

Abstract

**Legitimate resistance: A survival story  
– the crisis of Jamaican political ideology and the quest for resolution in some recent  
Jamaican novels**

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In the four-plus decades since Jamaica was granted independence, the country has struggled with different ideologies in an effort to grapple with the socio-political legacies of colonialism in forging a new national path. Ideology was at its height in the explosive seventies, but the costs were dear; with the victory of capitalism over socialism at the end of that decade, the disillusionment of the population with politics and politicians, the failure of structural adjustment, the stresses of globalization and now, the disillusionment with the ideology of the world's superpower, politicians and academics alike seem to be acknowledging that there are many more questions than answers in terms of resolving the country's problems.

A number of novels by Jamaican writers have addressed this dilemma. The plight of the country's poor as described in Orlando Patterson's classic *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964) led to the democratic socialism of the seventies; such works as Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) reflect the searing social consciousness that was born in that period, but also the violent consequences of that birth; and the wounds from the political war of that same period, as well as the pain of disillusionment, are shown in more recent works such as Brian Meeks' *Paint the Town Red* (2003) or Garfield Ellis's *For Nothing At All* (2005). Errol McDonald's *Legitimate Resistance* (2006) proposes new solutions, suggesting new directions for the future – in a most disturbing way.

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**Legitimate resistance: A survival story**

**– the crisis of political ideology and the quest for resolution in some recent Jamaican novels**

By Kim Robinson-Walcott (PhD), SALISES, Mona

*This is my story*

*Real ghetto story*

*This is a survival story*

*True ghetto story*

– popular dancehall DJ Baby Cham (“Ghetto Story”)

*Big up all de warrior dem from di present to di past*

*A nuff a dem a died fi a cause*

– popular Jamaican dancehall DJ Elephant Man (“Warrior Cause”)

In the forty-five years since independence was granted in 1962, Jamaica, grappling with the socio-political legacies of colonialism, has struggled with different ideologies in its effort to forge a new national path. In the period immediately following independence, with its promises of record-breaking economic growth, there was a feeling that the sky was the limit, that we could achieve anything. That optimism translated, in the early seventies, to the widespread conviction that better could and would and must come in terms of addressing social inequalities. The spread of that optimism contracted as the decade progressed. However, ideology in one extreme form or another was at its height in that explosive period. The costs were dear: by the mid-seventies the lines of demarcation were drawn sharply and the losses on both sides were severe. When the government fell from power at the end of that decade, despite the victory of capitalism over democratic socialism, there was a new type of disenfranchisement – a disenfranchisement experienced by former diehard political supporters on both sides, a disenfranchisement of ideology. Since then, with the ever-growing disillusionment of the majority of the population with politics and politicians, the failure of touted miracle solutions such as structural adjustment, free markets and globalization, compounded by the evident

beginning decline of the world's current superpower, an ideological vacuum has been created. So: a fall of optimism, a fall of idealism, a rise of materialism and cynicism; and politicians and academics alike seem to be acknowledging that there are more questions than answers in terms of resolving the country's problems. As social scientists argue among themselves as to whether or not Jamaica qualifies as a failed state, the general population is apathetic at best, hostile at worst, to the perceived shenanigans of local politicians and indeed, world powers.

A number of novels by Jamaican writers have followed this ideological trajectory from activism to apathy, from idealism to cynicism. The hopelessness of the plight of the country's urban poor was famously described in Orlando Patterson's classic *Children of Sisyphus* (1964).<sup>1</sup> Patterson's depiction of the 'poor and wretched' inhabitants of Dungle, echoing Fanon, is one of despair, but a noble despair: As the Rasta griot Brother Solomon says, "Isn't it strange, brother, how wretchedness and despair can make gods of men?... Keep running. You must keep running. The track is rough and round, but you must keep running" (203).

A recognition of such hopelessness, in contrast to the earlier post-independence optimism, led to an initial broad support of the democratic socialism initiatives of the seventies. Such works as Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987)<sup>2</sup> reflect the searing social consciousness among the educated as well as the uneducated, the overprivileged as well as the underprivileged, the revolutionary zeal that erupted in that period and also a recognition of the violent consequences of that eruption: in Jamaica there is "no telephone to heaven, no voice to god. A waste to try. Cut off. No way of reaching out or up. Maybe only one way. Not God's way..." (16), "No miracles. None of them knew miracles. They must turn the damn ting upside down. Fight fire with fire Burn...cyaan tu'n back now...I am about to kill one of your creatures. Some of your children" (50).

Cliff's novel expresses both the revolutionary fervour of the seventies and the disillusionment with established seats of power that began to manifest in the early eighties, a feeling that one must take the law into one's own hands because the powers that be can or will not. There is no telephone to heaven.

The wounds from the political war of that same period, as well as the pain of disillusionment, are shown in more recent works such as Brian Meeks' *Paint the Town Red* (2003)<sup>3</sup> or Garfield Ellis' *For Nothing At All* (2005).<sup>4</sup> As Norval (Nadi) Edwards has so eloquently stated, "*Paint the Town Red* is... testimony and haunting requiem, a tale which is ultimately driven by the imperative of remembering and recording the stories... of those Jamaicans caught up in the maelstrom of idealism, radical transformation, devastating political violence and deep social divisions, who dreamed, fought and died on the altars of lost causes, failed political gods and betrayed hopes."<sup>5</sup>

*For Nothing At All* similarly revisits the period of the seventies and the lives that were destroyed by the manipulations and manoeuvrings of politicians who seduced the young male residents of poor or working-class communities to be used as pawns in their turf wars. Their self-serving, power-seeking endeavours tore apart friendships as they tore apart communities, and as Ellis's protagonist Wesley says,

it is the why of it that bothers me, the way and the speed at which it came, this thing that made us so. It is as if we were halfway through a game of chevy chase...but before I can call my friends to come and play again, they are dead, I am in jail and our blood is on each other's hands. It is the why of it that bothers me, for it does not make sense at all. It is hard to believe that we could have come to this. And I cannot explain or understand what has happened, or how and when. As if we have come and gone, and the game we started has not been finished, yet we have been wasted, vanquished and spent, for nothing...for nothing at all. (172)

*This is my story*

*Real ghetto story*

Dancehall always throbs with the pulse of the masses, and in Baby Cham's song "Ghetto Story" (one of the most popular songs in Jamaica in 2006), the lyrics are haunting:

...

*I remember when we skip the poll clerks*

*And dump the ballot box pan Tivoli outskirts*

*And hold a plane ticket and go chill over Turks*

*When me come back a still inna di hole me a lurk  
I remember those days when informer Dirks  
Get one inna him face and me nuh get no perks  
And de bigger heads dem are a couple of jerks  
Cause dem a mek di money, when a wi mash di works*

Yet: this is, as Baby Cham says, a survival story:

*This is a survival story  
True ghetto story...*

*Jamaica get screw, tru greed an glutton  
Politics manipulate and press yutes button  
But we rich now, so dem can tell man notin  
Cuz a we a mek mama nyam fish an mutton<sup>6</sup>*

The post-seventies disillusionment with politicians, combined with a post-civil-war residual infrastructure of armaments and a post-civil-war culture of ruthlessness that were the legacies of those same politicians, led to a new dispensation, one which by the nineties had become manifest: the politicians no longer ran things, instead the dons did. The dons, often funded by drug running, provided for the communities, made “mama nyam fish and mutton”, protected the residents from rival gangs, from corrupt politicians, from corrupt police. In many inner-city communities the dons usurped the authority of the state.

*Wi get di ting dem  
Dem outta luck now  
Mi squeeze seven and di whole a dem a duck now  
Wi have whole heap a extra clip cau we no bruk now  
Rah rah rah rah [sound of gunfire]*

*Wi get di ting dem, so dem haffi rate we  
Cau we a tek it to dem wicked of lately*

*And now the whole community a live greatly*

*Rah rah rah rah* [sound of gunfire]<sup>7</sup>

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To return to Elephant Man:

*Big up all de warrior dem from di present to di past*

*A you know dem fight fi a cause*

*Big up all de warrior dem from di present to di past*

*A nuff a dem a died fi a cause*<sup>8</sup>

– but the warriors that Elephant Man is “bigging up” are people such as Claudie Massop, Bucky Marshall, Jim Brown, George Flash, Andrew Phang – infamous area dons who were eventually killed, many by the police in alleged shootouts. In contemporary Jamaica, for the residents of many inner-city communities abandoned by politicians, life would be as wretched and despairing for these children of Sisyphus were it not for these dons. These are the heroes. These are the sources of hope.

*Rah rah rah rah*

This is the context, then, in which one must place Errol McDonald’s recently published novel *Legitimate Resistance* (2006),<sup>9</sup> advertised by the publisher as “another street smart Jamaican novel” (a novel which, I must emphasise, does not in my view rank in terms of literary merit with the other novels previously mentioned here, but which I nevertheless find very interesting for a number of reasons which I hope to show). McDonald paints the scene of contemporary Jamaica with much accuracy: poverty, senseless violence, corruption in the state. Gang warfare is rife in the inner city communities of Kingston, with a new dimension – there is an influx of deportees (called ‘dips’) who are fighting to wrest turf from the older established gangs; meanwhile the police respond by slaughtering innocents, and thereby alienating the inner-city residents. McDonald’s two heroes are Click, a don, and his chief assistant/second in command, the young ‘shotta’ Silver. Click is the head of the gang called the ghost riders (GRs for short), who at first seem merely to engage in the usual entrepreneurial activities of extortion, ganja running and murder of competing gang members. However, McDonald rapidly establishes the GRs as “guardians of the people” (26), vigilante “deliverers of

justice” (127) who in their demonstration of civic responsibility engage in “Robin-Hood style giveaways” (57) to their community. Extortion is well-intentioned: “Dem big company and big business haf to give us more money fi operate downtown. Wi a go use dat money to feed and protect the residents” (215). There would, McDonald suggests, be mayhem” without them (111). “There was no escaping the killing fields of the Jamaican ghettos...Somebody had to stand up to point the guns in the right direction and destiny had chosen the Ghost Riders” (214). The dips, in contrast, are bad guys – though the status of true bad guys is reserved for the “police dogs” (214).

There was deep resentment and hatred for the police. They seemed to exercise a power drunk behaviour reminiscent of a colonial era where people in position overused their authority on their contemporaries and peers. Their many indiscretionary killings made them expect a backlash. A vicious cycle of fear and cowardice perpetuated the bloodshed. (143)

Silver, the warlord shotta, is described as a “freedom fighter”. As Click’s chief “enforcer” (65), he is the romantic young dashing hero, the “brave warrior” (200) who “bravely and fearlessly rode like lightning [sic]” (201).

In contrast Click the elder (one is considered an elder if one makes it past 30) is the “mastermind”, the “man of vision” (51) who brilliantly plans, strategises and executes the expansion of the GRs from mere inner-city gang to multinational corporate entity. Click’s strategies, from establishment of a camp in the mountains (similar to the one in *No Telephone to Heaven*) to ganja shipment methods to terrorist tactics to money laundering to legitimization of operations, are carefully constructed, mapped out by the author in comprehensive and exhaustive detail, indicating extensive research on the author’s part and practically providing any would-be aspirants with a template for success.

Click’s vision is not based on greed. Click is a man with a mission, a man who knows he is destined to lead an uprising in Jamaica to save the people, a man clothed in righteousness and a protector of the people who is himself protected by Jah. As a righteous man he is reluctant to get involved in cocaine smuggling and distribution – and when pragmatic considerations change his mind (saving Jamaica does take a lot of money), he insists that the cocaine must not be allowed to get into the hands of Jamaicans but must all be shipped out to other markets where the people matter less. Similarly his

chief enforcer Silver is also protected by Jah – so long, as he tells a colleague earnestly, as he doesn't kill indiscriminately (88). No gratuitous violence here.

Earnestness is an important factor here. Because as one reads this novel one feels that the author is very earnestly presenting the activities of the GRs as 'legitimate resistance'. There may be no irony in the title. There may be no irony in the book. McDonald's tone is at the very least matter of fact, if not downright admiring of the way that Click and his followers subvert the authority of the state. Any displays of ruthlessness on the part of the GRs, of which there are many, are presented as unfortunate but necessary aspects of running a successful business – one must retain control, one must let potential usurpers know who is in charge, one must exert a little discipline from time to time. (*rah rah rah rah*) While it must be acknowledged that there are occasional moments when a voice of conventional morality slips in (for example Silver's girlfriend fleetingly expresses reservations about her boyfriend's calling), these moments are quickly bypassed, sometimes seemingly quickly forgotten by the character who utters the words (like Silver's girlfriend), if not by the author himself – so much so that one suspects these may have been the token intrusions of a concerned conservative editor (I was present at the book launch and the editor did seem concerned).

This audience will, I am sure, be happy to hear that Click and his GR gang succeed in their legitimate resistance: the corrupt government is overthrown, the corrupt police are slaughtered or otherwise removed from duty, Jamaica becomes self-sufficient as a major exporter of ganja and other innovative agricultural products and so the economy booms, the Rastafarians are given Kings House as their headquarters and Haile Selassie's grandson appropriately, installed there, and Click, Silver and the rest of the posse live happily ever after.

*Big up all de warrior dem from di present to di past*

*A nuff a dem a died fi a cause*

This is a survival story, a real ghetto story. It is a fairy tale story in many ways, of course – not least, the fact that the USA allows all of this to happen – but in many other ways it is real. It is real in that it reflects many truths about Jamaica's contemporary political and



economic scene, though it may exaggerate them: the disillusionment with politicians, the view of the police as the enemy, the dependency of the urban poor on sources of sustenance and protection alternative to the state, the heavy reliance of the economy on income from the ganja trade, etc etc. Perhaps more so, it is real in that it speaks to the vacuum created by the loss of earlier political or economic ideologies and responds to the sense of hopelessness felt by many Jamaicans about the future of their country. It is real in that it reflects a celebration of violence, not gratuitous violence, not merely gangsterism, but violence as resistance in popular Jamaican culture. And it may be real in that it reflects what I fear may be a growing trend among Jamaicans to distance ourselves from, or excuse, or even justify, in other words legitimize, immorality on the grounds that it doesn't affect us personally, or that we benefit from it, or that the end justifies the means.

And that I find disturbing.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (Kingston: The Bolivar Press, 1971). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987; reprint, New York: Vintage International / Random House, 1989). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Meeks, *Paint the Town Red* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2003). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Garfield Ellis, *For Nothing At All* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2005). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Norval Edwards, book review of *Paint the Town Red* in *Jamaica Journal* 28 nos. 2-3, 81.

<sup>6</sup> "Lyrics – Baby Cham – 'Ghetto Story' ", <http://www.yardflex.com/archives/000309.html>, accessed 4 March 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Elephant Man, "Warrior Cause", *Log On* (Isleworth/New York: Greensleeves Records, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Errol McDonald, *Legitimate Resistance: The Jamaican Connection* (Kingston: LMH Publishing, 2006). All subsequent references will be to this edition.