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Specters of the vernacular: Neoliberalism, world literature, and Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

David Watson

To encounter people who can speak with one another in exactly that transformation of standard English which is patois, which is creole—the hundreds of different creole and semi-creole languages which cover the face of the Caribbean in one place or another—that these have become as it were the languages in which important things can be said, in which important aspirations and hopes can be formulated, in which an important grasp of the histories that have made these places can be written down, in which artists are willing for the first time, the first generation, to practise and so on, that is what I call a cultural revolution.

—Stuart Hall, “Negotiating Caribbean Identities” (1995)

At the announcement of the 2015 Man Booker Prize, Michael Wood, the chair of the judging committee, remarked that Marlon James, who would go on to win the prize for *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), and the other shortlisted novelists “created new ‘Englishes’ that remade and reshaped the language” (Airey 2015). We may surmise that one of the things Wood had in mind was the relentless orality of James’s novel. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* begins with an apostrophizing injunction to the reader—“*Listen*” (James 2014: 1)—before launching into a polyphonic narrative which consists of a dozen or so narrators speaking in vernacular languages that include Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Creole, as well as Rastafarian Iyaric or Dread Talk, and an idiomatic American English saturated with colloquialisms from the 1970s. “Dead people never stop talking” (James 2014: 1) the novel tells us furthermore, and these specters speak in their own vernacular, a digressive, errant English punctuated and interrupted by howls and hisses, wails and moans (James 2014: 1).

This chapter is about the use of vernaculars—vernacular languages but also cultural expressive forms as I will go on to explain—in James’s *Brief History*, a novel unimaginable without what Stuart Hall calls the “cultural revolution” (1995: 13) that made available for literary purposes the vernacular languages of the Caribbean. How do we make sense of the turn toward the vernacular in this counterfactual account of the 1976 attempted assassination of Bob Marley (the unnamed “Singer” in the novel), and retrospective narrativization of the neoliberal turn in the Caribbean, which saw the rise of illicit economies and extractive regimes, as well as the imposition of structural adjustment programs on nation-states throughout the hemisphere, including Jamaica? I contend that *Brief History* takes part in a renewed encounter with the vernacular within the anglophone global novel, a development that asks of us to reflect upon how American institutions such as creative writing programs modulate this genre. I then go on to argue that the vernacular plays a double role within the novel’s retrospective account of the ascendance of neoliberalism. It gives expression to a kind of postcolonial melancholia, serving as a reminder of the decolonial and collective potentialities foreclosed upon by economic and political destabilizations in the Caribbean and Latin America. At the same time, *Brief History* raises the prospect that vernacular languages, writing, and music do not exist outside of neoliberalism and its cultural logic, but become incorporated within what Jodi Melamed calls “neoliberal multiculturalism” (2011: 138) as signs of racialized and classed differences endowed with aesthetic rather than political value.

For many readers of *Brief History*, its novelistic successes and failures can be summarized exactly by a single word, excess. Nadia Ellis, for instance, locates within the novel a “poetics of excess” comparing poorly to the “easier styles of earlier masters of Caribbean literary Creole” (2015: n.p.) such as that of Sam Selvon. In her rebuttal of Ellis’s critique, Sheri-Marie Harrison argues that James’s excesses are “thrilling” because his novelistic excess both articulates a “broad critique of (late) global multicultural capitalism and ... eschews much of the dignifying, empowering and ostensibly liberating national politics that we may have come to expect from a novel written by a Jamaican” (2015: n.p.). Leaving to one side the question of how we may adjudicate the matter of James’s relationship to a Caribbean or, more narrowly, Jamaican literary tradition, the point I wish to make is a simple one: James’s excesses extend not only to matters of sex and violence, their imbrication, or to the density and length of the novel, but also to the vernacular languages and expressive cultural forms he employs

and references during the narrative. The multivocal narrative of *Brief History*, its indebtedness to the vernacular modernism of William Faulkner, whose world is populated by “listeners, talkers, and tellers” (Waid 2011: 763) rather than readers and writers, the novel’s redeployment of minor Latin American and Jamaican literary genres—*narcoliteratura*, *testimonio*, the maximalist total novel, yardie fiction about the urban poor (Deckard 2018: 171)—its allusions to reggae music, dancehall, and early rap music are all suggestive of a novel steeped in the vernacular languages and cultures of Jamaica as well as those of a hemispheric geography that includes Latin America and the United States.

What we may call the novel’s dense vernacularity prompts Sharae Deckard to suggest that “James is like a dancehall emcee, sampling a whole repertoire of tunes from the past, rewriting and recalibrating familiar riffs and beats into new music, playing with a multitude of narratorial voices and genres in order to weave the texture of a new epic” (Deckard 2018: 171). As Deckard indirectly suggests, there is a citational quality to James’s encounter with vernacular languages and forms. As he deploys them in *Brief History*, he is performing a type of memory work, excavating past vernacular forms without allowing any one of these to become identified tout court with the novel in its entirety. Moreover, following Deckard, it becomes possible to understand *Brief History* as a remediation of the musical idiom of dancehall: the form of the novel is used to imitate the characteristics and effects of a different medium. James is transformed into an emcee summoning his readers with the opening imperative “Listen” (James 2014: 1), while the novel assumes the qualities of a sound system playing different vernacular sounds for the reader, an implied reader performatively transformed into a listener via the force of James’s opening address. We may wonder furthermore whether the novel is not also offering a remediated version of the musical form of dub reggae. Lee “Scratch” Perry has spoken of dub as “the ghost in me coming out” (Toop 1995: 129). With its name echoing the Jamaican patois term for a ghost or malevolent spirit, “duppy,” the genre consists usually of remixed recordings from which vocal tracks have been removed—a reminder of the silent “Singer” around which *Brief History* revolves—the drum and bass parts have been emphasized, and echoes, reverbs, delays, and other vocal and instrumental musical snippets have been added. Characterized by a collage aesthetic and shot through with absences, dub both “reinserted the mystery and spookiness into reggae” and played a role in a “diasporic project of reclaiming an African heritage” (Veal 2007: 212) that took form in Jamaica in the 1970s. In *Brief History* the diasporic vector has shifted and now connects

Jamaica and the United States, yet it too remixes the vernacular languages and expressive forms it has inherited to recover an earlier historical moment—that of the neoliberal turn in the Caribbean—a moment infused with silences and populated by ghosts. Riddled with spectral voices—“Maybe I’m a ghost talking to you now” (James 2014: 644) one character ponders—the novel sets up a series of correspondences between the vernacular voices it reanimates and the voices of the dead. It furthermore invites comparisons between imaginative identification and ghostly possession. Bam-Bam, a teenager involved in the assassination attempt, says of Weeper the gang enforcer that “I just wanted to go inside him like a duppy, and move when he move and buck when he buck and wind when he wind and feel myself pull out little by little by little and ram back in hard then soft, fast then slow” (James 2014: 80). Bam-Bam’s queer, libidinal identification with Weeper, enacted via the mediatory figure of the duppy or ghost, resembles overtly the readerly contract or promise of realist narratives—verisimilitude, identification with characters—and presumably echoes the desires of an author to get into the heads of characters. Whether or not we connect the novelistic form of *Brief History* with dub music, the novel’s indebtedness to vernacular languages and expressive forms is clear. And this indebtedness raises questions about novelistic form, and whether the medium of the novel can be understood, in this instance, as replicating vernacular genres belonging to other media.

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that the relationship between *Brief History* and vernacular languages and expressive forms renders it a largely regional work. While there has long been an intimate connection between regional writing and vernacular languages, *Brief History* is a self-consciously hemispheric novel, as I intimated earlier, that not only pivots toward the United States, in contrast with Caribbean fiction concerned with the legacies of older forms of imperialism and colonialism, but also encompasses and references American vernacular languages (the purportedly cool slang of the 1970s) as well as expressive forms—rap, country and western music, gangster films, westerns, B-movie pulp fictions. In this sense, James’s novel forms part of a growing number of works, often from the global South, that deploy the vernacular within anglophone writing concerned with international or global themes and concerns (Nadiminti 2018). A partial list of authors producing global writing inflected by the vernacular would include Kiran Desai, Junot Díaz, Tania James, Karan Mahajan, and Chigozie Obioma, a finalist for the 2015 Man Booker prize that James would go on to win. The anglophone global novel is shaped increasingly it seems by voices speaking in the vernacular. And, in a sense, authors such as

James appear to be making good on the promise of what the African American novelist Gayl Jones described earlier on as the “multicultural, multilingual, multi-vernacular” (1994: 508) global novel.

For some readers, however, the question of the vernacular, partially one about dialect writing, is increasingly a redundant topic in the face of the development of the world or global novel in the twenty-first century. This genre, to which *Brief History* belongs, is characterized by amongst others the use of multistranded narratives, an expansive geographical reach, and an interest in the ethics and politics of cosmopolitanism (Irr 2011: 660–1). One of its features is also an increased sensitivity to the opportunities and problems posed by multilingualism (Irr 2011: 661), perhaps most overtly those complexities for which the term translation serves as a shorthand. In *Du Bois's Telegram* (2018), her magisterial account of U.S. literature and the state, Juliana Spahr argues that the contemporary interest in multilingual writing and globality, in contrast to the often-regional preoccupations of vernacular literatures, renders dialect writing something of a residual formation within contemporary anglophone literary culture (19). Yet turning to contemporary fiction—Spahr is primarily interested in poetry—it appears her dismissal of vernacular writing is premature. Even so, this dismissal of the significance of the vernacular for globally oriented writing resonates with other attempts to cordon off the vernacular from the global and to reinscribe it within fading local or regional formations. Sheldon Pollock, for instance, warns that the globalization of English is resulting in a homogenization of language and culture, a “reduction of diversity in the cultural ecosystem” (2000: 567), that will bring about a demise of the vernacular. Alexander Beecroft, in his account of world literature, sounds a similar note: “when the era of the coexistence of cosmopolitan and vernacular came to an end, it was a specifically European ecology that was to take its place,” he argues, “that of the national literature” (2015: 193), which subsumes the vernacular before giving way itself to global writing. In both cases, we are asked to imagine if not the demise of the vernacular, then certainly its transformation into a residual form of expression.

It may be the case that to think of vernacular languages as artifacts of the past is to misread the situation. Luisa Martín Rojo points out that multilingualism, at least, is an increasingly prized commodity: multilingual “skills are commodified, and constitute a key element in the process of *personal mastery* by which individuals make themselves competitive” (2018: 551; emphasis in original). While this situation alters very little concerning the dominance of English and other international languages of trade, it does suggest the persistence of

a multilingual field which may hold consequences for the development and persistence of vernacular languages. Moreover, it is not clear to me that literary and language histories approaching the vernacular as a residual formation have much to say about a novel such as *Brief History* or, indeed, that of any writer opting to turn to vernacular languages and expressive forms, a turn that from this perspective would at best be a form of archival work, or be driven by a nostalgia for outdated modes of expression. Such a perspective would, among others, foreclose on a reading of contemporary vernaculars that would discover in them the same political potential Gavin Jones associates with earlier forms of vernacular writing, particularly dialect writing coming from the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which saw an increase in the popularity of writing in vernacular languages. He argues that “dialect could encode the possibility of resistance, not just by undermining the integrity of a dominant standard, but by recording the subversive voices in which alternate versions of reality were engendered” (1999: 11). In other words, the vernacular was understood during this period as a potentially political tool for African American and migrant writers, among others.

Recently S. Shankar, in his *Flesh and Fish Blood* (2012), has attempted to restore to the vernacular some of its political valences. He argues, for instance, that the vernacular should be understood as a “critical term that does the theoretical work of locating cultural specificity as well as challenging overpowering models of globality” (2012: 109). Mobilizing the vernacular as an oppositional term setting itself off here against the transnational, Shankar is not straightforwardly associating it with the autochthonous qualities of local cultures, but framing it as a site for the production of “alternate versions of reality,” to use Jones’s phrase, subsisting within and challenging normative accounts of globality and globalization.

Perhaps the most rigorous and productive account of the vernacular and its present-day situation to my mind, however, appears in the cultural historian Michael Denning’s *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (2015). *Noise Uprising* attempts to account for a global recording boom that began with advances in recording technology in 1925 and brought to an end by the financial depression of the 1930s, even though Denning is interested in this boom’s reverberations and afterlife as well. Focusing on a series of recording sessions in predominantly colonial spaces—Havana, Honolulu, Cairo, Jakarta, Rio de Janeiro as well as New Orleans—Denning charts the contribution to the musical world made by commercial recording companies

equipped with electric recording equipment and shellac discs, which enabled the global dissemination of vernacular musical idioms such as rumba, samba, tango, jazz, calypso, flamenco, and hula. As he puts it, this was a “vernacular music revolution ... analogous to the tectonic shift from Latin to the European vernacular languages in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries” (2015: 7). For Denning this musical, vernacular revolution had consequences far beyond the world of music:

For these vernacular phonograph musics not only captured the timbres of decolonization; the emergence of these musics—hula, rumba, beguine, tango, jazz, samba, marabi, kroncong, tarab, chaabi—was decolonization. It was not simply a cultural activity that contributed to the political struggle; it was somatic decolonization, the decolonization of the ear and the dancing body. Decolonization, I will suggest, was a musical as well as political event. Moreover, this decolonization of the ear preceded and made possible the subsequent decolonization of legislatures and literatures, schools and armies. The global soundscape was decolonized by the guerrilla insurgency of these new musics before the global statescape was reshaped.

(2015: 136)

Arguing for the interrelated histories of cultural and political decolonization, Denning understands vernacular music as initiating and underwriting the histories of anti-colonial struggle that would shape the twentieth century. While the financial depression of the 1930s brought an official end to this vernacular music revolution, Denning identifies its afterlife, what he terms its “remastering” (2015: 220), within two formations useful for our understanding of the contemporary situation of the vernacular. In the first instance, transformed into folk music the vernacular soundscape is linked both with the nation-state and with the cultural politics of emancipatory social movements (2015: 220). Remastered as “world music,” however, vernacular music idioms are given a very different articulation from that associated with folk music: “if the remastering of them as world music is a form of commercial enclosure,” Denning writes, “it has also figured the cultural recognition and sonic enfranchisement of a planet of slums” (2015: 220).

Different media have different histories, and it would be a mistake to collapse Denning’s history of vernacular musical idioms into a generalized account of the vernacular during the course of the twentieth century, or an account that affords us immediate insight into James’s *Brief History*, no matter how overwhelmingly the novel insists on homologies between it and vernacular musical idioms such

as reggae, dancehall, and dub. It is unclear, after all, whether twentieth- or twenty-first century literature can be associated with the same revolutionary, decolonial force as Denning attributes to musical idioms during this time period. His account is instructive, however, for its insistence on the historicity of the vernacular, how it is shaped and transmuted within decolonial and national contexts, how it serves to give representation to both emancipatory movements and economically marginal surplus populations, and how it also becomes a form of capital circulating across borders, largely as a result of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank pressuring postcolonial states to adopt “neoliberal trade and property regimes” (Denning 2015: 229), including ones pertaining to intellectual property rights and copyright control. In a dialectical move on Denning’s part, the vernacular shapes and is shaped by this history of decolonization, nation-building, and neoliberalization. Remarkably similar to Sarah Brouillette’s short, materialist summary of the post-World War II history of world literature—“from liberalism through decolonizing left-liberalism to neoliberalism” (2019: 2)—Denning’s account helps us see that the vernacular is neither a static nor an *ahistorical* category. Implicitly it also calls on us to think through and stay with questions concerning how the vernacular shifts and transforms, rather than relegating it prematurely to the dustbins of history.

Turning to the situation of world literature, it seems to me we could usefully supplement Denning’s history by attending to the type of questions recently raised by Kalyan Nadiminti. Arguing for the emergence of a form of vernacular realism within the global novel, Nadiminti suggests that this contemporary encounter with the vernacular needs to be understood in relation to a very different set of developments than the ones Denning is primarily interested in. Noting that it is increasingly the case that writers from the global South are educated at or work in universities in the United States, particularly their creative writing programs, he suggests that international authors are influenced by the emphasis given to voice, particularly the voice of the ethnic minority writer, within such programs. Rather than encouraging writers to adopt “metropolitan speak,” global South writers are exhorted to deploy the “vernacular within anglophone realism” (Nadiminti 2018: 384). In doing so, the creative writing program creates “the global professional writer” (394) producing fiction in the vernacular for a “globalized elite, albeit now of the non-Western kind” (389), which is to say a global readership that identifies with the “tenets of American globalism” (384). In this account, it is the American university that produces vernacular literature for the international publishing market and literary institutions such

as literary prizes, where writing in the vernacular is increasingly associated with literary prestige. Like Denning, Nadiminti is concerned with how the vernacular articulates with the contemporary global economy. The result of this confluence is the imbrication of the vernacular with the transnational circulation of commodities and capital, and with the life worlds of the people instantiating and accompanying these global flows.

Taken together, Denning and Nadiminti provide a complex set of coordinates to make sense of the dense vernacularity of *Brief History*, in particular its historicization of reggae music. During the 1970s, reggae provided the soundtrack to a singular moment in Jamaican history: Michael Manley and his People's National Party came to power with a purportedly democratic-socialist agenda that promised to redistribute wealth and power, address inequalities, and to acknowledge the nation's diasporic African heritage. The One Love Peace Concert of April 22, 1978, which features in *Brief History* as well, was intended as an intervention into the violent political situation in Jamaica, with Manley's government increasingly destabilized by U.S. interventions spurred along by concerns over Manley's democratic-socialism and pivot to Cuba. James includes in *Brief History* an extract from the speech made at the concert by Peter Tosh, the increasingly politicized former member of the Wailers (the reggae band led by Bob Marley):

Is word sound and power that break down the barriers of oppression and drive away transgression and rule equality. Well right now you have a system or a shitstem wha' go on in this country fi a long ages and 'imes. Four hundred years and the same bucky massa business and black inferiority and brown superiority and white superiority rule this little black country here fi a long 'imes. Well I and I come with Earthquake Lightning and Thunder to break down these barriers of oppression, drive away transgression and rule equality between humble black people.

(2014: 319)

Tosh's tripartite invocation, "*word sound and power*," evokes the Rastafari idea of "the convergence of mental, sonic, and spiritual forces of transformation, truth, and resistance" (Mathes 2010: 35), putting it to use, in an apocalyptic key, as a decolonial promise to put an end to centuries of imperialism and inequality—the "*shitstem*" in Jamaican patois. In citing Tosh's speech, James is also alluding to this association between reggae music and decolonial politics, the same type of conjuncture that Denning dates back to the early twentieth century. Yet, *Brief History* is sensitive to the conditions that render this connection untenable. Reggae is also associated with an individualistic, entrepreneurial sensibility—"go to a

studio and cut a tune and sing hit songs and ride the riddim out of Copenhagen City,” one character declares before pessimistically noting that outside of the Copenhagen City ghetto (James’s version of the Tivoli Gardens ghetto in Kingston, Jamaica) waits the discovery that, in fact, the whole “world is a ghetto” (2014: 8). This reference to the American band War’s 1972 funk hit song underlines indirectly the material stakes associated with reggae music as a commodity form. A different complication arises when we encounter in the novel an American doctor who proclaims his appreciation of Jamaican patois: “It’s so musical, it’s like listening to Burning Spear and drinking coconut juice” (2014: 631). A vernacular language, a roots reggae band, and coconut water come together in this evocation of a kind of postcolonial exoticism, betraying an anxiety that the global circulation of the vernacular languages and music emboldens and feeds upon a touristic sensibility geared toward the exotic.

James offers a complex, discrepant itinerary to make sense of the musical idiom of reggae, connecting it with a promise of decolonization yet also linking it with the burgeoning of an individualistic, entrepreneurial sensibility—the same ethos informing the characters in the novel directly involved in the narcotics trade for whom “politics don’t mean shit ... Money mean something” (2014: 644)—as well as with the transnational circulation of exoticized commodities. In a striking moment in the novel a “big box marked Audio Equipment/Peace Concert” (2014: 415) is revealed to be filled with M16 rifles smuggled in from the United States, with this dissonant, ironic image figuring for the reader the destructive possibilities associated in the novel with the circulation of goods across borders. Yet, it is not just reggae, narcotics, or military equipment that are entangled with the transnational flows of goods and people. James received an MFA from Wilkes University and is currently Writer in Residence at Macalester College in Minnesota. Of Jamaica he remarked that “If you are a writer in Jamaica, maybe even in the Caribbean, there comes a point when you just have to go” (Talentino 2019: n.p.), and go he did by taking up an academic position in the United States. Indeed, his most recent novel, the fantasy *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), was nominated for the National Book Award in Fiction, a literary prize reserved for U.S. citizens. Whatever the motivations for James’s itinerary, which is not my concern here, he participates in the same trajectories and institutions that Nadiminti identifies as formative of the renewed interest in vernacular writing within the global novel. More generally, his career has unfolded against a backdrop within which U.S. government agencies and private

foundations such as the Ford Foundation have emphasized the multicultural, global characteristics of U.S. literature. In this situation, which Spahr aptly describes as constituted by the use of “state-sponsored multiculturalism as a tool of cultural diplomacy” (2018: n.p.), the international writer, whose multicultural identity is testified to via his or her language usage as much as anything else, inadvertently plays the role of underwriting an imaginary within which U.S. literary culture is associated with diversity, tolerance, and cosmopolitan hospitality.

From decolonization to a state-sanctioned rhetoric of multicultural and transnational inclusiveness, the multiple, contradictory valences of the vernacular in this account of James’s *Brief History* ask for closer scrutiny. The novel articulates two moments in the history of the vernacular, or, more precisely, the vernacular languages and expressive forms of Jamaica: the moment of cultural revolution, which Denning prompts us to identify as an instance of decolonial rupture, as well as a series of interrelated retrenchments within which the vernacular is exoticized, commodified, and put to work within a hemispheric or transnational narrative of national inclusiveness. What takes place between these moments, which we can identify loosely with the early days of the Manley government and the time during which James wrote his novel respectively, is neoliberalism’s economic, political, and cultural ascendance, what one character in the novel describes as the coming of “progress, markets, freedom. That’s the free market, son” (2014: 412).

There is good reason, as Aihwa Ong (2007) and Jamie Peck (2010) have respectively argued, to think of neoliberalism as a set of discrepant processes and practices assuming different shapes when deployed within divergent spaces, a hybrid technology entering into alliances with disparate political, economic, and social formations wherever it is deployed. There is no pure, essential neoliberalism. However, there is a shared historical account underwriting its divergent projects which include the liberalization of the market since the 1970s, the rise of finance capital, and attendant processes of deregulation, privatization, and free trade playing out globally. It also includes narratives concerning the fragmentation of communal bonds, the rise of the *homo economicus* and the citizen-consumer, the waning of the welfare or social state, and the recoding of political and ethical values in market terms. If there is a shared logic linking these projects, it is that the political economic transformations and state restructuring associated with neoliberalism go hand in hand with the market-mediated transformation of the population, the citizen-subject, and culture. Accordingly, neoliberalism names

something like the transformation of “every human domain and endeavour ... according to a specific image of the economic” (Brown 2015: 10).

For my purposes here I am interested in two interrelated narratives pertaining to neoliberalism and its ascendance in the Caribbean. The first concerns James’s portrayal of how the United States attempted to contain the democratic socialism of the Manley government through indirect military force and neoliberal economic policies. Summarizing this series of events, Brian Meeks writes that

When, however, the dominant hegemon entered the fray, particularly after the regime’s principled support for Cuban intervention to help save Angola from South African invasion, violence grew, and middle-class support was lost, as the country appeared increasingly to be ungovernable. This was worsened by the economic contractions which accompanied both the crisis of the global economy, following the 1973 Oil Crisis, and the obvious attempt, to quote Richard Nixon in reference to the Allende regime in Chile, to “make the economy scream”. The subsequent IMF agreement to purportedly return fiscal balance to the economy exacerbated the political pressure on the government and initiated policies that, some forty years later, are being questioned from the bottom up by the officers of the very IMF.

(2019: 356)

Significantly, in an interview James has clarified that he is not concerned with older colonial relations between Jamaica and the British imperial metropole; instead, he is interested in “how we were colonized mentally and economically by the U.S.” (McKenzie 2015: n.p.).

The novel’s narrative refracts the history of interventions by the U.S. in Jamaica: the use of CIA operatives to undermine Manley’s government, their distribution of arms to militias, and the destabilization of the state as well as the economy in the wake of neoliberal structural adjustments, which, among others, stood in the way of the nationalization of the bauxite mining industry, which remains central to the Jamaican economy. Situating the assassination attempt, presented in the novel as instigated by the CIA, within this context, the narrative presents Jamaica as part of a series that includes Patrice Lumumba’s Republic of the Congo and Salvador Allende’s Chile—both leaders are referenced in *Brief History* (2014: 7)—where interventions by former and current imperial powers destabilized revolutionary decolonial movements. The reasons for the containment and destabilization of Manley’s government were two-fold yet interrelated:

Enough of this government and this Michael Manley wanting to suck cash from the bauxite companies like they don't already do enough to help this country. Shit, Alcoa transformed this fucking backwater island, sure they didn't build the railway but they certainly put it to profitable use. And other things: schools, modern buildings, running water, toilets, it was a slap in the face really, demanding a levy on top of all we do for this country. And that slap in the face was the first shot heard around the world for Jamaica's entry into communism, mark my words. Nationalization is always the first step, how these fucking people voted the PNP back into office is a fucking mystery to me, babykins.

(2014: 282)

Anti-communist ideology and business interests coalesced to prompt the U.S. intervention in Jamaica, which resulted in the privatization of businesses, the propping up of the extractive mining economy, and the imposition of a debt regime on the nation which has resulted in three decades of mounting international debt and low growth in the country's GDP. In short, *Brief History* tracks the collapse of Jamaican history into what David Scott has described as the order of "ruined time," that is to say the aftermath of "the catastrophic collapse of revolutionary futures past and the re-hegemonization of the world by a cynical imperial and neoliberal agenda" (2014: 12, 28).

The second narrative regarding neoliberalism I am interested in is a perhaps less well known and commented upon one. As Patricia Stuelke has noted, it is a strange coincidence that it was during the early 1980s, when the Caribbean was becoming fully inducted into a neoliberal regime, that there was a growing sense of the Caribbean and the United States as relationally bound together by shared histories and cultures. Focusing on black feminists identifying the Caribbean as a "locus of a shared utopic past" (2014: 125) for African Americans, Stuelke argues that this retrospective focus both elides contemporaneous political and revolutionary concerns and, ultimately, resonates with claims made by then U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who proclaimed that "like America itself, the Caribbean Basin is an extraordinary mosaic of Hispanics, Africans, Asians, and Europeans as well as native Americans" (Stuelke 2014: 127). Stuelke draws our attention to what we may think of as a type of cultural repair work, with cultural archives—in this instance that of Zora Neale Hurston—and expressive forms being called upon to resolve political and economic tensions by substituting for a fraught and heteroclit political terrain a narrative of relationality and consanguinity. As a result, an account of interconnectedness and inclusiveness takes the place of a reckoning with fraught, antagonistic histories, an account

that is tilted, moreover, in favour of the United States because of its economic and political predominance. Stuelke's account serves perhaps as a useful heuristic for making sense of the burgeoning interest in the Caribbean in American academia during the last few decades; more pertinently it sheds light on James's account of the funeral and legacy of the Singer.

Narrated by the ghost, or rather duppy, of the murdered politician Sir Arthur George Jennings, the chapter of *Brief History* based on the funeral of the "Singer," the unnamed Bob Marley, takes as its key concern the questions "How do you bury a man? Put him in the ground or stomp out his fire?" (2014: 599). With Jennings situating the "Singer's" funeral within a hemispheric context in which the neoliberal counter-revolution has proved to be successful and the trade in narcotics is booming and linking, "Colombia, Jamaica, Bahamas, Miami" (2014: 600), the chapter is concerned with tracking the containment and waning of a decolonial vernacular culture and its transformation into something else. Awarded posthumously the Commonwealth Order of Merit for distinguished military, scientific or cultural work, the "Singer" "joins the order of British Squires and Knights ... A fire that lights up Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa doused out by two letters, O and M" (2014: 600). The subsequent reference by Jennings to Marley's "Buffalo Soldier"—a song about a black U.S. cavalry regiment involved in the American Frontier Wars waged against indigenous people to secure the nineteenth-century settler colonial project—hints further at the implication of the "Singer" within the discursive project of an imperial power. In the song, after all, Marley overtly identifies with the figure of the Black American soldier, who is awarded the "Medal of Honor for killing a people and an idea" (2014: 600). Yet, the music of the "Singer" lives on. Circulating globally it inspires three girls in Kashmir to "sling on bass, guitar, and drums," and the music is "a balm to spread over broken countries" (2014: 601). Jennings tells us that

in another city, another valley, another ghetto, another slum, another favela, another township, another intifada, another war, another birth, somebody is singing Redemption Song, as if the Singer wrote it for no other reason but for this sufferah to sing, shout, whisper, weep, bawl, and scream right here, right now.

(2014: 601)

In this account of the afterlife of Marley's work, James approximates what Denning has described as the "sonic enfranchisement of a planet of slums" via the global circulation of vernacular musical idioms. The tone is elegiac, melancholic, yet

hopeful too, looking forward to the music of the “Singer” being used to articulate and represent the emotions of disenfranchised and surplus populations across the globe. But Jennings’s narration begins with an invocation of the “fire” of the “black revolutionary” (2014: 599) as a way of figuring the performative force of Marley and his music. Subtly the chapter intimates that a shift has taken place in the way Marley and his music are to be understood. An understanding of the vernacular idiom of reggae as a decolonial, revolutionary sound gives way to a depiction of it as a curative resource, a “balm” providing momentary relief for the sufferer (Marley’s version of “Redemption Song” runs for three minutes and forty-seven seconds). The audience for the music is no longer a potentially revolutionary people, but the victims of dispossession and disenfranchisement. In other words, in this account vernacular culture is stripped of its decolonial potential, and reconfigured as a transnational resource for surplus populations, providing comfort. Whatever we may say about this association of affective work with vernacular expressive forms, what is clear is that the narrative here follows the same trajectory as the neoliberal one proposed by Stuelke, with anti-racist and anti-imperial expressive forms becoming incorporated within a different discursive project that also obscures from view the complex political histories that first shaped these vernacular articulations.

When Jennings’s account of the Singer’s funeral and legacy concludes with the image of “Redemption Song” being sung “right here, right now” the reader is necessarily reminded that this here and now also include the novel that we are reading. *Brief History*, as I have argued, provided the reader with resignifications, perhaps cover versions, of vernacular languages and expressive forms, including that of the unnamed Bob Marley. The complex history of vernacular idioms—the association of the vernacular with the decolonial, its neoliberal transformation into a transnational commodity signifying inclusiveness and the type of affective work I have discussed—also constitutes the frame within which we read and make sense of *Brief History*. In part, this is to say that the novel is intensely self-reflexive, knowing full well its historicization of the situation of vernacular languages and cultural forms is partially an account of its own situation within the global literary field. What James is doing, after all, is putting into circulation via the global novel vernacular languages and expressive forms, relocating them within a hemispheric framework where they articulate with other vernaculars, and rendering them accessible to a transnational readership. This business of circulation is allegorized for the reader in *Brief History* during a moment when Weeper narrates his prison experiences:

Either way, in prison you always carrying something in your asshole, and all the battyholes behind bars add up to one trade route. Asshole in the east take goods to asshole in the west, destination: inmate in the south with money or other goods. Bag of cocaine, pack of Wrigley's, Hershey bar, Snickers, Milky Way, ganja, hashish, beeper, toothpaste, diet pill, Xanax, Percocet, sugar, aspirin, cigarette, lighter, tobacco, golf ball with tobacco or cocaine, rolling paper, matches, Lip Smackers, lubricant, syringe with eraser over the needle, fifteen lottery tickets.

(2014: 447)

This triangulation of East, West, and South is suggestive of Cold War divisions of the globe, with South here standing in for the so-called Third World. Weeper's "trade route" runs between inmates in the carceral system yet it also provides a map of the Cold War geography within which we need to make sense of the imposition of neoliberalism on the Caribbean, and the global dissemination of its languages and musical idioms. But the North is absent in Weeper's account, the negative space created by its absence standing in by implication for something like freedom, or perhaps for the ones running this prison. We may also say that the North points toward both the United States and the direction of travel of the illicit narcotics economy the novel is concerned with. But if we understand *Brief History* as a self-reflexive account of the vernacular and its circulation then this passage intimates something about James's doubts and ambivalences regarding the routes through which the vernacular travels, the same flows within which his novel is implicated.

There is a scene toward the end of the novel that foregrounds such doubts and ambivalences. It involves the character of Nina Burgess, who adopts during the course of the novel the pseudonyms Kim Clarke, Dorcas Palmer, and Millicent Segree. A witness to the attempted assassination of the Singer, Nina is desperate to move to the United States and finds herself in the Bronx, New York toward the end of the novel. As Naomi Adam reminds us, James has declared Nina to be his mouthpiece in the novel (2020: 27). Perhaps unsurprisingly her language usage is marked by a high degree of style shifting, with her moving between the more prestigious Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Creole with ease, and even adopting Rastafarian "Dread Talk" on one occasion (Adam 2020: 27). She is also reflecting on such shifts between different vernaculars, upbraiding her sister Kimmy at one point for "playing ghetto" (James 2014: 155) by adopting Jamaican Creole. In the final chapter of the novel, Nina is desperate to "have something Jamaican in my mouth" (2014: 682). After gorging herself on Jamaican cuisine,

“fry chicken and rice and peas ... and some fry plantain and shredded salad” (2014: 682), Nina tells the reader:

I make it through the door just before the vomit burst my lips open and splatters all over the sidewalk. Somebody across the street must be watching me hack fried chicken while my own belly is contracting the life out of me. Nobody is coming but I still left a mess right near his door. I’m trying to stand up straight but my stomach kicks itself again and I bowl over hacking but no vomit.

(2014: 685)

Overtly Nina is expelling Jamaican cuisine, but the semantic drift suggested by “something Jamaican in my mouth” implies that the food also serves as a stand-in for language and song, among others. It is as if she is purging herself of an excessive amount of vernacular culture, with the novel—a narrative characterized by its own excesses—calling upon itself to purge its own excesses in its final pages. Too much food, too much of the vernacular, its languages and music, the narrative seems to be suggesting, with the novel concluding shortly after this scene with Nina calling her sister Kimmy, who is still living in Havendale, an affluent neighborhood in Kingston, Jamaica.

At this point, one may well ask whether vernacular languages and expressive forms, once uprooted from what is presented in the novel as their originary relation to a decolonial politics of anti-imperialism and anti-racism, constitute something like an excess in the narrative, a surplus of language and culture to be set in motion along various routes, but ultimately to be purged. It may be the case that the narrative is trying to distance itself from its imbrication in vernacular cultures and flows, both indulging in and, yet, suspicious of the transnational circulation and neoliberal resignifications of the vernacular. After all, it too is implicated in “playing ghetto.” However we make sense of James’s self-reflexive account of the vernacular and its complication it is certainly the case that *Brief History* offers the reader a set of coordinates by which to understand the complexities surrounding the vernacular today, its entanglement with histories of decolonization and neoliberalization, its shifting valences as both a mode of expression and representational form for the disenfranchised inhabiting a planet of slums, and a component of the genre of the global novel that finds its readership amongst globalized populations.

It is to the global novel and its renewed emphasis on the vernacular I want to turn in conclusion. I want to do so by invoking Cristina Beltrán’s account of what constitutes a neoliberal aesthetics. In her account of representations of race

in the United States, she argues that racial presence, that is to say the rendering visible of racial differences, has been conflated with the aesthetic category of the beautiful, and through this conflation has been understood “to signify not only racial progress but racial justice” (2014: 138). Much like Patricia Stuelke, Beltrán is concerned with what we can call category errors, with how accounts of inclusiveness and relationality in the cultural realm or judgments about what constitutes the beautiful substitute for the political, whether it be the politics of decolonization or of racial justice. With implications for how we approach the vernacular turn within the contemporary anglophone global novel, *Brief History* cautions ultimately against such misrecognitions and substitutions, even while not necessarily fully resisting participating in them. In other words, it resists a reading that would find in the vernacular—whether language or expressive form—a straightforward expression of transnational relationality or interconnectedness, a reading that would suture together the Caribbean and the United States without giving recognition to the hemispheric fault lines opened by counter-revolutionary and imperial histories. *Brief History* insists that the vernacular, throughout all of its permutations and transformations, is shadowed by the specter of histories of decolonization and neoliberalization, and that our reckoning with the vernacular cannot escape confronting these specters as well.

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