilting power poles strung with loose wires that swayed in the wind, and would emit the most unnerving showers of sparks during rainstorms. However, so long as the weather was clear, the party would go on. If the early evening sky cast any doubt, a flurry of mobile phone text messaging would ensue between clusters of friends checking in with one another from various parts of town in the hopes that someone among them would have received a first-hand account of what was going on at the venue; most importantly, whether or not the soundsystem was being set up for a party.

The parties had a loyal attendance. I listened to chatter about the Wednesday night beach parties for at least a month's worth of Thursday mornings before I myself was toted along for what would be the first of several times. I had

to go, my friend Yaw[19] told me, so I could see "all the rasta boys" there. By ten o'clock, taxis carrying up to seven and motor scooters carrying two would begin arriving at the front gates of the beach where each guest would have to pay a small fee to gain entrance to the area. Those who wished to dodge the fee, as my friends generally did, could have the taxi driver drop them a kilometre from the gate where one could make a beeline from the road to the sea and then skirt along the edge of the water, bypassing all the fences that partitioned the beach, as long as the tide was low enough to expose a squishy sandy path around the final fence post. Reliably, someone at the venue would have arrived early to assemble a colossal heap of scrap wood, so that, after some careful tending and a few generous sloshes of gasoline, an impressive bonfire would be raging in time to welcome party seekers and to guide those of us arriving by way of the unlit shoreline.

The nightclub that hosted the reggae parties was more of a facility available for hire than a social spot that operated regularly on its own accord. It consisted of a covered stage, lights, a soundsystem[20], and a few dozen wooden lounge chairs and tables that belonged to the club but could be moved around at the whim of the guests and routinely got jumbled up with the furniture of the adjacent businesses, closed for the night.

Most of the people present at the parties, by my estimate, would fall within an age range of late teens to late twenties. The parties I went to drew (again, by my rough estimate) between seventy-five to one hundred people. Sometimes there were many more, I was told, and sometimes far fewer. Only very paltry number of

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[19] There are a few people who need to be given proper names to single them out of the general set of informants. To stand in for their real names, I have arbitrarily chosen names that are common in Ghana, such as those belonging to the Akan day-name system (Stahl 1991:255) or English names I came across in some piece of Ghanaian literature. Regretfully, the promise of anonymity also forbids me to say much about the remarkably bold and evocative nicknames (along the lines of, say, "Black King Lion" or "Steady") that many of these rasta boys used as their primary everyday titles.

[20] Louis Chude-Sokei gives an interesting history of the soundsystem as a defining technology in musics of the black diaspora, remarking that the soundsystem "is one of the black diaspora's most enduring and frequently unacknowledged cultural institutions". Note that "soundsystem" has a dual meaning in reggae culture; it can refer to the rig of equipment used to blare music at high volumes, but can also refer to the "social and cultural space" created around that blaring of music (Chude-Sokei 1994:96).

women were there; no more than a half dozen or so, most of whom were "*obruni* girls"[21] like me – pale skinned foreigners – who would arrive as the closely monitored guests of Ghanaian male friends or boyfriends. A handful of *obruni* boys, also visibly in the "custody" of a local companion, make up the remaining exception to the otherwise very Ghanaian, very young adult, very male, crowd.

On Wednesdays, the distinctive echoing vocals and slow syncopated rhythms of reggae music blared from crackling speakers on the stage, heavy with the distortion of over-amplified bass levels. One man hunched over the cd player selecting songs while several of his friends bothered him with requests and unsolicited advice. Once in awhile, somebody would pick up a microphone and sing or rap freestyle on top of the recorded music, stirring up salutes from the rest: "*rey-spect! Haill-e sel-ass-i-ye, rasss-ta-far-iy!*". In the absence of containing walls, the crowd emanated outward from the stage area, growing more and more sparse towards the water, where the last stray figures were only just visible in the dark, dancing barefoot in ankle-high waves.

I was slumped in a chair lazily watching those dancers at my third beach party appearance when a dreadlocked teenager, a boy I didn't know, gripped my shoulder and pointed in the direction of some closed shop kiosks farther down the shoreline. He tried to shout something over the din, to which I gave a perfunctory nod, misunderstanding what he wanted. He persisted, and on the fourth or fifth repetition, he got through to me: "some turtle has come out of the sea. Just there."[22] Yanking me to my feet by the wrist, the boy rushed me to the huddle of people who had then broken away from the dance party to see what was happening by the shops. It was true, and it was marvellous: a sea turtle, four feet long in the shell (or so I claimed in a gloating email I sent the next morning), had

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[21] *Obruni*, as it was explained and demonstrated to me, refers most literally to anyone with relatively light skin, but is not necessarily limited to those of Caucasian extraction. *Obruni* also connotes non-local or tourist status, though ethnicity is the most important criterion. For example, even a moderately fair but still visibly African-descended tourist is unlikely to ever be called an *obruni*, but a brown-skinned person of South-Asian descent, even if born and raised in Accra, likely will be called an *obruni* fairly often. The same word may also be written as "abruni", but the spelling I use in this paper seems to be the one preferred by native Twi speakers.

[22] It is common for English-speaking Ghanaians to use the generalizing "some" in reference to an object which is actually clearly specified, as in "do you have some twenty-thousand cedis I can borrow?".

chosen the spot of shoreline just beside the beach party to lay her eggs, and was busily digging holes. While she kicked up high sprays of sand with her hind flippers, I watched with elation and acute pessimism, trained by a lifetime of televised pleas from wildlife rescue organizations. I worried aloud: "What will happen to the eggs?"

My friend Yaw had joined me at my side. "You see, she will bury them, and later the turtles will be born", he replied.

"Well, I know *that*," I pressed, "I mean, what will happen to the baby turtles?"

"They are *sea turtles*, Janice," he answered patiently, "they will go *into the sea.*"

The unexpected party guest went about her business unruffled by adulations from the throng. Haille-Sellasian salutes to motherhood were interspersed with proclamations of the beauty of God's creation, along with one or two funny quips about the "rasta turtle" dropping by to listen to some reggae. Among the gathered rabble was a man in his thirties or beyond, senior in relation to most present, who apparently lived in an ocean-side shack nearby. He told me that he was planning to sit vigil for the turtle to ensure that "nobody disturbed her" until she returned to the ocean in the wee hours of the morning. The lady turtle, said the man, was powerful; a Queen, "like all woman; my sister also", pointing to me. He said he had seen many turtle hatchings in past years, and would use a plastic pail to collect the fledglings that ventured off-course, and deposit them into the water. He was a rastaman, he explained; a rastaman shouldn't eat meat or kill things, because God put him in charge of the creatures of the earth and the sea: "*One love, rastafari.*" When Yaw and I left to find a taxi on the main road, the sea turtle was digging her umpteenth nest, and most of her audience had wandered back towards the bonfire and the soundsystem.

How Here Got So Rasta / How So Many Rastas Got Here

"Typical crowds" happen somehow, though mysteriously. Somehow, in a flurry of cross-pollination between genre tastes, individual loyalties to collective identities, and the entertainment and fashion industries which exist to ensure that no scene – from the moment it is "discovered" at the brink of becoming conscious of its own scenehood to the moment its last few aging devotees, lacking heirs of equivalent marketability, are banished back to the margins as die-hards, squares, and ridiculous survivals – is ever left wanting for purchasable signs of itself; it comes to pass that people who share common style practices meet one another to pass time in the name of consumption, fellowship, and escapism, in spaces that are defined, paradoxically, only by their being there (Frith 1996:84, Thornton 1996:25).

As this paper progresses, it will be become clear that the relationship between rasta culture and it's most recognizable signifiers is complex; the scene does not actually hold *exclusive* claim over the style objects, musics, or practices that function as characteristic markings. Nor, for that matter, are any of those components actually requisite to identification with the scene. Furthermore, identification has as much, if not more, to do with moments that underscore difference and segregation, as moments that emphasize sameness and belonging. I am making a grand case of the reggae beach parties to point out that, for all the ways that Accra's young rasta scene appears, by its fluidity and plurality, to forfeit any possible claims of solidarity, not to mention "authenticity" in purist appraisals, there are also moments like the beach parties, at which a simplified, mutually agreeable version of the collective identity is performed explicitly and in unison. What's more, the resulting performance looks like this: dozens of nappy-haired rastamen with smouldering marijuana joints in hand, tossing and swaying ecstatically to the backbeat of deafening reggae music. It is an image that bears a striking family resemblance to that of the rastas of bygone Jamaica (Hebdige 1987: 53) that has staked out a place in global myth through copious representation in media and continual re-enactments in present-day scenes. At the

same time, what individuals experience as the basis or motivation of their performance is far from unified, reflecting the abundance of imaginable possibilities presented by the cosmopolitan "big city" environment; a landscape on which so many everyday actions are related, somehow, to extra-local environments. At the parties, it was those things felt to be held in common among participants in Accra's young rasta scene that prevailed as factors determining how the events took form and secured their loyal following. The beach parties played out like official sites of "the modern Ghanaian rastafari", distilled, and celebrated.

The significance of "working social hubs"(Thornton 1996:3) in the establishment and maintenance youth culture formations has been discussed in considerable depth by Sue Thornton, who focused specifically on the temporary transformation of spaces into youth "club culture" environments in London's underground rave scene, drawing attention to how a site's physical attributes can create a sense of territory by underscoring the conceptual distinctions between insider and outsider worlds (Frith 1996:156, Thornton 1996:9-11). Unlike the raves of Thornton's ethnography, which were usually held in very dark, walled-in venues and warehouses (Thornton 1996.:22), the reggae beach parties in Accra were set apart from other urban goings-on by distance and darkness, but the sense of space – space where rastas could "feel free" and "run things", to use two much-favoured expressions – is accomplished just as well.

In the last section, I looked at the idea of the "subcultural" as an effective way to think about cultural forms whose meanings rest on ways of conceptualizing society that emphasise the differences between a peripheral minority and some larger entity that represents the "rest" of society. I am suggesting here that the beach parties are framed by a subcultural plotline. The physical separation of a place, however it is achieved, establishes a clear inside/outside structure that is partly material, inviting the conceptual expansion of the metaphor of inner versus outer. Physical separation of club environments ensures that internal goings-on are shaded from the view of the 'outside world', including, most importantly, the view of disapproving, misunderstanding, or

disapproved-of parties. 'Inside' subcultural environments, it is those signs which serve as flags of distinction in most other environments that come to be rallied around as emblems of membership and solidarity (Dowd & Dowd 2003:28, Thornton 1996:11).

Of course, even the near unanimity of style throughout the crowd did not indicate a full cast of self-identified rastas. The semiotic flexibility of even the most rastafarian of symbols is such that those who have no desire to align themselves with any such collective identity, may still, for idiosyncratic reasons, adopt style practices that are so strongly linked to rasta culture that they almost beg a misreading by peers and strangers. Some of the beach party's most devoted regulars with whom I was well acquainted held firm to "not-a-rasta" identifications, despite having appearances and tastes that implied otherwise, not to mention their penchant for activities that put them in very rastafarian social circles.

However, the power of style consensus to mark out a space as subcultural – the power of description – does not require that individual participants imagine any "proper connections" between style objects and the subcultural identity they imply broadly. If we accept that style constitutes a readable language (as per Hebdige), and further accept that there is some degree of mutual intelligibility of the vocabulary of subcultural signs among the very diverse set of individuals who participate in that collective identity, as well as observing outsiders, then I can argue that the solidarity in style enacted at the beach parties reads like a billboard declaring the Accran rasta scene's proprietary hold on that environment.

I am encouraged to expound on this basic claim that these nights can be read as "rasta parties" partly because their reputation, in whatever form I would encounter it, would seem to indicate as much. That reputation was further underscored upon noting that what played out at the parties was a composite of those "rasta signs" that have become most deeply engrained in the lexicon of international youth culture. Periodic moments of solidarity in a heterogeneous social group serve to re-establish that basic vocabulary of signs which is understood, with varying degrees of muddling, by both the obvious scene insiders

as well as certain outsiders who are "in the know" for some reason, even where the latter's understanding of what goes on in subcultural environments is based largely on hearsay, or, perhaps, a sort of detached academic knowledge of the scene (Ferguson 1999:208).[23]

Not even the margin of error inherent in this reading (due to the faction of "not-a-rasta" participants, added to the contingent of *obrunis* and other assorted outsider types), poses much threat to the reputation of those gathering as rastafarian subculture events. This has a lot of do with the sheer outnumbering of those who would corroborate that reputation to those who would not, but also owes something to the glossing effect of the music, which hushes any categorical denials of rastafari that might be verbally appended to self-presentations which, without explanation, would seem to indicate the contrary.

As for how these parties became, as I argue, definitively subcultural spaces – how they "got to be so rasta" – is a circular plot line. When one witnesses extraordinary sameness in style being practised at a social event, it is evident that a relatively invisible process of exclusions and inclusions has gone on to bring about that consensus. A genre-themed dance party is a social event organized around the consumption of the preferred music of what might be called a "taste community" (Straw 2002: 247), which is one of the personae of a subcultural community. The organizers of the party (who were, to my knowledge, just the venue owner with two or three colleagues to act as disc jockeys and assistants) offered up reggae, which is inarguably a preferred genre in, and thereby a major symbol of, rasta culture. The open-air venue on the beach provided a desirable balance of privacy and accessibility (both physical and economical), thereby acting as an ideal medium for the cultivation and accumulation of reggae's kindred signs that arrived with, and indeed, on the bodies of the heavy contingent of self-identified rastas lured by the promise of their music. The sandy shoreline

[23] See also Simon Frith (1996) for discussions of music critics, radio djs, and record label executives, whose professions are dependant on a certain proficiency in youth culture scenes, placing them somewhere between the binary constructions of 'insider' and 'outsider' as I am using them here.

was a beautiful and spacious place to dance, and a safe zone for ganja smoking[24]. The low, easily bypassed, entrance fee made attendance, and repeated attendance, relatively easy. Quite of few of my friends and interviewees made romantic allusions to the hand-to-mouth lifestyle of themselves and their crew of friends. The rasta scene is guided by the proudly underclass and anti-materialist sentiments exuded by its participants; I am inclined to believe that without the condition of accessibility, that swarm of rastas would have staked out their turf elsewhere, somewhere that looked more like their sort of place.

Finally, and all along, really, since the shaping of a clubculture scene happens in many ways all at once, the phenomenon of reputation should be recognised as a potent mechanism in the shaping of club culture environments. Whether news of dance parties is spread via organized marketing tactics like the distribution of flyers or simply by word-of-mouth, the council of specialist knowledge is important. Frith notes that organizers of club events count on music (genre) labels to work for them as filters, to "attract a particular crowd and ensure a particular sort of evening." (Frith 1996:84). Aside from a few posters pinned up in the vicinity of the club venue, word-of-mouth appeared to be the primary form of advertisement for the beach parties, which is a form of advertising that works because of the power of certain salient cultural items to attract to attention of people who consider themselves to be more than ordinary consumers (Frith 1996:9). It is easy to imagine how, to those who came to be party 'regulars', the rumour that an atmosphere abounding in preferred forms was being shaped for them, by people like them, and (if they didn't hurry up and join in), *without* them would sound like a personal invitation, even a summons.

Subcultural practices, as in, those things that have come to be recognised as typical to members in a subcultural scene, become both descriptive and prescriptive when they come to occupy a central position in an otherwise

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[24] The use, possession, and growing of marijuana is indeed illegal and punishable in Accra. The impression I got from my informants' commentary on drug-related arrests in the news is that police mobilize anti-drug laws very selectively to make examples of certain local "hooligans". The severity of the punishments for ganja possession as reported in radio news reports did seem peculiar and demonstrative in light of the fact that there are several well-known spots where people are known to smoke carelessly.

peripheral environment: a "club space" is created and defined by what people do there, and what people come to do there, more or less, is what the space appears to be already designated for. Word of what is going on there gets out, and every week that the typical crowd reconstitutes at the club, the word is made flesh, so to speak.

The behaviour which was prescribed and subsequently performed at the beach parties was based on an essentialization of the collective identity as it is known among participants who, in dialogue, make it clear that their understandings of rastafari and the components of its essential performance are variant and fluid. Only when boiled down to the rituals enacted at highly subcultural sites like the beach parties - the dancing, the smoking, the meditative staring out into the sea, and the loving celebration of a sea turtle – could rastas and their close comrades find little to object to amongst themselves. Maybe if the music was off and the dizzying plurality of actual ideology was laid out, the appearance of consonance would be lost.

Certainly, those young men did not live their lives in a perpetual harmonious vignette. The urbanite rastas I am representing here are characters in a larger scene of youthful cosmopolitan Accrans who have interests in and preoccupations with popular music, fashion, and, in respect to these things, a concern for the general state of "local culture" in a global context. In everyday activities, they encounter people who exemplify, to them, ways of living which are different from their own. In the next chapter, I will consider the wider terrain traversed by my informants, where the project of constructing identities is done vis-à-vis representations of difference rather than sameness. At all times, rastafari is kept close at hand to be invoked as a framework for an opinion on such matters; as an identity, it functions alongside or in the background of numerous other ones.

At points throughout the remainder of this thesis, I will be referring back to the reggae beach parties as sites of the re-creation of a tableau of rasta culture "distilled", while setting this version of the identity against the individually constructed, constantly contested versions performed on an everyday basis, in culturally heterogeneous environments. In so doing, the distilled image of

rastafari will be gently pulled apart, exposing some of its most visible components for consideration: namely, dreadlocked hair, ganja smoking, classic dance moves, "Dread talk" slang[25], and, most importantly, the reggae music (Savishinsky 1994:38).

[25] Iyaric is a rastafarian dialect of Patois, a Jamaican Creole, that is considered the vernacular of rastafarianism. Often called "dread talk" in literature, and often called Patois my informants, this language is blended to various degrees with English and can be heard in reggae music and especially dub poetry (Kebede & Knottnerus 1998:503). I say "dread talk slang" because I found that most of the time, Iyaric was a source of very select words and phrases rather than a dialect unto itself. I have, however, encountered instances of thickly Iyaric writing by Ghanaians on internet bulletin board systems (BBS) as well as in some pamphlets about rastafarianism and Bob Marley which are sold in the markets.

Chapter III

Hashing Out the Signs: Popular Music and Style

The promise of a genre of music that is of special importance to the rastafarian scene had a lot to do with the formation of the "typical crowd" at the reggae beach party, but it cannot singularly account for it; reggae music is allotted a generous portion of airtime on several of the radio stations which broadcast to the Accra area, which is one good indication of its popularity to a fairly broad Ghanaian audience. Still, there is something to be said for the point that while reggae is not exclusively rasta, it is very definitely *especially* rasta[26]. This is a global movement wherein reggae has come to be generally regarded as more of a political-religious form of text – the "rasta hymnal" (Hebdige 1984:18) – than just a genre of popular music (Cuthbert 1985:383, Savishinsky 1994:20). To pursue a viable, believable personal engagement with rastafari requires a deepening of the connection between the subculture in a broad sense and its pop culture accoutrements, including this music.

So, while nobody in Accra would need to go through particularly rastafarian channels to encounter reggae, it is certainly the case that it represents a sort of entry point for many young locals, due in part to the song lyrics that generally allude or make direct reference to characteristically rastafarian or closely entwined pan-Africanist themes. At the same time, a young person with a burgeoning interest in rasta culture, even through the mimicry of role-models alone, would quickly learn that treating reggae music with pious reverence goes a long way to authenticate a rastafarian self-presentation in the view of others.

Listening to reggae music was mentioned often as a condition conducive to meditation, second only to the use of cannabis for the same reason. One fellow explained that "you listen to reggae to give you conscious vibes. Good vibes," and added that the music speaks of evil in the world while giving positive lessons:

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[26] Reggae music emerged in Jamaica in the 1960s. Along with genre siblings ska and rocksteady, reggae reflected a merging of American R&B (rhythm & blues) with musics of rural slaves including *mento*. The drumming styles of early Jamaican rastafarians are considered to be a major source of influence (Cuthbert 1985:383, Chude-Sokei 1994:82).

Plate 3: A reggae musician sings a song he wrote with lyrics in five different languages (Ga, Twi, Ewe, English, and French). The song's message is a warning to youth about the spread of AIDS.

"reggae shows you how to live your life, good *and* bad".

It is the music made by hallowed rasta "ambassadors" Bob Marley and the Wailers; it is the music in which phrases of in the rastafarian vernaculars Iyaric or "dread talk" are sung (Kebede & Knottnerus 1998: 503); and it is the music through which other icons and symbols of rastafari, from cannabis to Marcus Garvey, are sung of (Appiah & Gates 1996: 546, Hebdige 1987:52). Reggae has gained the status as a tried and true soundtrack for the journey to enlightenment, and this might diminish the need to scrutinize the content very closely. The syncopated beats and echoing tones evoke messages that are spelled out and specified by the lyrics, but not necessarily dependant on them. I am suggesting that young rastas feel a personal attachment to the music, which is inseparable from a feeling of loyalty to it. This contributes to the feeling that reggae music is for them, and theirs, even if its commercial success has garnered a mass audience.

Reggae music was attributed a great deal of gravity by those I interviewed when they spoke of their personal experiences of finding rasta culture and making it their own; for many it represented a channel into that world, and many considered it to be a constant source of spiritual intellectual inspiration. I think the response to the music demonstrated at the beach parties I described in chapter two also hints at the consecration of reggae as a hallowed item in rasta culture; people sat in bunches to talk and smoke, but when they danced, they found their own space and gave little heed to anybody around them, dancing alone, looking skyward, "feeling the music", in Yaw's words. American reggae artists, when mentioned, were granted immunity from the scrutiny with which Western-world musicians were typically treated. Perceptions of Bob Marley and the Wailers ranged only from fervent fandom to pious devotion. All of this is to say that whenever or wherever rastafari took centre stage – as a topic of conversation, or as an organising concept for environments like the beach parties – reggae was a big deal to my informants. Somewhat incongruous, then, is the relatively minor role that music seemed to occupy under so many other circumstances, to those very same people. The love of reggae was reaffirmed in specifically rastafarian moments, but seemed otherwise taken for granted when compared to the attention paid to other musics in both conversation and consumption.

There are several genres of popular music which have an important presence in the audio landscape of Ghana. This is to say that a handful of headings – notably highlife, hiphop, hiplife, and reggae – comfortably denote recognizable and agreed-upon categories of music for a broad range of Ghanaians. Music presented under these headings was well represented in local radio programming and in the selection of CDs and cassettes sold in markets and by street hawkers. Of course there are more than just four musics[27] which are heard,

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[27] The noun usage of the *music* (as opposed to the usual mass noun denotation, as in: "I hear music"), is an academic strategy of designation which adequately evades the some of limitations of terms like *genre,* or *type*, which imply a specificity and stability of denotation, obliging that endless *ad-hoc* taxonomies be devised, convoluted by overlaps and subdivisions, to try to explain what is meant by categorical headings that couldn't be clarified without considering their individual construction through a "commercial/cultural process" where musicological, sociological, and ideological assessments (Frith 1996: 89) may all come into play, generating terms with flexible meanings functional in specific contexts. While genres can refers only to the

known, and thereby discursively significant in Ghana. For example, I could prescribe a genre heading like "International Pop Superstars" to the handful of enormously famous and ubiquitous North American and British performing artists like Celine Dion, Westlife, and Shania Twain whose songs are sung by schoolchildren who barely speak English, and whose visages are painted on the sides of phone card booths and mini busses. These artists, however, were commonly spoken of as if they were single-occupant institutions ("I like hiplife, reggae, and Celine Dion"). They were rarely, if ever, cited as objects of any generic category, save for certain moments when all popular music of the Western world was erected as a single, possibly menacing, entity.[28]

Most of my informants were craftsmen and musicians in what they identified as traditional styles. In conversation, traditional music was used interchangeably with the heading "drumming and dancing", and less often, "culture music", to indicate the musical form they attribute to long-ago Ghana; mostly forms involving collaborations of dancers with percussionists. There are examples of music beyond the "drumming and dancing" form that could also be described as traditional, but when the boys I knew performed as traditional musicians, they were playing drums, bells, and singing chants with their organized groups consisting of ten or so players, accompanied by an affiliated troupe of dancers.

When compared to those popular forms I've mentioned above, there is a marked difference between how "traditional" music is encountered by its (Ghanaian) audience; namely, it is a form reproduced mostly through performance without relying much on the reinforcement of a large industry of recordings and other commodities, though some recordings do exist, mostly for sale to foreigners. Despite this difference, traditional music occupies an important position on the

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outcome of that process of construction, *musics* is broader, and more practical when there is a need to oscillate between incommensurable categories like ceremonial music (which may not be a genre at all) and reggae (which probably is).

[28] In interviews, informants pensively volunteered a range of terms to describe the "kind of music" they considered these performing artists to be exemplary of. Celine Dion, for example, was variously deemed country or rock and roll. More often than not, the question of "kind: or "type" in regards to music that fell outside of well-established categories was met with a descriptive remark like "it is beautiful singing" or "it is music that makes you feel good".

same terrain as other popular musics, firstly for its vitality as a contemporary form that is consciously and constantly reinvented by performers even as they are striving to adhere to certain formal conventions, and secondly for its gravity in identity politics, where traditional music serves well as a symbol of ethnic or tribal identity. Traditional music can therefore share a type of symbolic capital with hip/highlife, reggae, or even hiphop, as the latter three are also invoked as symbols of ethnic identity, though in reference to identities of different scales.

Highlife music, and its rap-infused offshoot, hiplife, are considered to be forms whose roots are firmly planted in West Africa, if not specifically Ghana[29]. I have already alluded to the significance of reggae music to the rastafarian movement, for its characteristically pan-Africanist themes. Hiphop hails to an ever broader collective identity: in the lyrics of hiphop artists, and accordingly, in popular and academic discourse, hiphop is held up as a symbol of identity, if not a unifying political movement of (especially American and British, but ostensibly global) black youth (Kitwana 2004:342). In my first week in Accra, I stopped a young man in his twenties to ask for directions to a certain section of the enormous Mokola market. While we walked, we joked about each other's clothes. My white socks were funny. He said that only soccer players wore white socks with their sneakers. I retaliated with a jab about his baseball cap being on sideways. He grinned and said "Yeah, man, I like hiphop! This is hiphop style, and see this?" he said, holding up a wrist loaded with beaded bracelets, "this is for my tradition. African tradition." Quite a number of the style-conscious youths I met shared this overt way of explicating their personal effects when they had somebody's attention. I remembered this man's statement as one that demonstrated a logical fluidity between multiple scales of ethnic identification,

[29] Highlife is a syncretic music cultivated in the colonial era that combines and modifies both Western and local traditional elements. (Agawu 1984: 38) Highlife songs tend to be upbeat, melodic, and easy to learn, so it is common for musicians to perform songs written by other artists. Hiplife is the name that has been given to the music that is a faster style highlife, with a greater emphasise on synthesized beats and (mostly Twi or Ga) rap sections. Wile some people place the origins of hiplife as far back as the 80s, it is Reggie Rockstone, who released important albums in the mid nineties, who is most often named as the father of hiplife (Ojah 2005, reprinted on www.ghanaweb.com, accessed on September 31, 2006).

and how the styles of young people in Accra tend to unite items from several of these at once, and deliberately, importantly so.

My informants' involvement with the performance of traditional forms alongside their devotion to rasta culture is another good illustration of the fluidity between multiple ethnic identities, for anything done in respect to one's local roots is an act done in the spirit of rastafari. In personal accounts, the story of how they began, as boys, to train in drumming, dancing, and skilled craftwork were very much integrated with the plotline of how they came to see themselves as rastas.

Global collective identities forged from rastafari and hiphop can open areas of self-construction where multiple places are implicated: the hometown, the wider homeland, the home of (actual or symbolic) kin, and so on. Similarly, the criticism of popular musics implicates multiple places, and multiple types of ethnic identity. Take, for example, some of these excerpts taken from an online discussion forum geared towards Ghanaians, where all things related to Ghanaian culture are discussed[30]:

> "I love hip-life....hip-life is way better than US hip-hop. Our artists should be concerned about the consequences/effects their songs would have on the society aside the money... [they] should not preach violence or drugs. I know our hip-life artists know better and would never let us down."
>
> "...I love hip hop...and I know it has positive context which is not shown...I think Ghanaian hip-hop can be positive as long as it stays true to what hip-hop is (not the modern incarnation) and is in our languages or English with a Ghanaian accent. I never really liked hip-life...because like highlife the subject matter is very limited and is uncreative musically..."
>
> "Hip-life has become the propaganda of our new political and socio-cultural climate....Sadly, Ghana's music seems to be trapped at the level of mere entertainment...Every other love song you listen to is love-themed or totally nonsensical – not that musicians have an obligation to a certain criteria for expression – but my question is: are our young hiplife artists even aware of the potential of their art? Where are the prophetic lyricists of our time? Who are our Bob Marleys and Tupac Shakurs? [...] The highlife era seems to have not only preoccupied itself with entertainment

[30] From the www.GhanaThink.com user forums, accessed on June 10, 2006. These comments were posted between April 20 and May 10, 2006.

> but also the transmission of our cultural norms. Do you remember Nimo or Nan Ampadu with their guitar? Telling fables with didactic value on national TV…they seemed to have had a purpose to their trade. What are we being made to listen to these days?"

The online discussion excerpts quoted above highlight the global media's role in the production of popular culture. Earlier, I attempted to give the reader a sense of how global media, and specifically, the World Wide Web, is of colossal importance to the stock of ideas and possible objects of interest available to Accra youths, with or without reliable access to computer technology. For those who are, in fact, able to take web browsing as a pastime, there are commercial websites that provide popular music fans with all the information – official or rumoured – needed to council their ongoing consumptions: concert announcements, album release dates, lists of available recordings and memorabilia, links to stores that sell them, classified listing for individuals to trade and sell related products.[31] For those so inclined, there are also sites like GhanaThink.org, which offer something which goes beyond reference material for shoppers: the opportunity to extend one's consumption by participating in a form of *ad nauseam* discourse of chat rooms and online message forums. With endless space and an apparently bottomless pool of potential participants, anything can be tabled for dissection or expansion; anything can be held up as something worth talking about. Exactly where the sharing of practical information divides from superfluous bantering is a matter of individual judgment, but the ubiquity of bulletin boards indicates that, among enthusiasts, there is an impetus to take their object of interest and simply make a bigger deal of it. Talking about popular music therefore can serve as a vehicle for the discussion of more abstract issues: politics, morality, and cultural survival, to name a few. Individuals can react against and lend support to ideas that arise out of mass-mediated or face-to-face discussions. An opinion stated (or posted) becomes a model for others to react against, side with, or side with after making certain personal modifications.

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[31] Examples of sites of this kind that are geared particularly towards Ghanaians are www.ghanamusic.com, www.ghanaweb.com, and www.musicinghana.com. Western recording artists can be explored through countless commercial websites, accessed by using a search engine like www.google.com.

In this way, the meanings ascribed onto popular musics are tinkered with by people who can add clout to their personal readings by brandishing knowledge as a form of (sub)cultural capital (Thornton 1996:11); that knowledge about cultural forms that leads people to feel that their experience as a listener is enhanced. Participating in the casual discourses of popular culture can become something of a hobby for some keen web forum users, in much the same way as it is for the core group of young men who inform this research: those who I earlier characterized as self-appointed pundits of all things related to music in their city.

Around café tables and in overstuffed taxis, my friends found themselves arguing or, in moments of rare concord, mutually postulating on the direction of local music, the moral lessons espoused by certain artists in their songs, the ideological implications of style choices, and many, many questions of authenticity: the validity of somebody's claim to rastafarianism, the credibility of foreign hiphop artists' identifications with the African diaspora or some otherwise stated global black brethren, the relative Ghanaian-ness of local artists working in newly emergent genres that exhibit Western influences. Somewhere in my notes, I scrawled the phrase "hashing out the signs" while describing one such critical scrum, noting that my role had become the provider of answers (including defensive rebuttals) about what things were like in North America, or to serve as a captive student on whom to heap ostensibly unequivocal truths about how things are in Ghana, in Africa, or the world.

Highlife, Hiplife, Hiphop

There is a connection between the rasta scene and the music scene (as in, the community of musicians working in Accra) that puts the former on familiar terms with members of local bands who play various styles of music. Lots of groups have a self-proclaimed (or speculated) rasta or two in them. A few of my informants who usually played in traditional groups have been known to "sit in" as drummers or vocalists with one of the local highlife or hiplife groups who played in small nightclubs around Accra. This is one factor that takes the rastafari

scene away on most nights from its most defining music – reggae – into social environments organized around other musics, especially highlife, where rastas are huge fans, and traditional music and dance shows, where many rastas are performers. Even those musics that fall outside of the more globally recognized set of rasta symbols can be made significant to the rasta scene by representing ideas which are valued in that scene, say, by providing avenues for the expression of wise messages, or by being thoroughly "local". For instance, reggae music doesn't seem to inspire semiotic "hashing" as often as highlife, hiplife or hiphop music does, but the criteria of inspiration merit, for which reggae was celebrated, and the vaguer question of what feeling a person can get from listening to the music, were key concerns when speaking about all manners of popular music. Highlife is afforded a great deal of respect for being home-grown, and for spawning the presently ubiquitous hiplife music. Furthermore, it was emphasised that the content of highlife is generally more morally sound, parental, and inspirational than the well-loved but admittedly more vapid and pleasure-focussed content of hiplife. In one interview, for example, a friend whom I will call Kwame (age 24) remarked that hiplife is faster and more fun to dance to, and that he wondered how many people even bothered to listen to the lyrics, aside from some scrutinizing parents. Although he was a fan of both kinds of music, he held highlife music in a more reverent light: "The message is cool. It's like advice, inspiration. It tells you how to make something of your life. It's good for young people."

Hiphop music, local or otherwise (though most of the artists cited were American), is popular to a relatively wide, though predominantly young, audience in Accra, and it forms the axis of another youth culture scene replete with its own styles and clubculture environments. The young men who affect a strong hiphop style in their manners of dress, walk, and speech are casually dubbed *yoyos* and homeboys[32]. Accordingly, the hiphop scene in Accra is one of the young rasta scene's most significant Others, and things from the hiphop world often come up

[32] One of my interviewees told me that *brem brem* is another term for the same thing, but I didn't come across that term in common use. It is possible that it is used more often in local-language dialogue.

in comparison and contrast to counterpart forms from the rasta scene. When it comes to the merit of hiphop music in comparison to other musics popular in Accra, hiphop divides people. Even individual opinions seemed split, with different situations calling for the articulation of different views.

When speaking strictly of music they enjoyed listening to, many people, including the teenaged schoolchildren I spoke with, listed hiphop music and certain rap artists, especially enormously internationally successful ones like 50-Cent, Nelly, and Puff Daddy[33]. If, however, the conversation later turned to the issue of the music's lyrical content, its potential influence on the local music industry, its potential effect on the moral sensibilities of the youth, or what to make of the clothing styles and other accoutrements of global hiphop culture making their way into the style vocabulary of Accra, remarks often took a sharply negative turn, and it would be at that point that two other terms for hiphop-styled youths came up: *gangsta* and *nigga*. I was told that these terms were borrowed from high-budget hiphop videos depicting extremely expensively dressed rap stars appearing to glorify gang violence while making degrading remarks about other artists. The words have been subverted to mock somebody who is apparently trying to present themselves in the image of those rappers[34].

This was a topic that had most of the rastamen I spoke with, even those who were only nineteen and twenty years old, taking a sort of parental tone with regard to the generation "coming up", whether or not they were counting themselves into that set. It was the inspirational messages contained in both reggae and highlife music that secured those forms the respect of the young rastas, at least officially. Most saw American hiphop music as being thick with messages of violence, jealousy, vulgar materialism, and crass sexuality. When the rastas and their musician friends expressed worry for the kids coming up, it wasn't simply a matter of believing that children and teenagers are likely to mimic what they hear

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[33] Puff Daddy is a pseudonym of Sean Combs, a rap artist from New York who has built a multimillion dollar industry around his record labels and fashion lines (John Bush and Bradley Torreano in Bogdanov et al., eds. 2003: 395). His widespread fame outside of North America has been noted by Ronald A.T. Judy (with emphasis on his popularity in Tunisia) (1999:9).

[34] I believe that *homeboy* and *yoyo* have comparable etymologies, but are certainly not loaded with the same acerbic attack of the subject's character as *nigga*.

in crass rap lyrics, but the fear that they, as a generation of consumers and future musicians, will bring about the death of the more inspirational musics. One informant had this to say about Western rap artists: "they sing about nasty things, and now hiplife artists sing about nasty things too. It's a bad influence. People use [hiphop] music to insult each other. Music is full of inspiration and teachings. Music educates more than anything."

This disapproval of the "nastiness" of hiphop music was echoed by the teenaged schoolboys and schoolgirls I interviewed. Their understandings of the music and the artists who make it was limited in comparison to my young adult informants who had more first-hand experiences with live concerts[35] and night club environments to inform their views. The children's remarks seemed formulaic in contrast, as if they were obediently mirroring the stern opinions of teachers and parents.

By sources of all ages, the apparent threat posed by hiphop and the local *yoyo*s was almost invariably deferred to another time and place, or to people who were weaker and more easily influenced. In other words, to express a fondness for 50-Cent's last album was not to contradict one's generalized, official, mistrust of rap music, even if 50-Cent himself was used as a case example of American hiphop's lamentable qualities in the same conversation[36]. Kwame pointed out that most of the people I was interviewing had a command of English that was above average for the general population of Accra. Like the journalists, school teachers, and public/radio speakers who were largely responsible for propagating the moral reaction against hiphop, my informants were in a position of relative privilege to be able to engage in a literary critic's approach to the lyrics, and even so, the speed and thickly idiomatic language of the music results in perceptions which are often based on provocative keywords picked out in the song, rather than the complete text. By the same token, it is important to note that language proficiency

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[35] A few hiphop groups from North America have made appearances in Ghana over the last decade or so, including the L.A-based Black Eyed Peas (Bynoe 2006:27,198) and very recently, Brooklyn's Jay-Z (www.ghanamusic.com, accessed October 2, 2006.).

[36] 50-Cent has garnered a reputation in the music press for rapping about first hand experiences with drugs, prison, and violent physical assaults and shootings. He is also characterized as having a style and comportment that "visually represents his hardcore demeanour."(Bynoe 2006:133).

does not necessarily limit access to or enjoyment of this or any other form of popular culture (Adejunmobi 2002:75). The importance of language, in this case, has more to do with politics of nationalist or localist identity than plain intelligibility.

Language is part of the reason why West African hiphop musicians are easily forgiven for their stylistic homeboy transgressions and praised for their successes. Sheer local pride is heaped tenfold upon any hiphop or hiplife musician who raps in a Ghanaian language. Along with its the morally questionable themes, American rap music and the global industry of western popular music in general is accused of have an Anglicizing influence on Ghanaian music[37]. The feeling is that, as one person put it, "if you want to be an international star, you have to sing in English rather than your local language."

There is a third charge frequently laid on U.S. hiphop, which is that the youth culture that surrounds it is one of greedy, materialistic excess. My friend Howard is an outspoken and arrogant drum maker and rastaman in his mid-twenties. One evening, I was walking with Howard and one of his shy sidekicks from the Art Centre when a car alarm went off at a gas station on the opposite side of the road. Howard scoffed at the car's fancy security system: "I wouldn't have that. Even if I had money and a car, I wouldn't have that." I asked Howard why this was, knowing well that he would tell me whether I asked or not. He glanced at the group of men fussing about the vehicle. They were around our age, decked out in low-slung baggy white pants, bandanas, big t-shirts, baseball caps, chain necklaces, and basketball sneakers. "Me, I'm a rastaman!" Howard hollered into the street, "*that* is for rich guys. They want to be like Americans. Too much like American rappers." Throughout this episode, Howard's friend had been supplying various emphatic gestures and mutters of approval.

A teenage boy once told me that he liked to listen to 50-Cent sometimes, but then added, "you can see that he is a hard man". I asked how he could tell. He

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[37] Judy, in his article about popular music in Tunisia, discusses the concept of English as a global language, in relation to the concept of Americanization, noting that the two are often taken as nearly synonymous and that Americanization is further identified with the undesirable "subsuming of all human expression to economics." (1999:9).

described the rapper's tattoos, his big running shoes and trousers, and his many necklaces. When I asked whether he thought there were men in Accra who dressed that way, he said that there were a small few who did, but not as many as in South Africa, or so he had heard. "If a man dresses that way, you can see his life. A life of just work and money. Those are *niggas*," he said. Several people told me that the *yoyo*s buy their clothes a few sizes too big because they think of themselves as "big men"[38]. As another informant put it, "dress can tell you the kind of person someone is. You see some people who wear their trousers down" – there, he pointed to his buttocks to show how low some guys let the waist-bands of their pants sit – "and just walking as if the world belong to them."

There is a subtle but significant difference between what could be considered typical of this generalized parent culture reaction to hiphop and what was articulated by members of Accra's young rasta scene. The latter show concern for the general moral education of the young, yes, but they also have a particularly strong interest in trends in Ghanaian popular music (and popular music in Ghana, regardless of origin), not to mention a sharp eye for anything that can be held up as a symptom of ideological differences between their scene and someone else's. On the matter of *homeboys* in Accra, one of my friends had this to say: "their brains are made of Babylon things. They are not rasta. They don't know this world." He believed that hiphop music was going to promote undesirable characteristics in the upcoming generation. "But," he prognosticated, "the wise will separate themselves."

The Babylonian Affliction

The voluntary segregations and separations innate in every application of *rasta* as a label, and in every utterance of *rastafari* as a blessing or emphatic oath, is further clarified when one learns that there is a single title assigned to everything else: Babylon. It is both a place and the condition that is felt to grow

[38] While the use of the word "big" to imply importance is relatively straightforward, please note that the term "big man" actually functions in Ghana as a semi-official label for a man who is in a position of considerable authority, usually wealthy, and implicitly, likely to be corpulent.

from that place, to radiate from it, with the potential to seep dangerously onto the rastafarian Zion. Babylon-the-place is not-Africa, and accordingly, the term in this sense can refer to a simple matter of unfortunate fact ("tomorrow our sister Janice goes back to Babylon; we will miss her"). A connection to Babylon-the-place implies certain things about one's mindset and thus fuels countless jabs made at tourists whether, in the spirit of light-hearted teasing or genuine annoyance ("these Babylon boys don't know how to drive"). Babylon, taken as a condition that can transcend geography, as an attribute that might even be found festering in a full-blooded Ghanaian, however, is what gives weight to the most vicious of verbal blows ("ignore him; *he is Babylon*"). Babylon in this sense is a question of consciousness: in this context referring to that inspired state of mind achieved by those who come to *overstand*[39] life's truths by meditating and keeping a righteous mind.

At times a Babylonian oddity might be pointed out with kind-hearted amusement. I was once eating a meal at a restaurant when I was suddenly embarrassed by a flurry of chuckles and Ga-language conversation was directed at me, punctuated by hand gestures and several decries of "Babylon". I took my hand from the bowl, blushed, apologized presumptuously, and begged to be filled in on what I'd done badly. My friend smiled: "It's okay! We like how you eat. Babylon style. You keep it nice, there is no mess," going on to joke that one of the other boys at the table ate like he had a hole in his chin, so that half of the food he put in his mouth fell right back out. There, the Babylon condition explained my quirk, but didn't insult it, except for maybe a mild reference to the common complaint that white tourists are timid, uptight people afraid to "feel free". This latter notion, not surprisingly, was behind the phrase I took for the title of this thesis: "Babylon boys don't dance". That line was an offhanded scoff made by one of the rastas about some *obruni* volunteer workers who were sitting calmly at a table at a highlife nightclub while a live band played music for a crowd of happy dancers who were apparently able to feel the music in a way that rastas tended to

[39] To *overstand* is to know things to a more enlightened degree than if one could only understand. This is an Iyaric or patois word (King 2002:xx) that has become well established in dread talk slang used by Accra's young rastas.

read as a gauge of good character. The feeling that people who enjoy themselves have their priorities intact, especially when inspirational music and ganja is involved, was a theme that I found subtly audible in my informants' opinions on many things.

The concept of Babylon in reference to a black-skinned foreigner was always a matter of more complex assessment. A visible tinge of African heritage can entitle someone to certain comforts of assumed fraternity, but simultaneously disqualifies the same individual from the some of the immunity offered to a pale-skinned foreigner. The smallest comments or actions could call into question black-skinned foreigners' loyalties to Africa, and, by extension, how bright the spark of rasta consciousness was glowing within them – was *still* glowing within them, perhaps – since, unlike their pale-skinned counterparts, for whom a conscious mind would be an exceptional triumph over the natural Babylon condition, consciousness in someone with African ancestry was taken as something which ought to be there if it had been properly retained, maintained, and if necessary, sought and rekindled.

Along these lines, the musics and fashions which have emerged as the products and symbols of black cultures outside of Africa (Neal 2004:371), with the exception of any obviously or acceptably rastafarian commodities, were subject to complex assessments as well, especially in light of the evident appeal some of those forms have to Accran teens and young adults. Ghanaian hiplife musicians, whose music incorporates rap but nevertheless holds true to its highlife origins in most sonic respects, have tended to dress a lot like big-name American rap stars, especially for television appearances, promotional photos, and album covers. In reference to this, one of my interviewees commented that "people buy your music more if you dress in a way to attract them." Although the hiphop styles which are becoming popular in Accra are clearly informed by certain musical icons, not everyone feels that it is reasonable to interpret every instance of Ghanaian appropriation of such American styles as a logical extension of Babylonian consciousness. "*Yoyo*s think differently than the rastamen," assured

one young rasta in an interview, "but it depends where they got their dressing from."

In spite of how popular it seemed to be to denigrate hiphop style, the look seems to have a saleable allure with the young. The sheer popularity of hiphop style in global youth markets (Kitwana 2004: 342) has influenced youthful fashion trends in Accra general ways, beyond just the very obvious deliberate appropriations by *yoyo*s and hiplife artists, such that wearing clothes that have a hiphop look about them may have little to do with a keen interest in or identification with rap music or global hiphop culture.

The commodification of youth culture styles is not limited to the hiphop world, and there is a keen, somewhat uncomfortable awareness of this among my informants. The fashionable, "global pop idiom" aspects of rastafarianism were very much acknowledged, and in many ways, resented for threatening to cheapen the identity. The identity of the rasta who is young, urbanite and savvy about international popular culture is easily contested by onlookers from within and outside of the scene. In the next chapter, I will focus more intently on the matter of fashion and style in an attempt to show how the multitude of possible ways of "doing rastafari" fly in the face of notions of universal authenticity of the identity, but also demands a certain amount of rhetorical agility on the part of those who wish that their very personalised versions of the identity be accepted as valid to their peers, themselves, and certainly, to anyone who inquires of or poses a challenge to their claim to it.

Chapter IV

You Have to Carry Your Hair

Making Rasta

Over several generations, the set of practices most clearly and consistently associated with the movement have grown, though purists might say degraded, into a globally recognised vocabulary of signs within a larger language of youth subculture expressions. Because of the movement's basic tenets of African traditionalism, certain traditional forms in Ghana have acquired rastafarian tags. One young man, a craftsman and traditional musician, made some remarks which I feel demonstrated this effect quite well: "In my heart I know I'm not a rasta, but sometimes, because of the system, I dress like one." I wondered what the system was. "Like the city. The way things are," he told me, and then went on to explain what he meant by dressing like a rasta. He liked to buy locally printed cloth in the markets and take it to a tailor to be sewn into clothes, rather than buying the pre-made imported clothes that the majority of young men in Accra wear for everyday affairs. He liked to keep his hair a bit on the thick side rather than shaving it close to his head. Most of his ideas came from old photographs taken of men from his home region during his grandfather's time.

I would discourage reading this fellow's way of "dressing like a rasta" as a mislabelling of "natural" or even especially customary style practices; a young man living in the big city is making something of a statement by dressing, on a nearly daily basis, like an old man from a small village[40]. He was somewhat frustrated, however, to find that his acts of style had been so successfully earmarked by a global collective identity that it was difficult to have them read the way he'd like: as gestures of homage to his heritage minus the old-testament framework; as good-looking and original clothing minus the implication of group affiliation.

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[40] Typically, men have 'traditional' style clothing for formal and ceremonial occasions, but wear Western-style trousers and collared shirts or t-shirts most of the time.

Partly as an answer to the supposedly materialistic message of hiphop fashion, some of the rastas hold fast to criteria such as low-costliness and localism (Ferguson 1999: 212) in their clothing choices. The *yoyos* have their gold chains and rings, but my rasta friends drew attention to their meagre, dull silver and beaded jewellery, making excuses for any remotely flashy baubles: "I just wear this one because my friend gave it to me. I don't like to wear much gold." When a peddler came to the Art Centre selling second-hand t-shirts, his pile of shirts was subjected to an ideological dissection: "you can't bring me *that*; I'm a rastaman," was one indignant response to the t-shirt the peddler had been waving, deemed unacceptable because of the company logos printed on it: the corporate sponsors of some charity marathon for which the shirt had been printed. The young men rifled through the shirts looking for some that were more politically appropriate. Those meeting their approval included one with a drawing of sunflowers on the front, and a tourist souvenir shirt for some city in the U.S.A. All the same, the peddler left without making a sale.

Though some of the anti-materialist, anti-corporate, and African traditionalist values common in the rasta scene do translate into clothing and jewellery preferences for certain individuals, dreadlocks have a unique sort of significance to the identity, being arguably the most agreed-upon signifier of rasta culture, intelligible to scene members and 'outsiders' around the globe. Within, and also well beyond the scenes which comprise the contemporary global movement, dreadlocked hair codes rasta (Hebdige 1987: 53). The semiotic links between dreadlocked hair and rastafarianism are multiple and elaborate. Let me attempt to map out some of the ways "dreads" *mean* rasta, beginning with how the word itself can operate in a few different ways in everyday usage.

The word rasta is, at times, a proper noun. Here are two examples: (1) a man steps on my friend Yaw's foot while boarding a bus and exclaims "Oh! rasta, sorry, sorry", and (2) taxi drivers hovering outside a popular dance bar waiting for fares called out things like "Yeah, rasta. You need taxi?" to locksmen emerging

from the bar, while addressing others by the more general *Challey*[41]. Even the rasta boys themselves, and even their decidedly not-a-rasta (but "rasta looking") friends would use the term in the same casually presumptuous manner, even though a number of them, in interviews, expressed frustration with the simplistic assumption that under every mop of dreadlocks was a "real" rastaman. Most of the time, the locksmen would ignore the passive murmurings of "hey rasta" from the children, bored shopkeepers, idle security guards and assorted loiterers who seemed to make a hobby of remarking on passers-by. A proud rasta might, on a whim, give an affirming salute in reply. A proud not-a-rasta might, on a whim, choose to argue: "*Challey*, I beg you! I am *not* rasta."

The word rasta is, at other times, a noun referring directly to dreadlocked hair. Again, here are two examples: (1) fans of the Black Stars professional football team, but critics of star player Pimpong (who keeps a mane of chin-length flopping dreadlocks) make numerous jokes to the effect that "his rasta gets in the way" when he plays, and (2) in an interview, a teenaged schoolboy was describing to me the "look" he associated with hiphop stars, remarking that "some have cornrows. Some have rasta"[42].

I chose two examples where the actual identifying practices of the subject are unknown and do not need to be known for the purpose of the statement. In other words, whether Pimpong or whomever that schoolboy had in mind when he spoke of "some rap stars" would have personally counted themselves as part of the movement for which their hairstyle is named is hard to confirm and largely trivial. My point is that dreadlocks and rasta have come to operate as synonyms in certain contexts. Among those who wholeheartedly identify as rastafari, the link between the word and the hairstyle is more convoluted.

As I was led to understand it, "making rasta" refers to the official establishment of a personal identification with rastafari, defined by the act of

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[41] Pronounced "chah-lay", and spelled a few ways (challey and challe are common, though it is also frequently interpreted, apparently wrongly, as a colloquial modification of the English name Charlie), this word is a generic name with which one can casually address strangers, especially in everyday business transactions, as when haggling with taxi drivers or peddlers. Some of the young people I knew also liked to call each other "challey", a bit facetiously.

[42] Cornrows is a hairstyle consisting of thin braids, knotted tightly against the scalp in parallel rows.

forming dreadlocked hair. The phrase "keeping [my] hair", in fact, was used more or less interchangeably with "making rasta". This meaning works, that is, for a self-identified rasta who has, indeed, grown dreadlocks. It is the vow of the Nazarites[43] described in the book of Numbers (chapter 6) of the Judeo-Christian Bible that is widely understood as the true origin of the practice of keeping dreads, which a few of my informants could clarify with a retelling of the story of Samson (who lost his strength when his wife Delilah conspired to have his hair shaved off) or, with less confidence, mentions of John the Baptist or Samuel, noted as famous keepers of their hair with few other details. The virtually uncontested scriptural origin of the practice of keeping dreads aids those who so choose in offering up their hair as a certificate of authenticity of their identity, as if the two (having rasta and being rasta) were co-requisite. Nevertheless, all such explications, even the most dogmatically averred, tend to have asterisks attached. Rastas keep dreads as a sign of their commitment to the movement, most would agree. But what about the inverse and converse: do dreadlocks clearly indicate the identity, and would their absence indicate that the identity is absent too? As I was led to understand it: not really.

For one thing, as I mentioned in the last section, there is, at all times, an awareness that dreadlocks have been become somewhat sexy or hip thanks to several decades of popular reggae and rap stars sporting the look and turning into a global commodity, albeit one that is, strictly speaking, free of charge. I do not disagree with Savishinsky's suggestion that looking like a rasta could earn a young man the attention of girls and the approval of his cohorts.[44] Part of a successful claim to the identity, however, is ensuring that one's enactment of rastafari's stylistic trappings is suitably well grounded in at least a basic understanding of their meaning and gravity, to the satisfaction of oneself and that of one's perpetually teasing, scrutinizing peers. As I was advised in one interview: "there's no fate in your hair. You have to be able to carry your rasta".

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[43] It was not until I independently researched certain biblical passages mentioned by my sources that I became aware of certain minor confusions in their recollections of scripture, such as one informant's invention of Nazareth as an Old Testament character, (Nazareth is a town which appears later in New Testament), and then conflating that character with Samson the Nazarite.

[44] See the quoted passage (Savishinsky 1994:29-30) on page 4 of this thesis.

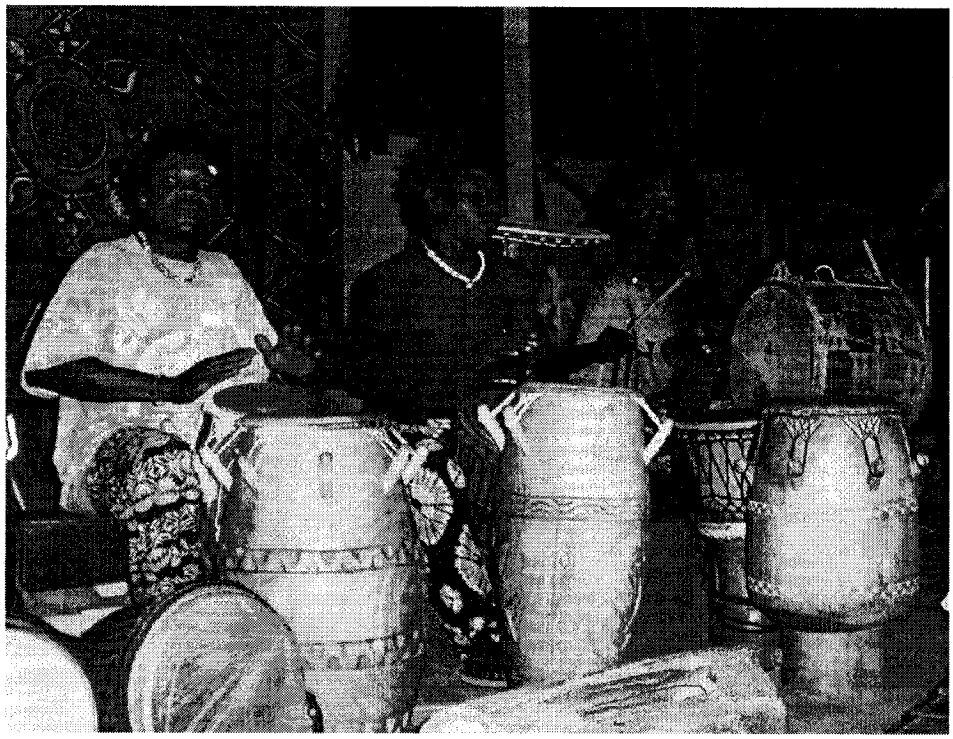

Plate 2: Three musicians (two brothers and their cousin) who also work together in a drum-making shop. Two are rastas, one is adamantly not.

Nevertheless, it is well accepted that living up to the statements implied by certain style practices – as when one carries one's rasta – is a project that allows plenty of space for idiosyncratic interpretations of the meaning of style objects. The young Accran rastas I knew spoke with ease about the fact that what was true for them might not be true for another. This relativity, I believe, had something to do with a general (at least formal) tolerance of religious diversity. Rastafarianism has well known Christian underpinnings which are understood, if foggily, as important parts of the movement's history. Nevertheless, an acceptance of religious diversity asks that a version of rastafari filtered of its most biblical elements be tolerated as well. Ethnic pride, therefore, often seemed to eclipse religious beliefs in significance. Because old Samson simply doesn't have the same mystique for strictly secular rastas as he does the more religious ones, the primary protagonist in the story inscribed upon dreadlocked hair has become a racial phenotype: the most important virtue of dreads, based on what I was told,

seems to be that they come about when coarse, curly, 'negroid' hair is permitted to sprout unchecked, without any efforts to smooth it out like Caucasian hair.

By way of explanation for the hallowing of abundant African hair, some hold that it was none other than the Europeans who were largely responsible for instituting the now-standard grooming practice of keeping hair shorn close to the head, as part of their disciplinary regime imposed on indigenous people of the Gold Coast. Ancestors of some undetermined long-ago generation, as the story would go, were "naturally rasta" by virtue of having grown long matted hair in the absence of both the pressure and the technology to crop or tidy it. Indeed, tribal forefathers of generations past were cited by many as inspirations for the choice of dreads or other hairstyles, as with another of my fervent not-a-rasta friends, who kept his mane of tightly spun dreadlocks because it made him feel like he was being true to his Fanti roots.[45]

Furthermore, because hairstyle is used to make a remark on various forms of traditionalism, then there is another point to be made, which is that other identities performed in concert with rastafarianism may overrule the latter when it comes to what is done with the hair. Some young Accra men keep slightly rounded "Afros", longer than the most common popular male styles, because they believe it to be the style of their ancestors from particular tribes in Ghana. Many practicing Muslims in Ghana keep their hair very closely shaven. I interviewed one teenage boy who explained that, for this reason on its own, he could never make rasta. Another Muslim informant kept his head shaved but told me that he, and many others who did the same, felt themselves to be "rasta in their hearts". Still, because the dress and style disciplines of Islam are interpreted widely and very often quite lightly in Accra, being Muslim doesn't always beat out rastafarianism for rights to the scalp. The Muslim holy month of Ramadan was observed during my stay in Accra, and it was only at that time that I learned, with any certainty, who among my acquaintances actually practiced Islam. Temporary

[45] The two men who claimed to keep their thicker "afros" for reasons of tribal heritage were from different regions than this man (the central region and the Ewe region). I have little more than hearsay and unverifiable images to confirm or deny the truth in any of their claims that afros were typical of elder or past generations of men from their home regions.

prayer compounds were cleared in front of workshops and in driveways, where Islamic men displaying a considerable range of garb and hairstyles gathered to pray as per the customs of the occasion.

Moreover, though one may have lovingly cultivated dreads in the full spirit of aligning oneself with a global movement replete with lifestyle and ideological implications, certain circumstances may require that one hacks them off in the spirit of mundane practicalities. The dress-codes of jobs and schools, the rules of parents in the context of the family home, and grandmothers who simply turned pale with grief when they saw what their teenage grandsons had gone and done to their heads while off in the big city, are among the reasons cited for the sacrifice of cherished locks. I interviewed one man who was adamant about the semiotic weight of his stubby dreads, in conversations with both me and his friends, only to have his sense of humour tested the next week when he betrayed himself by shaving his head for the purpose of a visa application photo. He thought he would stand a better chance at having his application go through if he shelved the oft-maligned rastaman image, at least temporarily. His friends chided him about his abandonment of his rasta locks, though not altogether unkindly: "Oh, why? Couldn't you carry them?"

The point that dreadlocks can be a liability warrants a moment of consideration, for it presents a caveat to the accusation that rasta style is often adopted by the young strictly to enjoy the spoils of a 'hip' image. It appears quite true that dreadlocks make a man stand out in Accra: children like to cry out 'rasta!' when those locksmen walk by, and, like Savishinsky claimed, young women, especially tourists, really do seem to befriend them more often than other Accran men who have more conservative styles (1994:23). So, yes, looking like a rasta may win certain forms of desirable attention, but I want to emphasise that the benefits don't always come cheap. One must, at the very least, accept the consequences of being visibly associated with a collective identity which elicits mixed, and often quite negative, reactions from the public.

In an interview with two teenage schoolboys, one of them brought up the term 'rasta', so I asked him what sort of person he had in mind when he used the

word. "They dance like this!" he said, leaping out of his seat to demonstrate - and very well, I might add – the syncopated jump-and-sway moves made famous by Bob Marley and emulated by countless rastas to come (Savishinsky 1994:46), including the young Accrans at the reggae beach parties. The boy and his friend collapsed into giggles over the dance and then went on to describe the rastamen as people who smelled bad from not washing well – "they don't put water on their hair!"[46] – and who smoked ganja and tobacco. Finally, one of them added, soberly, that "the things they do are not good for your life. When you start [rastafari], it will spoil your life."

My impression is that it is quite common for any item associated with rasta culture to be quickly linked to marijuana usage. In the imagination of many members of the public, this is thought to result in lethargy or even insanity. Dreadlocks are not considered acceptable attire at most learning institutions or places of business, at least partly due to their association with unseemly lifestyles. Though some of my informants' comments about the harsh judgements they must endure for the sake of their chosen styles might have been overblown, I encountered enough allusions to the stereotype of the rastaman as lazy, crazy, and high on drugs to not doubt their claims that dreadlocks are indeed a burden, at least sometimes. When they spoke about people "carrying their locks" then, they were making a point about the element of conviction required to live with that hairstyle; a conviction that would ideally, in their views, be motivated by the religious or political ideologies of rastafarianism, rather than the appeal of having the hip "tough guy" image that only wins the admiration of particular audiences in certain contexts.

Lazy, Crazy and Drugged

A sermon was aired on a local radio station wherein a jovial pastor amused his congregation with a lesson built upon memories of his teenage years. His story

[46] This is a common misconception. Well established dreads can be easily soaped and rinsed, and it was certainly the habit of my rasta friends to maintain high standards of hygiene, bathing once or even twice daily.

was about certain boys, classmates of his, who impressed their peers by shrugging off the implicitly childish role of schoolboy to take jobs. In the pastor's story, the boys were presented as archetypal characters that most anyone could find familiar:

> "*most* of the children I knew diligently attended year after year of schooling whether we liked it or not, but there were always *those boys* – you know which ones I mean – *those boys* who became..." – and here the pastor heaved a sigh and made a grand dramatic pause – "...driver's mates"[47].

The congregation responded immediately with chuckles and a smattering of agreements: "mmm-hmm!", or "ah, yes!". As he continued his story, the pastor's audience hooted gleefully at his characterization of these young driver's mates and the hallowed status they were afforded by a 'cool' factor known only to the young. Jealous, the driver's mates' schoolchild friends were left to watch through the window from their desks, sighing each time the *trotro* would pass by. The mates, the preacher assured, would be sure to holler their signals particularly loudly when the *trotro* passed a school, ensuring that the sound would fall on coveting ears of other youths.

The moral of the story is predictable. The boys who dropped school for driver's mate jobs could enjoy the material and symbolic spoils of that choice for only so long. The spare cash that could meet the desires of a wayward youth – marijuana and junk food being repeatedly emphasized by the pastor – would not fund the more legitimate needs and wants of a self-respecting grown man. Nor would the lazy, and again, drug-smoking friends acquired by the boys during their unsupervised hours prove to be models of any desirable adult characteristics. In contrast, the pastor cast those boys who stayed in school as the obvious gallants whose diligence and humility as children would pay high dividends in the form of sound life skills, and the pursuant rewards of good jobs and ideal families.

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[47] Driver's mates are the young assistants (usually teenage boys) of the men who drove the modified minibuses and vans – called trotros – that provide group transportation along standardized routes within and between cities and towns. "Mates" spend their day perched precariously on rear bumpers or dangling from open side doors, orchestrating the collection and dropping of passengers with a system of hollered signals, juggling cash exchanges all the while.

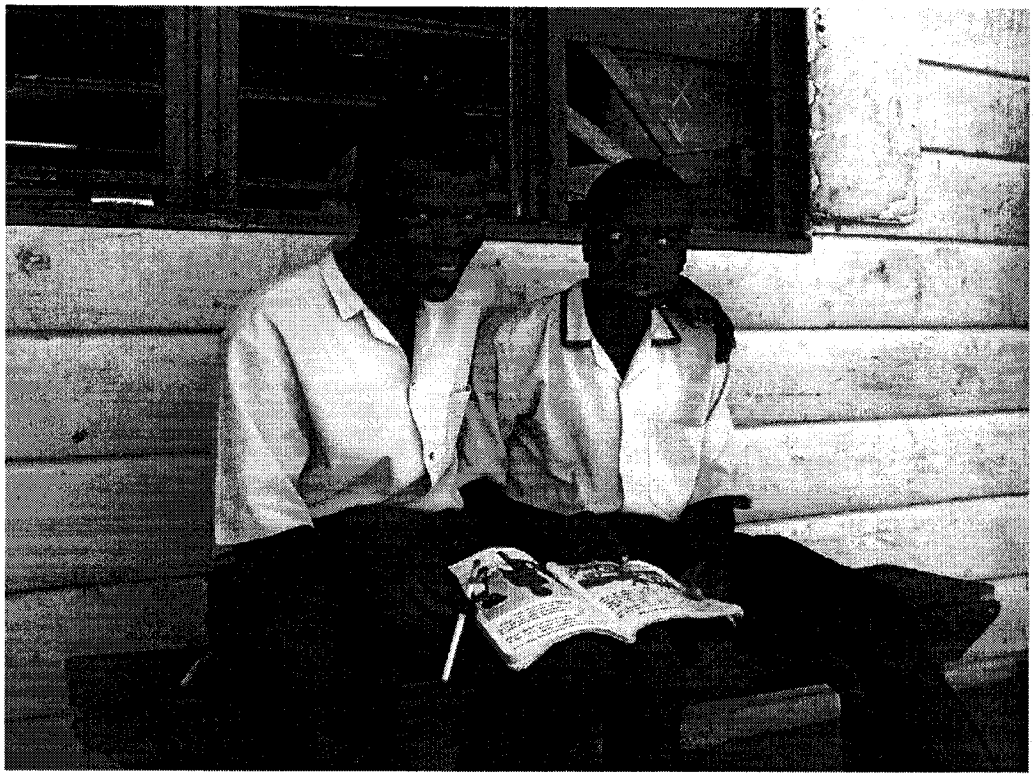

Plate 5: Two teenagers in school uniforms.

I am relaying the story of the radio sermon for its depiction of youth and what youth can get up to when left to their own devices, and as an example of marijuana being featured as both a symptom and an exacerbating factor of general malaise suspected of the youthful generation. To be sure, the pastor's knowledge of the mates' secret drug use seemed a bit questionable, considering that, as a young pastor-to-be, he was apparently seated in his desk, associating with good children, and working diligently towards honourable ends the entire time "*those boys* who became driver's mates" were off navigating their downward spirals.

The disapproval of ganja is also the root of most negative attitudes towards rasta culture. There is a general respect for the traditional arts rastas are frequently practitioners of. Plenty of people like reggae music. There are countless ideological points where rastafarianism bleeds into more widely felt pan-Africanist or localist sentiments. The matter of marijuana use, however, is what is held up as the rasta scene's damning flaw. In turn, it is on the matter of marijuana

use that the Accran rastas I knew were most adamant about their distinction from "the rest" of society.

At the beach party, the freedom afforded by having a space that was relatively secluded from the gaze of outsider eyes was best demonstrated in the party-goers use of marijuana, in plain view, in Herculean doses, with rastafarian-intoned toasts to its virtues made upon every third puff. Furthermore, the whole process was annotated verbally for the benefit of foreign guests like me: "you hear the song? It says 'pass the culture to the left hand side'.[48] Do you know what 'the culture' is? It's the herb! *This* is Africa culture!"

At one of the parties, I overheard a discussion between one of my youngest and most precocious key sources, and an American college student who was working as a volunteer for a Christian group. My rasta friend had affected a certain sagacious baritone dread-talk lilt that seemed to accost him from time to time – always an alarming shift from his regular boyish tenor – and was booming a lesson on the inspiring, mind-elucidating merits of marijuana at the abstinent American volunteer, who was, for his part, repeatedly suggesting that they adjourn their conversation to a time when they both (making an emphatic gesture toward the rasta boy) had "clearer minds". The lads had reached a moot point.

Abstinence from drinking alcohol is one of the traditional rules of conduct in rastafarianism (Savishinsky 1994: 20). Most of the rastas I knew drank a modest to moderate amount of alcohol, while claiming to drink far less than the typical non-rasta. As a rebuttal to the common equation of marijuana smoking with lack of mental soundness, the intoxicating effect of alcohol was often brought up, not just as a socially acceptable equivalent to the intoxicating effect of ganja, but as an inferior form of mental clouding, devoid of any meditative value. "When you drink, you will be speaking crazy, but when you smoke your brain is normal", explained a young rastafarian wood carver. Along the same lines, another had this to say about disapproving older adults: "they can't understand the

[48] As it turns out, this is a mishearing of the line "pass the kutchie pon the left hand side", which is both the title and the chorus lyric from a famous and frequently remade song originally released by 1970s Jamaican reggae group The Mighty Diamonds. A kutchie was a marijuana pipe. Some later versions of the song used the alternative noun "dutchie", which is a Jamaican cooking pot, and therefore less controversial. (www.reggaemovement.com, accessed on October 6, 2006)

reason why we smoke. They think we're crazy, but they're brainwashed. We also think that if they drink, they are crazy."

To those who partake in it, marijuana is a hallowed herb whose stems course with the essence of enlightenment, be it rastafarian consciousness, or the strong sense of rootedness for which ganja has become a symbol by virtue of its naturalness, and by its ubiquity in worlds rife with more obvious symbols of ethnic root-consciousness: the craft workshops, the reggae parties, and all sorts of outdoor hip/highlife or traditional music events. To its detractors, marijuana is a mind-dulling vice that propagates ignorance, laziness and insanity in the young, spoiling their potential as productive citizens, if not actually inciting anti-social behaviours which, amassed, equate some kind of social decay.

The accusation of craziness and laziness, linked inevitably to marijuana smoking, is met with understandable indignation by those who consider smoking to be integral part of a culture wherein street-smart self-sufficiency and skilled work are also celebrated. Ganja-smoking rastas spoke of cleansing oneself of material desires in order to find peace, patience, appreciation of nature, and happiness with one's life without need for high status; time spent gazing out over the ocean under the influence of marijuana is generally held as time spent on strengthening one's own character. Contrarily, it would seem that reactionary "parent culture" critics are more likely to see wasted, unproductive time rather than valuable meditation, and a lamentable lack of ambition where others see a state of happiness without need for the spoils of capitalism.

My knowledge of how rastafarianism is read, negatively or positively, by the public of scene outsiders is partly gleaned from the plaintive accounts of my informants along with a handful of experiences that serve as unambiguous (if anecdotal) validations of what the rastas reported about their own reputation. My goal in this chapter is to give some indication of how honing a committed and convincing identification with rastafarianism entails electing a certain degree of estrangement from "decent" society. This estrangement, of course, is a very meaningful part of the self-narrative of these young men, and one that is emphasized to certain ends. The landscape they tread is riddled with opposing

parties, including some people who actually dislike or distrust rastas for their (real or assumed) tendencies, as well as, as the next section will describe, people who can unwillingly be made avatars of ideologies from which rastas wish to vindicate themselves.

But Me, I'm a Rasta

At sites like the reggae beach parties, one needs only to "fit in" with the environment, already well branded under a subcultural heading, to imply that one has a personal engagement with that scene. Affirmations of that engagement can be as easy as a salutation made in lingua franca slang. There are times, in other words, where presenting oneself as a participant in a subcultural scene is simply a matter of opting in by doing any of the things that are common there, but uncommon elsewhere. At the beach parties, the mainstream rest of society was no more than "a perpetually denigrated, absent Other" (Thornton 1996:5), as were any noticeable contingents of *yoyo*s, the rastaman's most accessible scapegoats for the ills of Babylon. In most other contexts, however, the rasta scene's denigrated Others are far more present, visible, and available to be remarked on. There are also times, in other words, where presenting oneself as a participant in the rasta scene is a matter of opting out; what it means to be a rasta is often articulated in terms of what a rasta is *not*.

I wish to take some time to look at the way incidental moments can be seized as opportunities for an individual to assert a rasta identity while simultaneously authoring its terms. As I planned this project, I was anticipating (and hoping) that people would be verbose on the subject of youth cultures and self-presentation given the range of salient ideas, like generational and ethnic consciousness, which can potentially be articulated by appealing to a collective identity. What I was presented with was a collection of participants for whom the project of explaining who they were in relation to the world around them was a habit, maybe even a preoccupation, and hence a common theme in jokes, idle chatter, and indeed, arguments among friends and familiar rivals.

I believe some of the impetus in this game of overt, continuous self-presentation comes from the flexibility in how rastafari can be interpreted and enacted. Because there is little agreement in what it takes to make a valid claim of belonging to this diffuse subculture, it is left to individuals to narrate their own involvement to the satisfaction of themselves, peers, and any curious visitors who might be tagging along (like me). I believe that additional motivation comes from the perception – fuelled by quite valid observations – that the general public contains both admiring and disapproving parties. As much as there are other rastas, gawking children, and flirtatious young women to be rasta *for*, there are also counterpoints, rivals, and relevant Others, to be rasta *at*. The collection of bodies who can be invoked to articulate the distinguishing features of the rasta identity (however one sees it) includes people exemplary of other youth culture scenes, disapproving kin, misunderstanding authorities, and, most importantly, all things housed within the immensely encompassing abstract of Babylon.

During my stay in Accra, there were a few memorable evenings of being led through some neighbourhood or the next by one of the rasta boys and possibly a handful of his friends. These nights were meant to show me parts of Accra I wouldn't see without their help, and to show me something indicative of "real Ghana life" as it happens in places where foreigners are not often around. Not every night, anyway. All the while I would be regaled with tales of even better nights out: nights when the boys would walk for hours through backstreets in the ghettos sharing whatever alcohol they could afford. "The ghettos" was used by a lot of my friends to describe the neighbourhoods where they lived as long as they met the basic criteria of being somewhat out-of-the-way in relation to the busy nightlife districts and obvious upscale neighbourhoods. As those nights wore on they might wind their way towards the bars in Osu, by that time very much caught up in the glorious narrative of being rastas from the ghetto; that much was clear from their constant parenthetical remarks: "we just walk in the street…that's how we do it in the ghetto", "we see people and they know us. The little kids get excited when the see the rasta boys", and the most loved maxim of all, "rastafari is still in the ghetto". For my benefit, the conversation was thick with self-

description, so as to draw my attention to certain markers of their lifestyles, so that I would be well aware of the company I was in.

Casual proclamations of righteousness provided satisfactory resolutions for all kinds of objectionable vignette sighted along the way: an expensive vehicle outfitted with colossal sub-woofer speakers, a group of white men drinking expensively, a youth taking hiphop style to a comical, implicitly American maximum. In this manner, unsuspecting strangers were made examples of characteristics or virtues that are decisively excluded from the rasta handbook: that list of codes of conduct which was always translated idiosyncratically, but stated essentially. Recall my friend Howard and his friend's response to the sound of a car alarm coming from the vehicle belonging to some fellows who looked "too much like American rappers". In a few short phrases, my two companions were able to rule that the car alarm and its owners were un-rastafarian, and offer themselves up as perfect antithetical characters for the further clarification of my understanding, and that of all bystanders within earshot.

Variations of the phrase "but me, I'm a rasta" were appended to myriad self-assured quips calling attention to some quality of said title. My borrowed mobile phone had a security feature that deactivated the keypad whenever the unit wasn't in use. On my third or forth attempt to master the trick required to answer my ringing phone, one of my informants, growing impatient with my ineptitude, declared, "Alright! Me, I'm a rasta. I just want to unlock your phone *for* you." Which he immediately did.

Exhibitions of practical skill and the ability to do things for oneself could be emphasized with reference to rastafari, whether in regards to (as examples) the reanimation of a broken motorbike or the ongoing success of an income-earning business. As one more example, a street vendor who tried to persuade an informant of mine to buy a knapsack got this curt response: "I don't want that. Me, I'm a rasta. If I want something, I will make it." A certain degree of exaggeration was allowed in such pronouncements; the young man who made that last comment, for instance, wasn't wearing a single handmade garment, including the book bag he already owned.

These "but me, I'm a rasta" statements – context-specific negations followed by logically contrary affirmations – are even more overt, and far less ambiguous, acts of self-identification than style choices. In just a few phrases, two qualities can be set in opposition to one another (self-sufficiency versus consumerism, for example) and presented as indices of two different types of people (rastas versus whomever else), corroborated by evidence rendered from an immediate situation. This form of identification is so efficient and so easily manipulated that it becomes easy to understand the speed at which this and other subcultural identities can diffuse into a bewildering number of possible interpretations. Yet, the element of shared meaning remains crucial; each discursive act, however individually fashioned, makes reference to the idea of an established group entity in order to authenticate (with varying degrees of success) one's claim to be a part of it.

Conclusion

Making It As a Rasta

Hanging around Accra with a bunch of young urbanite rastas for three months meant being an accessory to many dramatic entrances.

On nights with no beach party or special musical event, or when walking up and down streets drinking cheap local gin and cracking jokes wasn't enough to satisfy, there were two or three hiplife/highlife nightclubs where the rasta boys would regularly take their business and their bravado. The "typical crowd" at any of these places was eclectic. Ghanaian men and women came as couples or with groups of friends. Young *obruni* volunteer workers joined each other to talk about their jobs at the schools, hospitals, and local newspapers, and to dance. Both they and my Ghanaian friends liked to gossip ruthlessly about the motley assortment of "ex-pats" who frequented the club: those quasi-celebrity, but rarely well understood immigrants from who-knows-where who had been living in Accra for years (or was it decades, now?) doing, well, *that,* of course, was what much of the gossip was about.

The rasta boys could boast a certain amount of celebrity themselves. In the case of the two nightclubs where live music was performed, many of them were well known to the resident musicians as old friends or past collaborators. At their favourite of these places, they were also known to most of the nightclub's doormen and barmaids, by whom they were met with what I read as mix of appreciation and tolerance. The rastas were regular customers, enthusiastic dancers, and tended to be popular with young foreigners as drinking mates and dance partners; these were things that were good for the club. They were also noisy, being typically well primed with ganja and gin prior to their arrival, and in every way possible acted as though they were – and this they were given to declare just prior to bursting through the door – "gonna run things". The chain of introductions that led to my finding a vacant room to rent actually began when one of them very nearly succeeded in starting a brawl with a group of *obruni* boys over the matter of a chair, claiming the chair was usurped unfairly by a particular

Australian teenager while he was dancing. My friend wanted it acknowledged that he was African, and a rasta; the Australian in his chair was a Babylon boy in Africa, and should learn respect.

Howard and his cronies would demand free entrance to the club (and only very occasionally get it), and then push their way to the stage area, where they would holler salutes at the musicians, and get in the way of dancing couples by throwing themselves around with big theatrical dance moves. Even the less audacious fellows like Yaw, his older brother, and not-a-rasta rasta-scenester Kwame, had mannerisms that got them seen and heard, like singing along with the music, drumming on the table, spilling beer on the floor in a casual libations-pouring ritual, or leaping up to dance on ledges or floor spaces other than the stage-front area, forcing people to navigate gingerly around them in order to get to the toilets or the bar.

I believe this vignette has a few things to offer in the way of realism and closure. In chapter two, I presented the Wednesday night beach parties as scenes written with a full lexicon of globally-legible rastafarian signifiers, including a reggae soundsystem, dancing, ganja, dreadlocks, and the exchange of Iyaric platitudes. In chapters three and four, I left that distilled image in its place on the shore of the Gulf of Guinea and attempted to provide something of a topography of the landscape of popular music and style in Accra that is trod by the young rastas, their *yoyo* rivals (stressing that this rivalry is largely rhetorical), drifts of entertainment-seeking foreigners, as well as the everyone-else that contains people who are also fans of music and bearers of style, but not in ways or to extremes that would implicate a de-localized collective identities like the rastas and *yoyos* do. The everyone-else includes those who may well like reggae, but do not canonize the genre's pioneers as if they were saints and prophets. They may smoke ganja, but not as meditatively or dutifully. They don't, most importantly, affect styles of dress and demeanour that knowingly incite onlookers to read them as people who are *probably* the type to listen to reggae or smoke marijuana, nor that they are *probably* the type to do so under the imagined aegis of a global

socio-religious movement. They are the "mainstream" against which more furtive involvements with such cultural items take on their subcultural quality.

Looking to scenes like that of the hip/highlife club, we do need to acknowledge a few things about the subcultural character of the Accran rasta scene. Unlike those scenes described in most ethnographies written in the vein of youth (sub)cultural studies, a great deal of attention and enthusiasm is directed at a kind of music that practically everyone in the city, whether club-goers or not, seem to feel a certain ownership of. Highlife is the treated as the national music of Ghana, and hiplife its misbehaving but far from disowned offspring. Because rastafari offers a lens that magnifies the importance of localism on the simple premise of Africa-as-homeland, the consumption of highlife by going to a live music venue is an example of the identity's mobility. Though the typical crowd of this nightclub was too stylistically diverse to appear like rasta turf in the same way the beach parties did, it did provide a site where the rastas re-established their scene's existence and coherence in a different way, simply by showing up and standing out.

The rastas in this scene are at all times aware of the subcultural character of their style practise, social worlds, and even the personae they take out on the town, whether they are heading to bars and nightclubs or heading nowhere more specific than "around the neighbourhood". This much is clear in their wont of continuously verbally reiterating who they think they are vis-à-vis (their conceptions of) various others. Still, the attestations of difference against anything that occurs on local soil are not especially antagonistic. The entities that represent the starkest forms of distinction from the ideals of rastafari are not encountered face to face. It isn't a Ghanaian mainstream that is the adversary, but a capitalistic, Western, especially American, Babylon; one that betrays its unsavoury qualities through, among other things, certain fashions and popular musics it exports to Ghana with the aid of widely accessible global communications technologies. In Accra, the youth culture landscape offers as many points of convergence among young people – the general, if often qualified, love of highlife, hiplife, and any

local music, for instance – as it does disagreement between those who identify with disparate scenes.

Early on in this paper, I problematized my presentation of this scene as a youthful one, noting that rastafarian culture denies its affiliation with any specific generation, and that, furthermore, it's younger devotees take cues from fabled elder role models like the aging locksmen who live around Accra, and also find meaning in the pantheon of iconic forefathers like Bob Marley and Marcus Garvey. I argued instead that the youthfulness of interactive global media has paved new roads to rastafari, such that the present crop of young adults can not only encounter this form of collective identity by way of popular music and style, but can then use it to evaluate a host of very current ideas. Still, I do not want to dismiss the agelessness of the movement experienced by those involved, as it points to another way that the identity is a mobile one.

Other youth (sub)culture studies have focused on temporary nature of music-oriented identities, the assumption being that they are a phenomena made possible by certain conditions existent only for particular phases of adolescence or early adulthood, giving meaning to "escapes from the parental home", or providing an aesthetic framework for generational angst (Thornton 1996: 17). The assumption is that, in time, those who identify with youth subcultural scenes will have to grow up and give it up, as jobs and families begin to erode the interests and limit the freedoms necessary to take part in many of the scenes' defining social activities.

The rastas I've been talking about feel like they're in this for the long haul, though. The limitations presently set against people openly living up to the movement's most notorious norms are real: those young men really couldn't go to college or get most jobs looking like they do, and certainly not smoking like they do. It is also true that the ability to be so carefree with their leisure time and meagre incomes, spending much of it drinking and partying, would be somewhat dampened by responsibilities to a family, a role that at least some of them do aspire to. They are participating in a rastafari that, taken as a lifestyle, is very

much shaped by activities that have a youth culture quality, like going to dance clubs and arguing about popular American rappers.

Nevertheless, religious and political ideas remain important enough to the identity – crucial, actually, to its authentication by peers – that there is no reason for these rastas to feel that any of what they're doing really *has to* have anything to do with age. There is, in my mind, good reason to believe that at least some of them will continue to live as enthusiastic rastas well beyond their late-night beach party years, and long after chiding *yoyo*s ceases to be an effective (or even available) way to reaffirm their identities. Furthermore, the way that many of them have been able justify and "survive" temporary retreats into more mainstream style habits, like shaving their head to placate a grandmother or make a visa application, speaks to the durability of their self-concepts and gives credibility to the claim that their rasta label runs deeper than fashion. Finally, there truly are just enough old grey-locked rastamen in the Accra area standing as living examples of the sustainability of this identity that their twenty-something brethren are encouraged in their beliefs that they can grow old and stick to their rasta all the while, despite the fact that they presently have radically different lifestyles than their role models, by living in a scene that is more defined by grappling with the meanings of popular music and style than communal living and farming. Accra's young and cosmopolitan rastas have plans, with the same romantic-yet-demonstrably-possible quality as the old rastaman commune ideal, to make it through life as street-smart urbanites, and these plans are thoroughly intoned in rastafarian sentiments about self-sufficiency and wisdom (consciousness and overstanding).

What it takes to make the identity performance "sustainable" is inseparable from the conditions which allowed it to flourish to begin with. We can continue looking to ganja smoking and dreadlocked hair as the two most burdensome habits of rastafari, in terms of being highly stigmatized, genuinely career limiting, but very much emphasized and encouraged in the rasta scene. It is not surprising that many of my informants kind of "drifted into" the scene at the same time that they began their involvements with forms of employment or

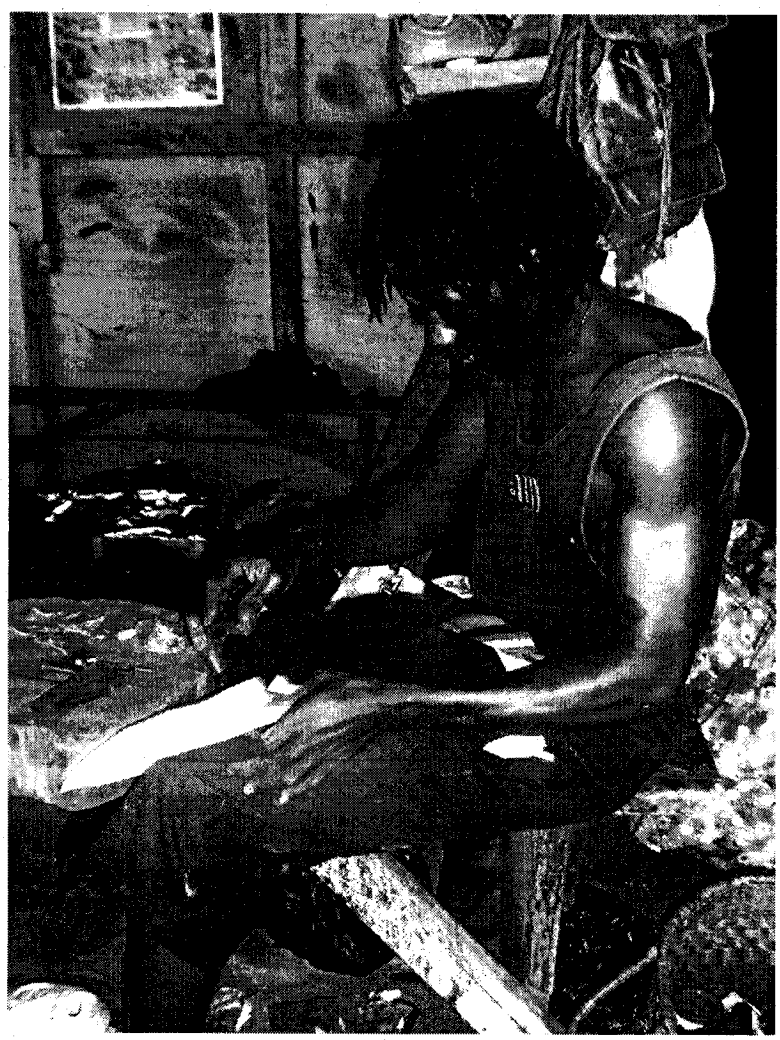

Plate 6: pounding metal to make a mask.

education that offer certain freedoms when it comes to style and behaviour choices. As long as their craft shops and other entrepreneurial ventures work out, there will be no threat to the ease with which they can continue to be obviously, outwardly, openly rastafarian.

Nevertheless, being able to secure work where one can look like a rasta and smoke like a rasta is only part of what it takes to make the identity performance sustainable, so to speak. While grand, haughty dismissals of the views of various opposing parties were appropriate in certain situations, the young rastas I knew were rarely if ever inclined to actually solicit or exacerbate anyone's scorn, marking another point on which this scene departs from that of other youth (sub)cultures. In fact, it was often clear that, because of shrewd professionalism

and respectful attitudes towards their elder family members, the desire to be taken seriously while enacting an easily ridiculed self-presentation was very important.

Accordingly, their best defense against the reactionary "parent culture" response is to have their long hair, smoke their ganja, and do all the other things associated with the identity *except* for allowing their lives to run amok, falling into the meaningless, shameful poverty that so many maintain is the fate of the lazy, crazy, and drugged rastaman. In my interviews, the importance of demonstrating seriousness to skeptical family, friends (*idren* or otherwise), and even the public, was expressed in terms of the value of working hard and sometimes studying hard. The father of one of my younger friends was very unhappy with his son's involvement with the rastafarian world, but apparently, his father's anger was subsiding as he became more and more theological about things. He read passages from the bible every day, along with any materials about rastafarianism he could get his hands on, all so that he could explain as much as possible about the movement's history and beliefs to his family each time he returned to his home village for visits. "They see you are out of society," he told me when I asked why people like his parents disapproved of what he was doing, "they think you are doing bad things, but you are really choosing a way of life!" His efforts won him the respect of friends as well: "you should talk to this boy here!" one of his senior shopmates said, "he really knows a lot of things!". The others in the shop looked up from their work and nodded in agreement, including the beaming rasta boy.

This fellow was far from the only one who told me about skeptical friends or family members who judged their choices harshly at first, but softened their views when they saw that those worlds that encouraged the pursuit of rastafari, like the art centre's craft workshops, also seemed to encourage a great deal of hard work and self-reliance. As one man put it, his critics changed their minds when they saw that he "was a man for himself".

By "running things" in their own lives, these Accran rastas earn roles with plenty of adult responsibility; they don't, as I've said before, live their lives dancing on a beach. The men discussed in this ethnography were up at dawn to

meet deadlines for drum shipments; they held meetings to settle disputes within their music and dance groups; they had teenaged apprentices with stubby nubs of freshly twisted proto-dreadlocks to train and supervise; and they were, at all times, scouting for extra work where their particular skills could be put to use to generate real revenue, perhaps as performers, or as middlemen between high-end shops and the "wholesale" art market, or as music and dance teachers[49]. I have to say I was amused to recall the schoolmaster's sharp words about the lazy, crazy rastamen who worked in the shops near his school when, days later, deciding he needed somebody to come in to his classes once a week to teach drum rhythms to his pupils, he looked directly to those circles to recruit someone for the job!

In many cases, the young rastas of Accra present themselves to scene outsiders as harmless musicians and purveyors of craft, the perpetually fun-seeking, the bringers of good business to bars, the spectacular, the goofy, and the somewhat charming. Wherever they go, people really do notice them and react, but usually with a generous dose of tolerance. It would seem that rastas in the flesh rarely pose the threat that they occasionally do in the imagination.

All the same, the fact that they do, nevertheless, remain the subjects of negative stigma is evident in how schoolchildren obediently and adamantly vow to never become like them, how often they are implicitly or explicitly slighted by the equation of ganja with insanity and social degeneracy, and how so few of their elder relatives were pleased to watch their boys grow up rasta, even if most of them developed tolerance over time. Furthermore, I knew several older adults – parental sorts, like my housemother and the elderly innkeeper I met upon my arrival – who seemed to think that the whole lot of rastas were no good and that I ought to stay away from them. All their warnings, no less, were precautionary; I hadn't even mentioned that I knew any such people. Feeling like a rebellious teenager during those lectures, I would roll my eyes at their overstatement, mumble a half-truth about who my interviewees were, and look forward to

[49] I was pleased that, during this bout of fieldwork, I was able to be of some assistance in connecting a few informants to temporary jobs as drum and dance teachers for *obruni* volunteer groups, after being approached by their coordinator who wondered if "any of [my] rasta boys" might be interested.

relaying their remarks to the fellows down at the art centre or at the beach. Doing so would give them something to wax self-righteous about; something that would incite reiterations of the rastafarian consciousness in relation to the misunderstanding public. They could then spill a few drops of beer on the ground as a toast to better days to come (and some say soon: in our lifetime, or our children's), when Africa will transpire as Zion, and the rasta man will have their chance to "really run things". *The wise will separate themselves.*

That lofty vision of the future gives weight to small matters of the present. Life in the meantime is not passive; thinking about Ghana as a future province of Zion turns cultural criticism into a thoroughly moral, possibly obligatory, endeavour. *Rastafari is still in the ghetto. Always we are fighting.* The choice to identify with rastafari entitles these young Accrans to the imagined tutelage of respected elder brethren and hallowed icons of the past, ensuring that what has been deemed a lamentably vapid cultural fad in relation to "old guard" of mid-century Jamaica (King 2002: 91), continues to feel like a socio-religious movement to young present-day scenesters. The points of ideological reference provided by this hopeful, rallying identity helps the young Accrans I've described sort through the barrage of musics, styles, and new media that feature on the cultural landscapes they traverse daily.

Affiliating oneself with a collective identity like this one can remove some of the ambiguity from decisions concerning which activities and commodities ought to be incorporated into, or rejected from, one's daily affairs. Rastafari is able to accommodate copious idiosyncratic, context-specific modifications while retaining ostensible constancy; it provides a mature rubric that lends clout to *ad hoc* assessments of youthful things.

While preparing for my trip to Ghana, I crammed a copy of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* in my suitcase. At home in Montreal, I myself had drifted in to a musicians' scene; one wherein it was very stylish to have already consumed this text. Having not read it *yet*, I hauled the tome to Accra with me with intent to privately remedy my shortcoming. One afternoon, one of the boys at the art centre spotted it sticking out the top of my corduroy satchel, which

I'd kicked under a bench in his workshop. He picked up the book and began thumbing through it, eventually pausing on a page somewhere in the middle.

"What does it say, that part you're reading?" I asked from the other side of the room. I knew that man's English reading skills were moderately good, but I still had to wonder what on earth he would be able to glean from prose as convoluted as that. He kept his head down and didn't answer, but muttered some half-comprehensible things as he encountered keywords in the text. Something about capitalism. Something about psychology. After awhile, he wanted to know what the book was supposed to be about.

"Oh *Challey*, I'm not really sure how to explain it," I answered, adding a confession, "I haven't really read much of it yet."

He went back to reading, and I watched the furrows in his brow deepen as he traced the lines of type with his finger. He was trying very hard, and I sympathized. After a minute or so, the young man heaved a sigh and a chuckle, depositing Deleuze and Guattari with an unceremonious thud on the workbench. I don't know what he read from (or into) that text, nor whether the content was even as important as his general impression of the object, arriving as it did, among the personal effects of an *obruni* graduate student. Still, it is hard to overlook the remarkable decisiveness of his adjudication, and what I think it says about the strength and flexibility of the idiom he chose to invoke, readied at his service through continual acts of identification, such that it could be deployed with such aplomb at moments like this. Rising to his feet, the young man delivered this ruling on *A Thousand Plateaus*: "Well, me, I'm a rasta," and left.

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