

VYBZ KARTEL—‘BRITISH LOVE (ANYTHING 4 YOU)’

A few months after arriving in Black River, a small coastal town in rural, south-west Jamaica, a woman working in the bar in which I spent time with research participants introduced me to the Vybz Kartel song ‘British Love (Anything 4 You)’. I ate in the bar several times a week as it was managed by the woman in whose home I rented a room. One day, a member of the bar staff, Janielle, and I began taking it in turns to play music on YouTube through the bar’s massive speaker system. At the time I did not like Kartel’s music, which meant that Janielle immediately put on ‘British Love’, and could not stop laughing as I winced at the (actually pretty good) English accent and Kartel’s questionable cultural references, including ‘watch[ing] the news like CNN’, or being ‘just a youth from the ghetto, like Brixton’. Janielle must have realised my frustration with the song as each time I subsequently went into the bar the song would miraculously come onto the speaker system and she would watch my face as I recognised the opening lyrics, ‘Baby girl mi love yuh so, come inna mi house let me touch you now’.

In Vybz Kartel’s ‘British Love (Anything 4 You)’ the dancehall star assumes the role of a man trying to chat up a woman, presumably in London, England, and adopts a ‘British’ accent along with his Kingston patois. The verses include romantic imagery, such as Cupid shooting his arrow, staying up to watch the sunrise, and the lyrics ‘but what I’m saying though is that I love you love, and I will never put no one above you love’. In this short paper I want to concentrate on two themes through

the lens of my relationship with Kartel: first the issue of skin bleaching; and, second, the role of migration in experiences of the contemporary Caribbean.

Whereas at the beginning of fieldwork the track annoyed me and I winced on hearing a hammed up English accent, as my research progressed I realised that the song carried a deeper importance for me. Although I might not have been able to drink a cup of tea with my mum when I was feeling a bit low, I could listen to an artist singing about such Englishisms as ‘crack a dawning’, ‘cups of tea,’ and (though a republican) ‘Princess Kate and Prince William’. I find myself thinking back on it almost nostalgically, reminded of a time and place that are anathema to the song itself. As well as the importance of the song in acting as a step towards friendship and in dealing with feelings of homesickness, it was also important for me in fieldwork as it led me to acquire a new nickname.

Born Adidja Palmer in the parish of Portmore, Vybz Kartel released his first song ‘Love Fat Woman’ in 1993 under the name Adi Banton with the group Vybez Kartel (sic), from which he would take his later name. He rose to prominence in 2003 when he had a series of major hits in Jamaica, since which time he has released such classic tracks as ‘Virginity’, ‘Romping Shop’, ‘Summertime’ and ‘Clarks’ (parts 1, 2, and 3). ‘Clarks’ might be seen as a precursor to British Love in that the song deals with something that we might view as typically British re-imagined in a Jamaican context. The wonderful book of photographs and text, *Clarks*

in Jamaica, by DJ Al Fingers details Jamaica's relationship to Clarks shoes, and unearths the translation of the shoes across cultures, including such reinterpretations as the 'traveller' symbol on the back of the shoes interpreted as the 'bank robber' in the Jamaica (Fingers 2012). Kartel enjoyed an international reputation as the biggest dancehall name in Jamaica, the US and the UK. In Jamaica he became known simply as 'di boss'. However, he was also involved in major controversies concerning skin bleaching, homophobia, and, most recently, in 2014 was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and conspiracy. Controversially, prior to his arrest he was invited to give a lecture at the University of the West Indies, Kingston, in March 2011. He introduced himself saying, 'I am Adijda Palmer, dancehall artist/hero, businessman, proud father of 7 children and counting' (Kartel 2011: 24). He was an artist at his peak in 2011, the same year in which he released 'British Love', and the same year in which I arrived for fieldwork.

When I began fieldwork in Jamaica in September 2011, Kartel was already incarcerated pending trial. My research project concerned the role of amateur football in the lives of a group of men in rural Jamaica, and complementary research with higglers, predominantly female market traders. As a British, middle-class man racialised as white in a predominantly Black society, I benefited from myriad inherited power structures. These power structures precluded me from accessing particular forms of knowledge (for example, the continuing colour-class structures in Jamaica) but, on the other hand, allowed me the privilege of accessing and moving through spaces that might be denied to those with other positions in these hierarchies.

Early in fieldwork, other football players gave me the nickname 'World Boss', one of Kartel's monikers, after a pitch-side discussion in which the players, all of whom

were racialised as Black, discussed the extent to which Black talent was exploited for white financial gain. They cited the experiences of prominent football players and Mike Tyson to demonstrate how such poor, Black (men) had their riches exploited by white (men) behind the scenes. They turned to me and joked that as a white man, I was a 'World Boss' with access to means whereby I might also be able to exploit poor, Black societies. While the discussion was playful—my introduction to the arguments consisted of their joking that they were being racist towards me—nevertheless, they point towards the tensions between positionality and global power imbalances that continue to shape ethnographic research. Indeed, as my research concentrates on Black sporting prowess to some extent, I recognise that I might be complicit in continuing these same structures of athletic exploitation.

The giving of the nickname 'World Boss' and its efficacy resided in the links to Vybz Kartel and to my position as a white, male 'World Boss'. The nickname was used for comic effect as it highlighted the contrast and similarity between Kartel and me. These need not be outlined fully but include his current incarceration on murder and conspiracy charges and his image as a bad man, a gangster, and a potential torturer and murderer. His image as a dancehall 'slack' star also contrasted with the perception of middle-class, English sensibilities as typified by formal restraint. A player on the field played on this contrast between one World Boss and the other when I accidentally kicked a ball into his face, after which he said, 'World Boss, a wha dis, an assassination attempt?'

The links between Vybz and myself also brought to light two further issues relating to masculinities, race, and class in Jamaica. First, Vybz was charged with 'bleaching,' that is, the cosmetic lightening of his skin. Bleaching is

becoming increasingly popular among young men in Jamaica and has been popular among young women at least since Nardo Ranks' track 'Dem a Bleach' was released in 1992. Coincidentally, when I looked up 'Dem a Bleach' on YouTube, the track had two dislikes, one of which viewers attributed to Vybz Kartel. In 'British Love' Vybz makes an explicit reference to his bleaching, saying 'Some say me bleached out and white like Eminem'.

The topic of skin bleaching is intensely heated and polarising in Jamaica. Some view it as a vestige of racist colonial policies that denigrated Blackness, while others view it as having little to do with race but about achieving a particular Black aesthetic. Kartel mentioned the issue specifically in his address to the University of the West Indies, saying:

Many people talk about Garveyism, Black Pride, et cetera. I have no problem with Black Pride, and I can assure you that my skin alteration has nothing to do with self-hate or opposition to blackness and Garveyism, and if we should look into the issues of the black race as it relates to our advancement or non-advancement worldwide, I think altering skin colour would not be our biggest problem. (Kartel 2011: 28)

Given my positionality, I cannot offer a conclusion as to whether, in spite of his assertions, Kartel's bleaching has its roots in the denigration of Blackness or whether it is simply aesthetic. Nevertheless, it is problematic to view discussions of skin tone as not having a relationship to Black Pride, particularly in a political climate in which skin tone continues to impact overwhelmingly on people's lived realities in Jamaica, but also in the primary migration destination of the United States.

The 'World Boss' nickname given to me as a white-identified man is indicative of the overlap between light skin tone and privilege.

The second issue thrown up by my receiving the new nickname concerned the relative wealth that both Kartel and myself enjoyed compared to the vast majority of Jamaicans. In part, Kartel was 'World Boss' because he could (prior to his incarceration) travel as freely as he wished, his wealth and prestige greasing the wheels of the visa process, allowing him to travel to the US and Europe. Similarly, I was able to move between Jamaica and the UK as long as money permitted; visa restrictions did not stop me from crossing the world. In contrast, although a minority in the town had spent considerable time working and studying in the US, younger, less wealthy residents could only vicariously travel abroad through the videos they saw online, or else could apply for a temporary job working as menial staff in a hotel or as a farm worker during harvest time in the US. My British citizenship allowed me to travel comparatively freely.

In 'British Love' Kartel references the difficulties for many Jamaicans in receiving visas to travel to Britain, in spite of the historical links between the two countries. Kartel adopts a British accent, yet at the end of the song suddenly changes back to the Jamaican dialect when he realises the difficulty of a relationship between a Jamaican and an English woman, saying 'Let's have a chat, come discuss the future // And how I'm gonna make the Cupid shoot ya // I'm in the tropics, you're in the freezer // But how it a go work? // 'Me nuh have nuh visa!' These final lyrics gesture towards an interpretation that the voice of the piece has been assuming an accent throughout, although the motives for doing so remain unclear.

The song 'British Love' is in part an exposition of the relationship between Jamaica and its former coloniser. As we never hear

the (assumed) woman to whom the song is addressed, it encourages a reading of it in different terms. The 'World Boss' might well be articulating the significant issue facing relations between contemporary Jamaica and Britain; after over four hundred years of slavery and colonialism, the British state seems to have severed ties and embarked upon a highly racially charged policy of deportation. Though commemorations of the Windrush generation have offered soundbites for politicians to talk of the immense contributions of Caribbean populations to British prosperity, the utterly shameful issues surrounding the loss of papers and the forced deportation of these same people who voluntarily migrated to contribute presents a sobering picture.

As I reflect on the changing meaning of this song in my understanding of contemporary issues in the Caribbean, it encourages me to think of how periods of fieldwork change their meaning as memories and archives of them are turned over, thought about, and re-opened for further analysis. The songs that most take us back to our fieldsites also offer lenses through which to reflect on how contexts shift and how our understandings change.

Perhaps it is fitting to end with the current status of Kartel. Although given life imprisonment, he remains one of the most prolific dancehall stars and in 2016 alone he released over 50 new songs (Serwer 2016). While not wishing to glorify him by any means, given his crimes, this ability to continue to influence dancehall from behind bars certainly cements

his nickname of 'World Boss'. My own status as 'World Boss' continues to inform how I relate to those with whom I worked in Jamaica. It is a reminder of the power imbalances that continue to maintain Jamaican dependence on overseas aid. The nickname also implies a responsibility to use my position in hierarchies to contribute to democratising and decolonising knowledges and working to promote understandings about Jamaica and the Caribbean. Most importantly, it is a responsibility to encourage and support scholars and voices emerging from the Caribbean.

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<accessed 28 January 2019>

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