‘If you listen carefully now, you will hear’: Spectral music in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

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Abstract: *This study considers the role of music in Marlon James’* A Brief History of Seven Killings *(2014), applying Jacques Derrida’s notion of spectrality to James’ recurrent allusions to the songs of Bob Marley and contextualising those allusions in reference to the novel’s supernatural elements. James’ novel is, in its presentation of Jamaican history, ‘haunted’ by Marley’s music, particularly the songs ‘Natural Mystic’ and ‘Rat Race’. James uses that haunting presence to challenge Marley’s posthumous public image, constructed by Island Records and the Marley Estate, as a voice of ‘peace and love’, emphasising instead the singer’s political radicalism.*

Keywords: Bob Marley, Jamaica, Marlon James, reggae, spectrality

First published in 2014, Marlon James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings* offers a sprawling, multivocal account of a tumultuous period in Jamaican history. Across its five chapters, each taking place on a single day, the novel covers nearly fifteen years, told through the perspectives of numerous distinct narrators. Ostensibly, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is about the 1976 assassination attempt on Bob Marley, but James’ narrative design uses that single, shocking event as something of an anchor for its formal and thematic sprawl, contextualising the incident with reference to Kingston’s internecine political and criminal feuds, Cold War geopolitics, the development of the international drug trade and the crack epidemic in urban America, while further contextualising these historical events and trends with reference to the experiences of fictional characters and fictionalised versions of real figures. As such, James’ novel plays with historicity, as the author warns us with the book’s second epigram, identified simply as a ‘Jamaican proverb’: ‘if it no go so, it go near so’ (James 2014, xiii).

Such play with historicity occurs in concert with James' construction of the novel's ontology, so that the interplay between fictional characters and fictionalised versions of historical figures — enacted at some remove from the genuine historical figures directly mentioned — supplements the novel's more profound moments of unreality. As a work of historical fiction, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* eschews both strict historicism and strict mimeticism, and James' oft-gritty realism exists concurrently with elements of the supernatural. The book's first speaker, Sir Arthur George Jennings, is a ghost, a murder victim who opens the book by admonishing us, from beyond the grave, to '*Listen*', because 'dead people never stop talking' (James 2014, 1).

This emphasis on the sounds of the dead is most immediately evident in the novel's musicality, a feature often noted by critics and admirers of James' work. John Schaefer, in an interview with the author, compared James' brand of narratology to 'a symphony', while Jason Frydman argues that the novel's 'shattered and spectral assemblage' of narrators presents 'voices dropping in and out like the basslines and vocal snippets of a dubbed-out dancehall re-lick' (Schaefer 2014; Frydman 2019, 48). James' many pop culture allusions feature a diverse selection of musicians, and the scope and breadth of those allusions suggest a novel built with something of a soundtrack in mind, a notion reinforced by the author himself. When speaking to Schaefer on New York Public Radio, James offered listeners his own handpicked soundtrack for the book, a brief collection of tracks by Marley ('Ambush in the Night'), Bunny Wailer ('Crucial'), Tenor Saw ('Ring the Alarm'), Boogie Down Productions ('The Bridge Is Over') and Damian Marley ('Welcome to Jamrock') (Schaefer 2014). Fans of the novel have gone even further, so that various playlists, typically drawing from James' musical allusions or from reggae records extant during the novel's timeframe, can be found on platforms such as YouTube and Spotify. The most impressive of these, a 108-song Spotify playlist constructed by user natfmagee101, features every song and artist referenced in the novel, resulting in over seven hours of music.

Such projects promote the sense that, while music may not be the central subject of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, it is nonetheless inextricably a part of the novel's plot, theme and technique. So much is reiterated in the book's formal structure: its five chapters take their titles from popular music, and one of its two epigrams is taken from singer and guitarist Bonnie Raitt. Frydman has noted that some of the novel's characters, particularly those involved in the assassination attempt (Bam-Bam, Demus and Josey Wales), share their names with notable dancehall musicians (Frydman 2019, 40). While none of the book's speakers are musicians themselves, music continually shapes their speech and their experience, so that bits of quoted lyrics occur constantly in the words of the novel's many voices. One of those voices, Nina Burgess, claims to be the inspiration for Marley's 'Midnight Ravers'; another is a *Rolling Stone* journalist, Alex Pierce, who comes to Jamaica ostensibly to follow Mick Jagger.

Pierce ignores his assignment, convinced not only that Jagger and the Stones are washed-up, but that the real story is coming from Kingston's ghettos. 'The busiest, most vital music scene in the world is about to blow up,' he says, 'and not on the charts' (James 2014, 61). This expectation proves prescient: within twenty-four hours, that scene's most famous performer will be shot in a failed assassination attempt, an event that serves as the literal and metaphorical centre of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*.

As such, Jennings' advice to 'listen' to the sounds of dead people at the novel's beginning serves a metaleptic function, given that the book's centre involves a famous dead musician. Such urgings are all part of Jennings' sometimes enigmatic role in the novel: as Sherri-Marie Harrison notes, Jennings serves 'as a composite of preindependence-era Jamaican politicians' and a symbol for the lost possibilities of Jamaica's postcolonial future (Harrison 2017, 93). He is a haunting presence, occasionally felt and even seen by the book's living characters, and, as Harrison continues, something of a chorus, commenting on events with the broader ontological context death has given him and 'linking all the characters and events together' (Harrison 2017, 93). Jennings is therefore both a literal spectre and a metaphor for the spectrality of the past, urging us to train ourselves to hear the sounds of the dead.

Spectrality, a notion theorised by Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (1994 [1993]), offers us a means to hear and understand those sounds of the dead in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. For Derrida, the spectral serves to trouble our supposedly dichotomous notions of absence and presence and past and present, an effect that James' allusions to Bob Marley's lyrics produce throughout the novel. As such, should we heed Jennings' advice and listen, we will find that *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a novel of Jamaica haunted not only by the fictional Jennings, but also by Jamaica's most famous dead person. As Anna Maria Tomczak notes, the combined effect of 'numerous allusions to Marley's songs and the musical quality of the novel's discourse create[s] the potential of a sensuous experience for the reader', so that the book's oft-cited musicality offers Bob Marley the means to speak from beyond the grave (Tomczak 2018, 176). While *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is not, strictly speaking, a novel about Bob Marley, its frequent allusions to Marley's songs urge us to view the novel's action in reference to both Marley's music and Marley himself, whoever (or whatever) Marley might be. Indeed, Marley often seems more a presence than a person in the narrative, a presence made manifest through persistent allusions to certain of his songs, the lyrics of which appear regularly and pointedly throughout the book. The sheer volume and force of these allusions suggest that James employs Marley as something of a revenant, a dead man whose voice haunts Jamaica, its people and James' readers.

This study considers the implications of what James' version of Marley has to say, drawing from Derrida's theories of spectrality to account for Marley's

haunting presence throughout the novel. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* repeatedly asks us to consider who Bob Marley is, and by focusing upon the songs most frequently and pointedly quoted in James' narrative, particularly 'Rat Race' and 'Natural Mystic', we can perhaps extrapolate James' answer to his own question. At issue for James, then, is not only Marley's role within the action of the novel, but Marley's place within broader popular imagination. Few figures in music are so widely revered as Bob Marley, but as we will see, the most popular and pervasive conceptions of Marley and his music are largely the result of a marketing campaign initiated by Island Records and continued by the Marley estate. This campaign has served to emphasise the singer's radio-friendly peace-and-love anthems over his more radical and revolutionary songs. James, by contrast, gives voice to Marley's militant protest music, so that his revenant urges us to reimagine our conceptions of the singer's legacy, to hear the radicalism that record executives sought to silence. The result is a novel that uses spectral music as ballast to historical and aesthetic revisionism concerning one of popular music's most extraordinary voices.

Bob Marley: 'The Singer' and the *Legend*

Most readers of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* know, as James expects them to, that while Bob Marley may have survived the assassination attempt in 1976, he would die from cancer less than five years later. While three of the book's five chapters take place before Marley's death in 1981, James' ontology suggests that the divisions between past and present and living and dead are somewhat fungible, so that allusions to Marley and, more importantly, his music, have a spectral resonance, as if *A Brief History of Seven Killings* were haunted by the music and lyrics of a man who, for much of the plot, is still alive.

This sense, that Bob Marley is somehow both living man and haunting spectre, originates in James' enigmatic, sometimes contradictory portrait of Marley, a peripheral figure the other characters refer to simply as 'the Singer'. By relegating the Singer to the margins of his novel, James construes him more as a presence than as a character, a narrative choice that spotlights both the Singer's otherness, as superstar and purported prophet, and his ordinariness. To the latter, James' Marley is clearly human in the most banal ways possible, as susceptible to bullets and cancer as other mortals, a man who eats, bathes, sleeps and has sex. The Singer's sexual appetite is of particular note: Josey Wales, the mastermind behind the assassination attempt, quips that 'if birth control is a plot to kill black people, then the Singer must be the plot to breed them back' (James 2014, 133).

While such traits emphasise the Singer's banal humanity, the Singer still seems transcendent of the ordinary. By referring to him by this grandiose moniker — a conceit punctured only twice, both times by the American Alex Pierce — James suggests something mystical about this figure. So much is

seemingly confirmed by other characters' awe of him, an awe that extends beyond mere admiration for the Singer's material success or unlikely fame. Nina, recalling her tryst with the Singer, describes first her desire to see him at his morning ritual of bathing naked in the waterfall at Bull Bay — 'something about it sounded so holy and so sexy at once' — and the sense that 'the moon must be sad too, knowing he would soon go inside' (James 2014, 101). Such powers over nature seemingly extend to his music as well. Demus, one of the would-be assassins, recounts using the Singer's music to soothe an injury sustained when he was tortured in prison:

> when the pain was so bad that only strong weed could help me, the only other thing that help was the Singer. […] Is not that music take away the pain, but when it play I don't ride the pain, I ride the rhythm. (James 2014, 56)

As Tomczak notes, such passages 'point to the immaterial, spiritual aspect of Marley's contribution to Jamaican (and international) culture' (Tomczak 2018, 182).

Moreover, within the novel's ontology, the Singer occupies a liminal space between life and death, so that cancer makes him something of a ghost before he actually expires. The sense that death, despite its finality, is not altogether a binary to life pervades *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, a notion reinforced by Jennings. We see as much when, in the aftermath of the assassination attempt, Demus is captured by Rastafarian vigilantes. Just before he is hanged, Demus sees Jennings. 'Those who are about to die,' Jennings says, 'can see the dead' (James 2014, 269). This is later confirmed by Kingston Don Papa-Lo, who also sees a 'white man standing across the road' moments before he is murdered (James 2014, 362); while James does not identify Jennings here, the implication is fairly clear. Such consort between the dead and the near-dead or soon-to-die evidently applies to Jennings and the Singer some years before the Singer's death from cancer. When Jennings quotes from Marley's 'Natural Mystic', he credits his source by saying, 'I stole those words from a living man who already has death walking with him, killing him from the toe up' (James 2014, 111). That death, the cancer under Marley's toenail, would not be discovered for some seven months, and it would not kill Marley for nearly five years, time enough to record and release four more albums and some of his best-known songs, including the one that Jennings quotes.

The fact that Jennings knows the lyrics to an as-yet unreleased song heightens the sense that music serves a spectral function in the novel, a function perhaps better explained by deconstructive theory than by the traditional tropes of ghost stories alone. Of particular use is Jacques Derrida's notion of *hauntology* from his landmark *Specters of Marx*. Borrowing both from Marx and Engels' famous claim in *The Communist Manifesto* that 'a spectre is haunting Europe' (Marx 1988 [1888], 54) and Hamlet's observation that 'the

time is out of joint' (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5), Derrida posits what he calls 'a spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present)' (Derrida 1994 [1993], xx). By troubling our notions of time and presence, Derrida offers hauntology as something of a replacement for ontology:

> If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth. There is first of all the doubtful contemporaneity of the present to itself. Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must perhaps ask oneself whether the spectrality effect does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other. (Derrida 1994 [1993], 39-40)

In so doing, according to Colin Davis, Derrida 'replace[s] the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive' (Davis 2015, 373). Such notions readily lend themselves to music by highlighting what Mark Fisher calls the 'opposition between two ways of hearing (or treating) the voice: the voice as (authorized and authentic) embodied presence versus the voice as recorded revenant' (Fisher 2013, 43-44). Recorded music, by its nature, is historical product and temporal phenomenon, but paradoxically, in our consumption and experience of it, it acts as a Derridean spectre, unbound or disjointed from the historical context in which it was created. This is particularly true of the music which remains culturally pervasive long after the expiration of its creator, music like that of Bob Marley. If anything, Marley's imprint upon popular music has only increased after death; his bestselling album, the compilation *Legend*, first hit shelves three years after he succumbed to cancer, and it has spent over 500 weeks on the Billboard charts, far longer than any record released in Marley's lifetime. At present, nine of Marley's songs boast over 100 million plays on Spotify, with his most widely played song, 'Three Little Birds', having registered well over 350 million listens. As Derrida notes, 'a masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 18).

So much is true of Marley's various masterpieces in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Snippets of Marley's lyrics appear throughout the novel, haunting the thoughts and speech of the novel's many characters and imposing considerable demands on the reader, so that intimate familiarity with Marley's catalogue often seems something of a prerequisite to understanding the novel. James' technique resembles that used by James Joyce in 'Clay' and 'The Dead', the two most overtly 'haunted' stories in *Dubliners* (1914), wherein the quoted

songs — 'I Dreamt that I Dwelt' and 'The Lass of Aughrim', respectively — provide significant meaning through those lines *not* quoted in the text. James, like Joyce, has similar expectations of his readers, though he reveals his technique more clearly than did his Irish predecessor. Early in the novel, as Alex Pierce complains that 'the real Singer' is impossible to capture, he points to song lyrics in place of biography:

> I could move in closer, get to the real Singer, but I'll just fail like every other journalist before me because, shit, there is no real Singer. That's the clincher there, that the real motherfucker right there, that he is something else now that he's in the Billboard Top Ten. An allegory kinda, he exists when some girl passes by the hotel window singing that she's sick and tired of the ism and schism. When boys in the street sing them belly full but them hungry, tailing off before the next line and knowing there's a greater threat in not singing what everybody knows. (James 2014, 82)

The two songs quoted above, 'Get Up, Stand Up' and 'Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)', are among the most revolutionary songs Marley ever recorded. The former, co-written with original Wailer Peter Tosh, is, in Timothy White's phrase, one of the Wailers' most 'dangerous, wailing Black Power songs', an incendiary rejection of both existing power structures and the Christian evangelism that serves to reinforce systemic inequity (White 2006, 260-61). The section Pierce quotes, originally sung by Tosh, expresses frustration with the 'ism and schism game', the various ideological divisions propagated by the powerful to maintain control, before implying that notions of 'dyin' and goin' to heaven in a Jesus' name' breed subservience (Marley and Tosh 1973). 'Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)' is perhaps even more blunt; the omitted line, which Pierce hears as a threat, notes that 'a hungry mob is an angry mob' (Marley 1974). With the threat comes a sort of promise, or at least hints of a potential revolutionary future. The system — or Babylon shitstem, as some of James' characters put it — has failed, but the prospects for genuine revolution haunt Jamaica just as Marx and Engels' spectre haunted Europe.

Indeed, one hears in these songs something approximating revolutionary Marxism, albeit a Marxism filtered through Rastafarianism, but close enough to sound either threatening or promising, depending upon the audience. One of these audiences is revealed to be the CIA, and the Company regards the Singer and his lyrics through the prism of Cold War geopolitics and national security fears, worrying that Jamaica could become another Cuba. In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, the CIA first responds to this existential threat of Jamaican revolution with implicit threats of their own, directed at the Singer and his entourage. Papa-Lo recounts the appearance of an unknown 'white bwoi' at the Singer's mansion. This man asks about a number of Marley's songs:

> What I want to know is what happened to the man who sung sweet little songs like 'Stir it Up.' Is it because the other two left you? What happened to the love everybody vibes? 'Burning and Looting'? Is that like 'Dancing in the Street'? You know, angry nigger music. (James 2014, 130)

In coarse, racist and deliberately provocative terms, the white bwoi returns us to Alex Pierce's comments about 'the real Singer', shifting the conversation to Marley's apparently contradictory ethos. Is the 'real Singer' the Marley of 'Stir it Up', the radio-friendly voice of peace, love and ganga? Or is he the Marley of 'Burning and Looting', the revolutionary voice of the postcolonial Third World? While the white bwoi seems confused about the Singer's catalogue — the Wailers were, if anything, more revolutionary in their politics before the departure of Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer — his question is unconsciously prescient. Marley's most famous and popular songs — 'Three Little Birds', 'Is This Love', 'Jamming', 'One Love/People Get Ready' and 'No Woman, No Cry' — typically express those 'love everybody vibes', belying the anger and danger found elsewhere in Marley's music.

This kinder, gentler version of Marley is something of a marketing construction, traceable to Island Records executive Dave Robinson. Tasked to put together a Greatest Hits package of Marley's songs after the singer's death, Robinson set out to 'sell him to the white world' (quoted in Kornelis 2014). When market research confirmed Robinson's suspicions about Marley's music, finding that white suburban audiences were largely turned off by revolutionary politics and overtly Rastafarian songs, Robinson selected tracks to obscure those aspects of Marley's ethos. The resulting tracklist on *Legend* (1984), while not altogether free of politics, skews towards Marley's softer, more romantic side. As such, according to Michelle A Stephens, 'Island's packaging of Marley in *Legend* erased the fact that the singer was the product of a subversive collective consciousness in Jamaica' (Stephens 1998, 145). In his decision to '[take] "reggae" and the "revolutionary" out of the conception of the album,' Robinson 'isolated all the music's meaning into the body of the individual artist himself; hence Marley as the "body of reggae"' (Stephens 1998, 146).

The result was a clear commercial success across multiple demographics; as Chris Kornelis notes, *Legend* would become both 'the preferred dinner-party soundtrack for polite company' and 'the gateway drug for generations of Marley aficionados' (Kornelis 2014). While the wide appeal and enduring popularity of *Legend* suggest that Robinson was onto something, commercial success came with a cost: the Marley of *Legend* is a somewhat distorted and, in Field Maloney's term, 'defanged' version of the singer (Maloney 2006). 'Listening to *Legend* to understand Marley,' Maloney continues, 'is like reading *Bridget Jones's Diary* to get Jane Austen' (Maloney 2006). Defanged or not, Island's version of Marley has proven commercially viable well beyond the world of popular music; the Jamaica Tourist Board has used 'One Love/People Get

Ready' in its advertising campaigns for decades, and Marley's name and likeness have been ubiquitously marketed, applied to all sorts of merchandise, including incense, iced tea, headphones, turntables, coffee and cannabis.

'Rasta don't work for no CIA'

While James' presentation of the Singer seemingly leaves questions of 'the real Bob Marley' unanswered, his repeated allusions to Marley's revolutionary songs serve to challenge the more market-friendly vision of the Singer. Those who know Marley only from *Legend* may well wonder why such an innocuous voice would be targeted for assassination; why gangs, politicians and the CIA would care about so harmless a message. These allusions remind the reader that Marley's broader message, with its themes of Black Power and post-colonial insurrection, was potentially dangerous to existing power structures, making Marley a threat to the economically and politically powerful. Moreover, by establishing the dangerous side of Marley's ethos, James shoves aside the cuddlier and gentler versions of both Rastafarianism and Jamaica itself. The misconception, often found among white Americans, that Rastafarianism is all about peace and pot is severely undercut by references to Marley's more radical songs, culminating in the moment when Rastafarian vigilantes exact brutal revenge against the Singer's would-be assassins. A song like 'Burning and Looting' emphasises the poverty and consequent anger in Jamaican ghettos, subverting those Tourist Board images of sandy beaches and clear ocean water set to 'One Love/People Get Ready'.

While the mysterious white bwoi fails to provoke the Singer, Papa-Lo and others recognise the threat even before it is expressed:

> Last thing we need is a rabble-rouser setting off the wrong element. Rock and roll is rock and roll and it has its fans it doesn't need… Look, I'm trying to tell you people this nicely. But rock, well, rock is for real Americans. And you all need to stop trying to cultivate an audience… Mainstream America doesn't need your kind of message so think real hard about these tours… maybe you should stick to the coasts. Stop trying to reach real America. (James 2014, 130-31)

When describing this threatening visit, Papa-Lo alludes to another Bob Marley song: 'some people take that as a visitation from the devil himself,' he says, 'but this is 1976 and if Rasta don't work for the CIA then somebody else do' (James 2014, 131). The song in question, 'Rat Race', was the closing track on *Rastaman Vibration*, Marley's only album released in 1976, the year of the shooting. While *Rastaman Vibration* has several revolutionary songs, 'Rat Race' is unique in its explicit commentary about Jamaica's violent political feuds and the Cold War geopolitics that finance and manipulate those feuds. Noting how 'political violence fill ya city', a city living under constant threat of 'sudden destruction', Marley mocks the notion of 'collective security for surety' (Marley

1976). This reality, that the collective security sought by capitalist nations against communist ones fails to protect Jamaican victims of politically manipulated gang warfare, seemingly prompts Marley to dismiss political machinations altogether: 'don't involve Rasta in your say-say,' he sings, because 'Rasta don't work for no CIA' (Marley 1976).

There is, of course, a constant spiritual and religious dimension to Marley's music, as present in his songs about love or ganja as in his songs about revolution, but in 'Rat Race' Marley declares Rastafarianism to be above the pettiness of Jamaican politics and, more daringly, American interference. Such claims balance the song's cynicism with a vision of religious purity and independence from both foreign manipulation and the capriciousness of political violence. These notions become, in the aftermath of the assassination attempt, either a haunting reminder of a lost ideal or a joke about the uselessness of idealism, and James repeats the phrase 'Rasta don't work for no CIA' — or 'the CIA', since most characters mildly misquote the song — throughout *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Alex Pierce, the one character to quote 'Rat Race' verbatim, uses it to wonder at the murkiness of Jamaican corruption and political violence, the clarity and directness of the statement clashing with the more shadowy underground he finds: 'the Singer,' he says, 'never one to pull punches sings Rasta don't work for no CIA. In Jamaica 2 + 2 = 5, but now it's adding up to 7' (James 2014, 62). Later, Pierce wonders 'if Rasta don't work for the CIA, does he know who?' (James 2014, 62). Jennings hears Josey Wales use Marley's line flippantly when talking to Peter Nasser, the Jamaican Labour Party strategist who contracts Wales to commit these acts of 'political violence'; when Wales himself is set to become a victim of such violence, the mysterious Dr Love, a CIA operative, uses it again before apologising for making a 'bad joke' (James 2014, 116, 664).

These recurrent allusions to 'Rat Race' position the track at the centre of the novel's spectral soundtrack. The song floats in and out of the narrative, taunting both James' characters and his readers with its unheeded warnings and lost idealism. It offers a persistent reminder that the Singer's principles were impotent against more powerful forces, that the CIA never needed Rastafarians to manipulate Jamaica and that there were enough willing collaborators to brush aside Rastafarian purism for sake of cash, guns and cocaine. To some, like Josey Wales and Dr Love, the passage of time renders 'Rat Race' an impotent warning and, by extension, a bad joke, a piece of pop culture ephemera from a lost moment in history. By the time Dr Love quotes it, 'Rat Race' is fifteen years old, a song that may have spoken to its own time but seemingly no longer speaks to the present.

And yet the spectral presence of 'Rat Race' throughout the broad historical scope of James' novel recalls Derrida's 'suggestion' that 'haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of

presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 4). Readers can trace 'Rat Race' to the date of its first occurrence in James' novel (2 December 1976) or its last (22 March 1991), to its release, recording or composition dates, but recorded music cannot be so easily consigned to dates or times. In 1991 or 2014, a song like 'Rat Race' is both relic and revenant; its warning, if no longer immediate, becomes accusation and condemnation of those who failed to heed it. 'Rat Race' may be a bad joke to Dr Love or Josey Wales, but it need not be so to James' reader.

'A natural mystic blowing through the air'

'Rat Race' can serve such a function, in part, because Marley's lyrics are so direct. Such directness is not altogether typical of Marley's protest music, and James uses 'Rat Race' as a foil to 'Natural Mystic', the other most ubiquitous song in the novel's spectral soundtrack. The opening track to *Exodus* (1977), Marley's first album to be recorded and released after the assassination attempt, 'Natural Mystic' presents biblically-inspired eschatology in cryptic, borderline gnostic terms; the sound of a doomsday trumpet, either the first or the last, heralds the 'reality' that 'many more will have to suffer, many more will have to die' (Marley 1977). Greil Marcus, reviewing *Exodus* for *Rolling Stone*, compared the track to Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind' (1963), arguing that 'where Dylan seemed to say the answers were blowing away, Marley is certain they are blowing straight to anyone whose soul is pure enough to receive them' (Marcus 1977). Indeed, Marley offers neither explanations nor answers, refusing to indulge his audience's questions ('don't ask me why'); nor does he explain, here or elsewhere, what a 'natural mystic' is. In lieu of explanations, Marley offers apocalyptic visions, explicable only through his advice that 'if you listen carefully now, you will hear' (Marley 1977).

The song's title would, somewhat anachronistically, become an appellation for Marley himself, eventually serving also as the title of a compilation CD, *Natural Mystic: The Legend Lives On*, released by Island |Records in 1995. This collection, presented as a sequel to, or continuation of, *Legend*, offers a more heavily political version of Marley, with glimpses of the hard-edged Rastafarianism and Pan-Africanism that the previous album lacked, but all while presenting Marley himself as, in Stephens' phrase, 'a deliberately ethereal icon, one removed from the very specific social and political context of reggae production in the 1970s' (Stephens 1998, 141-42). For Stephens, this vision of Marley was the inevitable product of Robinson's reinvention of the Singer for Island Records. 'The figure of the "natural mystic",' she writes, 'is the culmination of a posthumous ten-year process which first humanized Marley in the 1980s in order to immortalize him in the 1990s' (Stephens 1998, 142). The immortalised Marley, having become safe for white middle class consumption, would then become the marketable Marley, with even his most revolutionary

songs commodified in the form of licensed 'Natural Mystic' incense and 'Iron Lion Zion' onesies.

While James' Singer is, to some extent, an appropriation-cum-subversion of Marley-as-natural-mystic, the author's use of the song reclaims it from such misapplication. For James, the 'natural mystic' is not Bob Marley himself, but an inexplicable force extant in Jamaica in the time immediately before and after the assassination attempt. This is closer to Marley's meaning of the term than that promoted by Island Records or the Marley estate, even if James' characters use it without Marley's grim sincerity. The phrase 'natural mystic' appears twice in the novel, once delivered ironically by Josey Wales, as explanation for his evident first-hand knowledge of Marley's gunshot wounds; he heard it, he tells Alex Pierce, 'from the natural mystic blowing through the air' (James 2014, 391). Such a quotation is typical of Wales, who is both familiar with and dismissive of the Singer's work; however, the phrase is first uttered by, of all people, Claire Di Florio, the wife of CIA station chief Barry Di Florio. Confronting her husband about the CIA's plans in Jamaica, Claire avers that the Company's typical *modus operandi* seems not to fit somehow. She says:

> There's something else, something in the air. A natural mystic. (James 2014, 178)

The comment confuses her husband, whose question — 'what the fuck does that mean?' — echoes those questions Marley declines to answer in the song itself; like Marley, Claire also refuses to answer: 'it wouldn't even make sense to explain it to you' (James 2014, 178).

The entire exchange is curious, particularly since Marley had not yet recorded 'Natural Mystic' at the time of the conversation — as noted above, 'Natural Mystic' was recorded after the assassination attempt. The sense, then, is of something prophetic, a poor expression of the otherwise ineffable, laden with the very real threat of violence. While Claire does not quote further from the song, the use of the phrase implies that the song's apocalyptic vision of suffering and death will follow. Claire says it on the eve of the assassination attempt, the event that will lead to more death and destruction, ultimately cementing Josey Wales' place as don and his role in the international drug trade. The suffering and death, then, is recast as the fall-out from that event: the murders of the would-be assassins, the murder of Papa-Lo, the politicised gang violence resultant from failed attempts at reconciliation, the blight of crack addiction, the crack addicts murdered by Josey Wales and the murder of Josey Wales himself. In short, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* lives up to Marley's chilling prediction in 'Natural Mystic' that:

> many more will have to suffer. Many more will have to die. (Marley 1977)

Those exact words appear several times in the novel, serving as something of a refrain for the dead or soon-to-die. Jennings, as the first to utter them,

contextualises the Singer's lyrics as a chorus suitable for the end of the year and the onset of winter:

> And now we are in the time of dying. The year surrenders in three weeks. Gone, the season of wet hot summer, ninety-six degrees in the shade, May and October rains that swelled rivers, killed cows and spread sickness. Men growing fat on pork, boys' bellies swelling with poison. Fourteen men lost in the bush while bodies explode, three, four, five. Many more will have to suffer. Many more will have to die. (James 2014, 111)

The words come again when Jennings appears to Demus, just before the gang member's execution. Having been drawn to the jungle by Josey Wales' scent, only to find Demus instead, Jennings realises that the violence and cruelty that doomed him are unlikely to end any time soon. From there, the lines pass into the mind of Papa-Lo in the moments before his death as he tries to work out who was responsible for the assassination attempt on his friend the Singer. As he comes to understand that Josey Wales, his subordinate, has betrayed him, and that the powers beyond Wales are greater than Jamaican political parties or gangland dons, he repeats the Singer's words. The words return to Jennings at the end of the same chapter, as if responding to Josey Wales' ascendency and the novel's oncoming shift from Jamaica to New York:

> Now something new is blowing through the air, an ill wind. A malaria. Still more will have to suffer, and many more will have to die, two, three, a hundred, eight hundred and eighty-nine. (James 2014, 430)

'Marley's hot on the box'

Among those to suffer and die is the Singer himself, whose last days Jennings describes in the chapter. These vignettes of Marley in decline are juxtaposed with images of Jamaica under siege by political turmoil and brutal violence. Those images are themselves introduced by Jennings' revision of 'Natural Mystic': 'something new is blowing' (James 2014, 430). Such wording implies, somewhat paradoxically, the accuracy of Marley's apocalyptic predictions and the inadequacy of those predictions to account for the exact nature of this violence. The fact that the Singer's last days are spent largely abroad — in Paris, London, New York, Pittsburgh, Bavaria and Miami — suggests that international stardom has become a sort of exile, with the singer's voice finally silenced just as the CIA-supported Jamaica Labour Party wins the election. Employing the pathetic fallacy, James has the Singer's death punctuated by thunder and lightning in both New York and Kingston, implying yet again that the Singer, if not transcendent of death, is at least transcendent of ordinary death.

And yet, just before he expires, the Singer himself becomes the audience for a bit of spectral music. The song in question is, for a change, not one of his own making, but rather a song written about him. 'Something coming from out the

window,' Jennings reports, 'sounding like that Stevie Wonder tune "Master Blaster"?' (James 2014, 436). While Jennings' phrasing and James' curious use of a question mark make it unclear what, exactly, the Singer hears, the introduction of Wonder's 'Master Blaster (Jammin')', a hit single in the year before Marley's death, suggests that the Singer finds himself haunted by his own legacy on his deathbed. 'Master Blaster (Jammin')', though an evidently sincere tribute to Marley, de-emphasises the singer's radicalism and militancy: 'though the world's full of problems,' Wonder sings, 'they couldn't touch us if they tried' (Wonder 1980). Those problems are largely drowned out by the sounds of the reggae music — 'Marley's hot on the box' — that forms the soundtrack of a summer block party. While Wonder connects that party to post-colonial circumstances, including the recently ended civil war in Zimbabwe, and vague notions of Rastafarian solidarity ('joined as children in Jah'), the social and political power of Marley's music is sublimated to its escapism:

> They want us to join their fighting,
>
> But our answer today
>
> Is to let all our worries
>
> Like the breeze through our fingers slip away. (Wonder 1980)

This is, of course, the vision of Bob Marley that persists, the vision constructed, in part, by Island Records and the Marley estate, the vision that sells records, incense and coffee to the white suburban middle class. It is the vision used to sell Jamaica to tourists, a vision that belies the violence and oppression visited upon the Jamaican people as consequence of British colonialism and the Cold War. For the Singer to be haunted by this version of himself just before his death seems fitting, as James' novel is itself haunted by the sounds of a more radical Bob Marley and the Wailers. Perhaps, James speculates, that radicalism is no longer welcome in Jamaica or the United States, but Marley's ghost will continue to make its spectral music heard elsewhere. When Jennings makes his final appearance in the novel, he sees the Singer's fiery legacy 'doused out' by posthumous honours, particularly the Order of Merit and an appearance on a postage stamp (James, 2014, 601). And yet, Jennings concludes, the Singer's voice has not been altogether silenced:

> But 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. (James 2014, 601)

In this image, as Derrida would remind us, the time is out of joint, and the spectre haunting the world is the sound of a long-dead man's voice moving in the ghostly manner of a masterpiece.

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